

INTERVIEW WITH NISAN DAG



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DIRECTOR OF “WHEN I’M DONE DYING”,
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES

BY MARIAN EVANS

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WHAT INSPIRED “WHEN I’M DONE DYING”, YOUR SECOND FEATURE, FOLLOWING “ACROSS THE SEA”?

I discovered the underground hip-hop culture in the slums of Istanbul in 2014, while directing “Rebel Music – Turkey: Flowers of Gezi Park”, a documentary for MTV, and then volunteered to teach animation in a “youth atelier” in one of the slums. I was fascinated to see how young people are empowered by their passion for rap in their struggles. My initial inspiration was to portray this subculture and show how rap can be a vocal weapon.

In the following years, I witnessed the dark side of life in the impoverished communities. For me, the darkest of all is the drug addiction issue, especially the widely used deadly and synthetic drug called bonzai. Seeing several bright futures fading away in front of my eyes left me traumatised and I had no other option than to make a film about this.

“When I’m Done Dying” tells the story of Fehmi, an aspiring young rapper from the Istanbul slum I have called Karacinar. Fehmi is addicted to bonzai, it jeopardises his rap dreams and, though he comes to terms with the fact that he needs to quit, it’s not easy to do so. We experience Fehmi’s struggles through his relationships

with his first love Devin, his gay brother Erdem and his band-mate Yunus. It’s an emotional roller coaster for everyone involved, but the film ends on a hopeful note.

WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES OF WRITING THE SCREENPLAY?

My love for screenwriting peaked while writing this film. The whole process was no bed of roses, but I even enjoyed the hardships. Sometimes I spent a whole day feeling stuck, yet knowing that even the seemingly “unproductive” hours are a part of productivity. I like the unpredictability of the process; I get a sense of excitement from that.

It took more than three years and nearly a dozen drafts until the script was complete. Because the Turkish Ministry of Culture stopped funding projects by filmmakers who don’t share their political views, it had become extremely difficult to finance films in Turkey and we also had investors dropping out, due to the economic crisis. A year before we started filming, the script was already in solid shape but we couldn’t secure finance. But I was full of this intense energy and couldn’t contain it all, so I kept writing as we postponed the shoot.



“When I’m Done Dying” - on set © Melih Ekinci

Whenever I was frustrated by not being able to shoot, I sat down to write, as a way of keeping my motivation alive. The downside was that I think I ended up writing too much. There’s only so much you can fit in a feature, so I had to kill some darlings off later on and it was a challenge. But at least now I have enough unfilmed material to create a spin-off mini-series.

WHAT FILMS HAVE INFLUENCED YOU?

My earliest influences were animated films, especially Polish stop-motion animations, and there are some hand-drawn animated scenes in “When I’m Done Dying”. Studying in the United States, I did get influenced by indie American films but my first influences were independent Turkish films and European art-house films. So it’s a mixed cocktail.

YOU AND JESSICA CALDWELL, ONE OF YOUR PRODUCERS, BOTH STUDIED FILM AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY AND “ACROSS THE SEA” WAS SET IN THE UNITED STATES AS WELL AS TURKEY. HOW HAS YOUR WORK BEEN AFFECTED BY MOVING ACROSS BORDERS?

I am deeply moved and inspired by the stories of my homeland. In Turkey, I feel I have access to sophisticated and diverse characters. There is a lot of “drama” in my country, which is actually very unfortunate, yet I believe it gives many artists purpose and drive. But I can’t imagine working only in one country. My experiences in the United States and Europe gave me the vision to carry my stories to an international level. I want

to tell universal stories in the future and to try making films in languages other than Turkish. AUTHENTICITY IS IMPORTANT TO YOU. HAS THIS TAKEN YOU OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE AND PERHAPS CHANGED YOU A LITTLE?

For me, the first step out of my comfort zone happened while making the documentary and my views changed a great deal afterwards. Still, I am aware I have an outsider perspective, inevitably. One of the most important ways of seeking authenticity for me was trying to shift my perspective and see life through the window of the young people in the slums. I also focused on what’s at the heart of my story and ignored what is “cool” and “touristic” or interesting from an outsider point of view.

As filmmakers we get excited to tell more and put too much in our movies sometimes. My big effort was to steer clear of this trap.

For instance Karacinar, the slum I filmed in, was going through urban transformation, which is a big issue in today’s Turkey and lately a common topic in indie Turkish cinema. Another issue at our location was with the Syrian refugee population which has had difficulty integrating and being accepted in this new culture. Both topics are interesting but are not included in the film because my story was not about them and my characters were not affected by these issues. The slum I depict in “When I’m Done Dying” does not accurately represent the slum I filmed in either, but I stay true to my story and true to my



“When I’m Done Dying” - Nisan Dag on set © Melih Ekinci



“When I’m Done Dying”

characters. I think I can call this a “selective authenticity”.

