

## INTERVIEW WITH NATALIA MESHCHANINOVA



Natalia Meshchaninova on set

**DIRECTOR OF “CORE OF THE WORLD”,  
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY  
EURIMAGES**

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**BY MARIAN EVANS**

### HOW DID YOU BECOME A DIRECTOR?

So many aspects have to be in the right place in order for a person to become a director. I recall that a dream to make films came to me early, when I was about 15. I didn't think I could reach that height, though I was steadily walking towards it. But after I attended Maria Razbezhkina's documentary workshop I stopped living in dreams and started making them come true. That led me to my first documentary films. I produced and directed them myself and they were noticed by the film community. After that I just went deeply into the profession.

Screenwriting is another dream, a natural continuation of being a director, to make up films, write them, create them from the top, when vague shadows become characters, and pieces of thoughts become the material of a film.

**“SERDTSE MIRA/CORE OF THE WORLD” IS THE FIFTH FEATURE THAT YOU’VE WRITTEN OR CO-WRITTEN AND YOUR SECOND FEATURE AS (CO-)WRITER AND DIRECTOR, FOLLOWING “THE HOPE FACTORY” (2014). IT WAS SELECTED FOR THE TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL AND MANY OTHER FESTIVALS AND HAS WON AWARDS THAT INCLUDE THE**

**GRAND PRIX AND PRIZE OF THE RUSSIAN GUILD OF FILM SCHOLARS AND FILM CRITICS AT KINOTAVR AND BEST FILM AT THE RIGA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL. IT IS COMPLEX, INTERWEAVING THE INTERNAL DRAMA OF A DAMAGED MAN WHO WANTS TO BELONG AND AN EXTERNAL DRAMA ABOUT ANIMAL RIGHTS. WHAT INSPIRED IT?**

It's not easy to give a simple answer about an inspiration. Inspiration sounds like something impalpable or even non-existent to me. I think it is more about passion for filmmaking, creating and being in the process.

For me, cinema is a field for experiments. That's why I try to create a new movie unlike the previous ones, although my movies do have something in common: documentary – a tendency to realism and the details of human life. “Core of the World” has a brand new form and film language, unlike those in “The Hope Factory”. I am thrilled about this. The next movie will be different from all the rest.

### WHY THE ANIMAL RIGHTS THEME?

When we chose a forest-bound compound, a training station for hunting dogs, as a main location, it became

clear that it would be a conflicted territory. And it was useful for the dramaturgy of the film. We didn't want to go too deeply into the topic of animal protection and at the same time we couldn't keep it without mentioning it.

Some battles between hunters and animal protectors occur in our country today. But it is a common situation that activists don't know what they are doing and don't want to look closely at the problem; they see it as a surface issue like activity on Facebook. That's the reason for the war. Nobody thinks of the natural balance; everyone is just trying to forbid something, for in-



COW still - Stepan Devonin as Egor

stance, to set free "wild" animals that live in enclosures. Just after our shoot one of our acquaintances had the exact same problem in reality. Boars have been bred on his property for many years. Activists penetrated his territory and let three families of boars, all with offspring, out into the woods. The boars were all pet animals and all of them died in the woods.

We are raising a really complex issue in the movie – the issue of civilisation. And we are not giving any answers on purpose, not making our stance too loud, not endowing our heroes with univo-



COW still – the forest compound

cal characters, good or bad. People have got to think about whether invading something, without understanding the subject matter, is worth it.

### WHAT DID YOU BRING TO CORE OF THE WORLD FROM YOUR EARLIER WORK?

I try to stay loyal to the documentary principle: when I develop an idea I always seek the material from real life. For instance, I'd been learning about the nuances of emergency medical work for a long time, as well as details about hunters and the Greenpeace world. My co-author and I also had to find out all the information about Norilsk before creating *The Hope Factory*. We wanted to feel the city emotionally after understanding the logic of its life.



COW still - Egor and Dasha

### YOU WROTE "CORE OF THE WORLD" WITH TWO OTHERS. DO YOU PREFER TO WRITE WITH OTHERS AND, IF SO, WHY?

When I'm writing a script, I need to have a dialogue with someone. I've got to have a debate and formulate my thoughts and feelings aloud. Now we've created the perfect (for the moment) group of three – Boris Khlebnikov, my husband Stepan and I. Boris is in charge of the rational aspect, Stepan brings in pure emotion, then I convert all our conversations into scenario text.

