

INTERVIEW WITH SARA JOHNSEN**DIRECTOR OF "FRAMING MOM"
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES****OCTOBER 2019****BY TARA KARAJICA**

Sara Johnsen is an award-winning Norwegian author and film director. She holds a degree in comparative literature and graduated from the Norwegian Film School (NFS) in 2000. She has published two novels, written and directed a number of Norwegian TV series and feature films, including her own "Kissed by Winter" (2005), "Upperdog" (2009) and "All That Matters is Past" (2012). In addition to the Grand Jury Prize at the AFI Fest (American Film Institute festival) and the annual Norwegian Film Critics Award, Sara's films have won a grand total of nine Amanda statuettes and the Norwegian National Film Award, including Best Director and Best Film.

Tara Karajica talks to Sara Johnsen about her fourth feature film, "Framing Mom", in which Johnsen helms an all-female cast of both rising and established Norwegian film stars, an exploration of love, sex and family in which a young woman goes on a journey in search of clues about her past.

HOW DID "FRAMING MOM" COME ABOUT?

Well, to be honest, I knew about a story that started out in the same way, so I guess I was fascinated by the fact that some parents give up on their children. But,

in my story like in reality, there is a reason for everything. I was also told this story about a woman who got pregnant shooting a porn film and I thought it was so strange – and sort of beautiful – that a small baby is sometimes the result of something that has nothing or at least little to do with love. So these two stories started to work together and I began writing.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE ENGLISH VERSION OF THE TITLE, "FRAMING MOM"?

It has a sort of double meaning – they are filming to find the answer, to catch the mother. Unn Tove's camera is framing images and she sees an image of the mother in a film. I hope also, in a way, the "Framing Mom" film itself shows what kind of frame there is around Rosemari's mother.

THE FILM DEALS WITH ABANDONMENT AND THE PAINFUL RECONSTRUCTION OF ONE'S ROOTS. CAN YOU COMMENT ON THAT?

It is a theme in one of my other films called "Upperdog". I guess I am not the person to really know why I write and make the films I do. Let's just say it's part of what I am interested in.

IT ALSO DEPICTS A QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND A REFLECTION ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS. CAN YOU DELVE INTO THAT?

I often find human relationships sorrowful, but at the same time funny. Our need to be alone, but not all alone all the time, and our longing for love and companionship is very strong. In “Framing Mom”, I also wanted to show a friendship between two very different female characters, but also this mother and daughter relationship and what biology actually gives us. I really wanted the audience to feel Rosemari’s longing for motherly love. She is very young and fragile, but also dramatic. The film is supposed to be funny as well; the dialogue was supposed to show that all the characters sort of master their feelings through language.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN TODAY’S SOCIETY IS ALSO A PROMINENT SUBJECT IN THE FILM, AS WELL AS THEIR POWER IN UNCOVERING THE TRUTH AND THE CHOICE TO EXPOSE ONE’S LIFE TO THE MEDIA. WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE THIS ELEMENT PRESENT IN THE FILM TOO?

Well, I think it adds something to Rosemari’s need to define her own story and how this is also sort of taken from her by Unn Tove. These days, I see with both young and old people a strong need to document everything they do. People even choose a place for a vacation with the location for snaps in mind. We want to make a story out of every moment. And there is always someone out there eager to tell our most private stories and earn some money. This lending of other people’s emotional life creates a sort of addiction on both sides. Documenting our lives in images has become a sort of ritual.

YOU ALSO DEBATE LOVE AND SEX IN THE FILM, THROUGH WHICH YOU CREATE A PARALLEL BETWEEN THE PAST OF UNN TOVE AND ROSEMARI’S BIOLOGICAL MOTHER, ONE THAT IS FULL OF CONFLICT, UNCERTAINTY, CONTRADICTIONS AND EMOTIONS. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

Yes, I feel that a female sexual life is very much so: conflict, uncertainty, lust, shame, contradictions and also many emotions connected to fear. Sex can result in human life and I think this knowledge lies in our genes as

a sort of warning, since for a woman, having sex can become an existential change, connected to life and death. For our ancestors, having sex was connected to a risk of dying or being left alone with a baby and I think some of our reactions towards sex are left in our biological material. This is also partly why many women and young girls really don’t like explicit sexual attention from men they do not desire. It’s simply frightening.

In Norway, we have a strong tradition to accept women as active sexual subjects, but so are men. But what we desire is not always what we love and want to marry. Unn Tove’s character is drawn to a man she actually finds a bit stupid and, feeling a bit stupid herself, she



Ruby Dagnall, Sara Johnsen and Tuva Novotny on set

does not want to marry him. He is not a safe choice in the sense that he is not educated, not easy to talk to and has stupid political opinions. And maybe, in a way, she feels he is not able to bring future children up and will in the end leave her. Still, Unn Tove wants to make love to him. She desires a man that she feels is not worthy of her desire and she respects all her emotions concerning the matter.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT UNN TOVE AND ROSEMARI? HOW DO YOU SEE THEM?

Unn Tove tries to be a moralist and she is driven by a need to be perfect and smart. She is ambivalent towards all her desires – except for when it comes to her work. I very much wanted Tuva Novotny to play Unn Tove’s character because I feel she manages to shape these ambivalent emotions in a nice and funny way. To want something and not want it at the same time is

very human and it's funny how language tries to help us express this ambiguity. Rosemari is longing for love and is very naïve. She is sure everything will fall into place the moment she finds her mom. It took a long time to find the girl I felt could play the part. When Ruby came to audition, she was actually too beautiful for the part; I wanted a girl that would make the audience smile. But Ruby was too good not to give her the part and she was vulnerable in a way that I liked, so I rewrote the script and the character to make it fit her better. Ruby Dagnall became a star and won the Amanda Award for Best Actress, so I think it was a good choice.

but I have met a few bad ones in the last twenty years. I have decided not to be disturbed by their opinions and just look for my own path. The most important thing is to always work hard and, if people don't listen, then do not give in, but do it again and do not fear the anger of men. This, to not fear anger, took and still takes a lot of energy from me. I think female directors and writers of the new generation have more power and they will beat prejudice and take their rightful place. After the #MeToo movement, it's like it's a new era, and some old structures that were very strong in the film industry will change and that people want it to change. For "Framing Mom", we had a female producer, a female director of photography and the main cast was female, so in that way it's modern, but I never actually thought about gender when we all worked together.



Still "Framing Mom" - Ruby Dagnall

THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF TALK ABOUT WOMEN IN FILM IN THE PAST TWO YEARS. HOW DO YOU SEE THE SITUATION? HOW IS IT IN NORWAY?

After finishing film school, I started working as a director and writer for film and I have made four films. Five years ago, I became one of the showrunners on a TV series for NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation). The series is about the people working during the terror attack on 22 July 2011. I find that in the TV industry, women as directors and writers are much better represented than in the film industry.

In the film industry, there is a sort of elitism that merges with a dream of success and the idea of being a film director. There seems to be a strange sort of male egocentric side concerning how best to express who they are, and being applauded seems to be a big part of the ambition. There are many stupid and incompetent men in the film business, both in the production part and among the critics, and they have far too much power. There are a lot of nice and talented men too,

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