

## INTERVIEW WITH PETRA SZÖCS

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RECIPIENT OF THE 2017 BIENNALE COLLEGE CINEMA  
SCHOLARSHIP OFFERED BY EURIMAGES

DECEMBER 2018

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**YOUR FIRST FEATURE FILM, “DEVA”, WHICH YOU DEVELOPED WITHIN THE BIENNALE COLLEGE CINEMA, WAS SCREENED AT THE VENICE FILM FESTIVAL. WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF YOUR VENICE DAYS?**

I have lots of memories: I broke one of my toes on the first day and afterwards I walked a lot in the rain to kill the pain. One evening my boyfriend and I followed Mr Bordwell, hoping to overhear what he thought about the “Sunset”, and then suddenly he turned round and congratulated us on our film. During the screening I kept an eye on all four exit doors to check how many people left (24) and I vowed that I would never walk out of a film in case the director might be there.

**AT WHAT STAGE OF THE PROJECT DID YOU APPLY FOR THE BIENNALE COLLEGE CINEMA?**

I didn't have more than an idea when I learned about the Biennale College Cinema. I found out about it approximately six months before the deadline and then had to get together all the necessary material,

which was a lot: visual concept, director's statement, audience engagement plan, micro budget plan, etc.

**ONCE YOU WERE ACCEPTED, HOW WAS THIS BIENNALE COLLEGE CINEMA PROGRAMME STRUCTURED? HOW MANY SESSIONS TOOK PLACE IN VENICE? DID YOU HAVE DIFFERENT SESSIONS WITH DIFFERENT FOCUSES?**

First the 12 filmmakers who had been selected met in Venice in October 2017 for an initial and very intense workshop, which lasted 11 days. We were split into three groups and had classes with tutors from the different fields of production – a visual advisor, screenplay professionals, producers, etc. At the end we had a pitching forum in the Ca' Giustinian in the presence of Alberto Barbera, the director of the Venice Film Festival. As the next step we had three weeks to complete a first draft of the screenplay in English, which was really tough. We had nine months between the green light for the Biennale College



“Deva”

Cinema and the deadline for the Venice Film Festival.

**THAT SOUNDS LIKE AN INCREDIBLE RUSH. WAS THIS TIME PRESSURE ALSO A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE?**

Yes, definitely. More than once I had the feeling I wouldn't make it. It seemed impossible to meet the tight deadlines. And I'm sure one needs more time to make a feature-length film. But the experience I had confirms that it actually worked. We had about four months of pre-production time. We found the leading actress two days before shooting started. Then there were 22 days of shooting, which was more or less enough, followed by three months of post-production. I didn't sleep very much during this period. You have to make decisions very fast; sometimes you might be lucky and make the right one. And sometimes a decision you thought at the time was bad turned out to be the right one (and vice versa). So you try to gain control, but there are lots of surprises. I feel lucky to have had this experience. I would have been less open under other circumstances, I think.

**HOW SHOULD WE PICTURE THE WORKING SESSIONS? DID YOU REMAIN A GROUP OF THREE OR DID YOU CONTINUE IN ONE-TO-ONE SESSIONS?**

We – my producer Péter Fülöp and I – had nothing but face-to-face meetings with

each consultant. We had a whole lot of advisors, at least three or four in each workshop. It helped a lot to have a number of different points of view. We had Alec von Barga as a visual advisor and he was always there. It was very helpful to have one person who followed the project continuously from the very beginning. He knew all our material. And on the other hand it was inspiring to get a fresh perspective on our work now and then from somebody who was less involved.

**WHAT IS YOUR FILM “DEVA” ABOUT? WAS THERE A MOMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUR STORY WHEN YOU FELT STUCK?**

“Deva” is about an orphan albino girl who wants to lose the identity she was burdened with. At each stage (scriptwriting, casting, editing, etc.) I felt stuck at some point, but we were always able to get over it; actually we had no time for breaks. I had a really strong crew and, with my screenwriter, Gergő V. Nagy, and my assistant director, Balázs Bodor, I felt safe.

**VENICE IS AN EXTRAORDINARY PLACE AND ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR PLACES WITH TOURISTS. HOW DID YOU MANAGE NOT TO GET DISTRACTED BY YOUR SURROUNDINGS AND STAY CONCENTRATED ON YOUR WORK?**



“Deva”

All the workshops took place on the island of San Servolo, a remote and very inspiring place with a beautiful botanic garden. The building where we had our classes, where the accommodation was also located, was a renovated former mental hospital. The fact that we were completely isolated from the city of Venice allowed us to be on our own and concentrate on our work, but at the beginning it was good to have a drink in the evenings and to visit the Giardini of the Biennale.

**WHAT WAS THE MOST USEFUL INPUT YOU TOOK FROM THE COLLEGE? WHAT WAS THE MOST DIFFICULT AND CHALLENGING ASSIGNMENT YOU HAD TO FULFILL?**

I couldn't choose one, because we received so much precious advice. The most challenging thing was undoubtedly the time frame. But I wouldn't hesitate to go through this experience a second time and I warmly recommend any young filmmaker who doesn't have national funding for a project to apply for the Biennale College Cinema. It's an outstanding, once-in-a-life-time opportunity. There's no comparable structure anywhere in the world that gives you the support to implement a film project in such a short time. I was really lucky to have been selected.

**ARE YOU ALREADY WORKING ON YOUR NEXT PROJECT? ARE YOU APPROACHING YOUR NEW PROJECT DIFFERENTLY THANKS TO THE EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE BIENNALE COLLEGE CINEMA ?**

I am happy that I will have more time for my second feature, but it is good to know that it is possible to make a film in nine months.

**WHAT DID IT MEAN TO MEET 11 OTHER FILMMAKERS WHO SHARE VISIONS ABOUT STORYTELLING AND FILMMAKING?**

**TO WHAT EXTENT WERE THE OTHER PROJECTS AND APPROACHES AN INSPIRATION FOR YOU?**

I had the impression that ours was a particularly interesting group with very nice and supportive people. We're still in contact within our Facebook group. Even if I hadn't been selected, it would have been a life-changing experience to share these 11 days with them. All the projects were so powerful, exotic and visually stunning, and I am so happy that one of my favorites, Johnny Ma's "To Live To Sing" has finally been shot in China. I can't wait to see it.