Actually, Stepan was more or less involved in my writing process for a long time before "Core of the World". He is usually the first reader of my scenarios and my interlocutor. He helps me to check what does and what does not work in the script. That's why our co-working appears to be pretty natural. Of course, immediately we decided that Stepan would perform the main role, we created the role for him, basing it on Stepan's nature, sensual experience

and his world view. Because of this work Stepan engaged with Egor's character at a really deep level.

It's much the same to work with a family member as it is to work with someone else who is pleasant to you and whose taste coincides with yours. Such co-working is natural and simple to us, but it could be difficult for someone else. I think the most important thing is to try not to compete and not to get offended at each other during work time, not to take over, to learn to hear each other.



COW - Natalia Meshchaninova on set with Dmitry Podnozov

## HOW DO YOU LIKE TO WORK WITH ACTORS?

I don't have any special ways of working with actors. Each needs an individual approach. It is enough for some of them to hear: "louder, quieter, faster, slower". Some of them need their theatrics to be peeled off. And some just need to be left alone with their emotions, being watched during every take as they seek and find the right emotion. Some need many repetitions and long discussions to learn everything about their character. And of course, in documentary I have to set all the "actors" in frame. I have to affirm each of them in that space as a person, not as an actor, show them how to play their part by living, not playing, and support each one to live, to be.

## WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO WORK WITH ALABAI DOGS?

Alabai dogs weren't a random choice. We considered a lot of breeds and made our choice for many reasons. First of all, the final shot in the cage. When we had just started making up the story I already had that shot before my eyes. It had to be big dogs that look like polar bears. They were supposed to look dangerous and impressive. They had to be fluffy so that someone could

get warm by being close to them and they were supposed to look cute in order to make a spectator fall in love with Belka, the one being healed by Egor. That shot when Egor is carrying her on his shoulders is really magnificent because the hero is carrying a little polar bear with sad eyes. Imagine if it was a cheerful fidgety terrier? Or a shepherd dog? Trainers tried to change our mind, suggesting other breeds that are better for training. But we said: "No, no. Only Alabai dogs!"

I haven't learned anything special or new about working with animals, except that they need twice as much time for shooting and that the easiest looking task needs long preparation.



COW still - Egor and the Alabai

## YOU'VE MENTIONED IN AN INTERVIEW THAT YOU USE THE CAMERA "LIKE A PET ANIMAL"? WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

I don't think that I've ever mentioned using the camera "like a pet animal". It was probably some liberty of interpretation or translation. I said that the camera has to be tactile, present, so that a spectator would feel the wet nose, the softness of the hair, the smell of the rain and the woods, cold, warmth, excitement. We wanted the camera to make spectators feel the movie physically.

Russia has a proud heritage of women filmmakers. Have some of them influenced you?

I was mostly influenced by my master, Marina Razbezhkina, because meeting her and learning about her method in documentary movies really changed my life. Other filmmakers' movies don't really have an effect on me. Some movies I like and some I don't. I don't try to analyse things in there. I watch movies as a spectator, not like a filmmaker.

In my understanding, few women around the world have written so many produced scripts at your age, and had the opportunity to learn from those experiences. Are the conditions for women screenwriters and directors in Russia better than they are for women in other parts of Europe?

To be honest, I've never learned anything about the issue of conditions for women screenwriters in different countries. In our country women in cinema have the same rights as men (in my understanding). In Russia we don't have any organisations for woman filmmakers or for screenwriters. There are no filmmaker trade unions. Everybody works singly or in small creative groups.

Personally I have never experienced any gender discrimination. Probably I just meet good people. I definitely don't pick a crew based on gender. In my crews there are women and men in equal proportion. On the camera crew, historically almost every worker was a man because it is a tough job, physically demanding. But today we have many great women as camera operators. Every makeup artist and costume designer in the crew was a woman, what can I say... .

#### **WHAT HAPPENS WITH CHILD CARE ON SHOOTS?**

There is no child care organisation for the film shoots. Caring for our children is our problem and we solve the problem by ourselves. I used to take my daughter to her grandmother while shooting. One person hires a babysitter. Another takes their children with them on set. It is possible to arrange with producers so that they hire a babysitter for the crew members' children, but I don't think that it is common. Such issues are resolved privately, with thoughtfulness among those concerned.