

INTERVIEW WITH SONJA PROSENC



**DIRECTOR OF “HISTORY OF LOVE”, A
FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED
BY EURIMAGES**

BY TARA KARAJICA

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After graduating from university, Slovenian film director Sonja Prosenec attended both the Sarajevo and Berlinale Talents, co-founded the Monoo Production House and was selected for the TorinoFilmLab. Her award-winning and critically acclaimed first feature “The Tree” was the Slovenian candidate for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2016. Her approach to film language has so far been appreciated by cinephiles and film critics alike and The Hollywood Reporter described her as “a distinctively talented young filmmaker ... who can tell a story in a startlingly unconventional manner”. She has been a Board Member of the Directors Guild of Slovenia since 2016.

Tara Karajica talks to Sonja Prosenec about her second feature film “History of Love”, an elegiac tableau of a family dealing with the loss of the mother and new discoveries about her, that premiered to critical acclaim at this year’s Karlovy Vary International Film Festival and won the Special Mention Grand Jury Award.

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO MAKE “HISTORY OF LOVE”? WHAT WAS BEHIND THE INITIAL IDEA FOR THE FILM?

In my first film “The Tree”, I focused on three distinct forms of imprisonment – physical, within a system and as a result of our own feelings of guilt – through three different characters and by means of a single story about a blood feud. During the shooting of the film, a member of my family was dying and, later on, I decided to venture away from this kind of commentary on a social issue in order to follow the intimate tale of Iva and her family. However, the urge to explore the characters’ inability to connect with each other during the worst moments of their lives came from a reflection on society: the currently prevalent nihilism, violence and emotional detachment.

“HISTORY OF LOVE” TACKLES LOSS AND HOW EVERYONE DEALS WITH IT IN DIFFERENT WAYS. IN THAT REGARD, YOU, ALONG WITH YOUR ACTORS, HAVE CREATED CHARACTERS WHO ARE ALIENATED FROM THEMSELVES AND EACH OTHER, WHILE WE CAN AT THE SAME TIME SENSE THE PAIN THAT THEY CANNOT

ESCAPE, AS WELL AS THEIR UNDERLYING NEED TO CONNECT. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

I feel that often, when we are in extreme emotional pain, we run away from each other; we want to run away from everything that is connected to this feeling of loss, of pain. Consequently, we suppress these most intimate emotions and become alienated from people around us, as well as from ourselves. But, underneath, there is a need that we cannot escape: the need to share our loss and our pain with people around us.

understand (or at least allow a possibility that there is something she doesn't understand) and to perceive different points of view is she able to develop compassion for the human condition. Her identity is a work in progress. In this sense, "History of Love" is also a coming-of-age film.

CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THE EXCEPTIONAL SYMBOLISM IN THE FILM?

There is symbolism in the film, but what is important



"History of Love"

YOU FOCUS ON IVA, YOUR YOUNG FEMALE PROTAGONIST, WHO IS CONFRONTED WITH HER MOTHER'S PAST THAT SHE CANNOT ACCEPT, SO, LIKE ALL OF US, SHE TENDS TO JUDGE AND LABEL. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT HER AND HER COMING TO TERMS WITH UNDERSTANDING AND PERCEIVING DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW AND DEVELOPING COMPASSION FOR THE HUMAN CONDITION?

Iva has to accept that her mother was much more than simply a role she played in Iva's life. As it happens with all of us when we are children, we tend to see and judge people according to the role they play in our lives. A teacher is "just" a teacher, a mother is a mother. What Iva learns is how to accept her mother as a whole person; as someone who had her own life, her own wishes and desires. Only when she is able to

for me is that all the symbols are part of the narrative and they are not arbitrarily put in the film as a separate element. But I must admit that there are a few "symbols" that I only became aware of when viewers of the film pointed them out. I found this very satisfying because this means that they work on a more archetypal level. They were not put in the film consciously and a big part of the audience will perceive it unconsciously as well.