In seeking authenticity, I cast non-actors from the underground rap community for some of the roles. I had my actors spend time in the hood together and we watched hours of footage from my documentary to shape the characters. My lead also spent time with a bonzai addict in the slum where we filmed. Da Poet, one of the most acclaimed beatmakers and rappers in Turkey composed the music. Acclaimed rapper Hayki and up-and-coming Iranian rapper Ohash wrote the lyrics and, while we wrote them, actors Oktay Çubuk and Eren Çiğdem, who played the rappers, brainstormed with Hayki. Hayki also coached the cast for the rap scenes.

HOW DO YOU LIKE TO WORK WITH ACTORS; AND NON-ACTORS?

I like spending a lot of time with my actors before the set, whether they are professionals or non-actors. I believe that first we need to get comfortable being around each other before we can really fruitfully and freely discuss characters. When we first meet someone, I believe our concentration is consumed by the efforts of getting to know each other and, for some people, ensuring that they are liked by the other person. So I want to get this process out of the way first – hopefully quickly – and then we can start exploring the characters.

I like coming in with some backstory even if it’s not essential to

the film, and I prefer to fill in the blanks with my actors. Ideally, towards the middle of rehearsal process, character discovery is complete. I love it when we get to the point where my actors know their characters better than me and start bringing in their insights.

I also like to have a long rehearsal process, so we can take that time to discover the best way to work together and actors can form a

bond among themselves. I like finding unwritten moments that exist in between the scenes and, as part of the rehearsal process, I like to create those memories. Even if we don’t end up filming those moments, it redefines the scenes that come afterwards and makes the characters more three-dimensional. I also prefer my actors to spend time without my presence. Especially for non-actors, it’s really important that they feel comfortable around their partners.

IN “ACROSS THE SEA”, YOU AND YOUR ACTORS PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO QUITE SUBTLE – AND BEAUTIFUL – BODY MOVEMENTS. WHAT INSPIRED THIS?

In “Across the Sea”, my co-director and I compiled some songs that resembled the emotions of certain scenes. Before filming the intense scenes, we had our actors listen to the song for that scene. On a subconscious level, this might have created those movements you’ve mentioned. Perhaps it was the emotion in our actors manifesting itself through those movements. I find that music always gives me a great deal of



“When I’m Done Dying” - Ayris Alptekin, Oktay Çubuk, Hayal Köseoğlu, Eren Çiğdem, Ömer Can Engin



"When I'm Done Dying" - Oktay Çubuk

inspiration and it's a great tool for transmitting emotion. I did the same when filming "When I'm Done Dying". I remember one day on set, we were on our way to film an emotional scene with Hayal Köseoğlu in the car and we were both listening to the song for the scene and we were both in tears by the time we arrived on set. I love working with passionate actors, who can share my vision and excitement in telling stories.

YOU HAVE THE SAME CINEMATOGRAPHER, JOHN WAKAYAMA CAREY FOR BOTH FEATURES. HOW DOES THIS CONTINUITY AFFECT THE WORK?

Absolutely in a positive way. If I enjoy the process and outcome of a collaboration, then I like to hold onto it. The more you work together, the better you understand each other. You develop a special vocabulary that makes sense between you. Almost everything I have filmed except commercials was shot by John Wakayama Carey, including the documentary, which was great because he had witnessed my inspiration first-hand, experienced it with me.

WHAT THOUGHTS DO YOU HAVE ABOUT WOMEN DIRECTORS?

I find it crucial that gender equality be established in the industry and I find all efforts towards women's empowerment extremely vital. But I am looking forward to when we will not be asked what it is like to be a woman director, when these concerns will be as pointless as asking a man "What is it like to work as a male director"? I believe that if women had equal participation in creating media, not just film, society's understanding of women would vastly improve. So obviously the

change can start within the industry and years later we start seeing results in real life. Yet I also think that not all women creators have to feel like they have to fulfill this mission.

Regarding the gaze, as much as I wish the male gaze had not existed at all, I feel the same towards the female gaze. I think in an ideal world we can start talking about the gender-free gaze. I think the only gaze is the vision and the unique perspective of

the director which is not categorised as male or female.

Regarding financing and giving opportunities for women to create, it is crucial to seek equality. For instance, if the programmers in a festival's selection committee or a funding committee are diverse groups, it does create a fairer platform where every different voice gets a chance to be understood. On the other hand, I find it upsetting if a female filmmaker is only supported for being a woman. I can't help but wonder if it puts us women in a pitiful situation. This is something I keep thinking about. For me, I'd like to know that if my film is selected for a festival, it's because the film is powerful, not because I am a woman.

"The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the director concerned and in no way reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or the Eurimages Film Fund."