AT ONE POINT, YOU DRIVE THE AUDIENCE TO THINK THAT IVA IS DEAD AND THAT IT'S ALL HAPPENING IN A PARALLEL UNIVERSE OR DIFFERENT DIMENSION. WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT ASSUMPTION?

The world between the exhale at the beginning of the film and the inhale at the end of the film is like a world

in between. It can go either way. I see it as a meandering of events, memories and thoughts.

SIMILAR TO “THE TREE”, WHICH WAS STRUCTURED AS A MULTI-PROTAGONIST NONLINEAR NARRATIVE, “HISTORY OF LOVE” IS ALSO MARKED BY NONLINEARITY, CORRESPONDING TO THE COMPLEX EXPERIENCE OF REALITY BY THE CHARACTERS. STEPPING AWAY FROM A LINEAR NARRATION, THE FILM BUILDS ON THE MAIN CHARACTER’S SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND USES THE STORY MERELY AS A FRAMEWORK. CAN YOU, THEREFORE, TALK ABOUT THE SCRIPT, WHICH YOU DEVELOPED THROUGH THE TORINO-FILMLAB AND MIDPOINT?

Contrary to what one might think, this kind of film re-

The sound design for this film has been a special and quite long process in itself, as the sound in this film carries at least as much of the film’s weight as the visual narration does. It connects the parts that could be perceived as past and present into a meandering of events, memories and thoughts, with shots or sequences echoing variations and details. It helps to escape causality as the ruling storytelling principle and lean toward synchronicity or juxtaposition. Building the experience through precise sequences of images, rhythm and atmosphere requires a benevolent and sometimes patient viewer, which is not easy when the perception of cinema is becoming increasingly focused or limited to what can be analytically/intellectually grasped or read – in this case a bare-boned storyline, closer to literature.



“History of Love”

quires a very precise screenplay in order to determine exactly how much of a story to present without creating the impression that the point of the film is simply to tell a story, while still providing the most appropriate story clues to create a film universe wherein we can explore the inner states of the characters, as well as the more abstract concepts of the human condition. I had an opportunity to develop this during a very fruitful collaboration with Midpoint and TorinoFilmLab script consultants. As well as the narrative structure, sound plays an important role in this.

EXACTLY, SOUND IS VERY IMPORTANT IN “HISTORY OF LOVE”; IT CONNECTS THE PARTS THAT COULD BE PERCEIVED AS PAST AND PRESENT INTO A MEANDERING OF EVENTS, MEMORIES AND THOUGHTS. CAN YOU COMMENT ON THIS AND ON HOW SUBJECTIVITY IS SHOWN THROUGH IT?

HOW DID YOU DECIDE ON THE MUSIC FOR THE FILM, ESPECIALLY THE BACH PIECE AT THE BEGINNING?

I envisioned the beginning of the film as a goodbye, as some kind of an ending, a farewell. This is why I chose a part of Bach’s “St Matthew Passion”. It is connected to the mother’s death. We also used the orchestral piece by Silence during the shooting of the concert scene with Kristoffer Joner as a conductor, and as a score through certain scenes. This was decided on long before the shooting and, although the music was composed and published before the film, its authors Boris Benko and Primož Hladnik – who are also known for the music they create for the famous Slovenian band Laibach – were an important part of our creative process.



“History of Love”

WHAT ABOUT MITJA LIČEN’S FLUID, RICH AND VARYING CAMERAWORK?

The cinematography style corresponds to the concept of fluidity in the narration, where we try to create the previously mentioned meandering of memories and thoughts rather than jumping between the past and the present. As the main character’s hearing is impaired and we focus on her internal world, we put a lot of focus on the visual narration and complemented it with a sound that is, on more than one occasion, marked by the subjective point of view of the girl – the main character, Iva.

SLOVENIAN DIRECTOR DAMJAN KOZOLE IS VERY APPRECIATIVE OF YOUR FILM-MAKING STYLE SAYING: “WHAT I LOVE ABOUT SONJA’S FILMS IS HOW SHE DARES TO AVOID THE PROVED AND ESTABLISHED NARRATIVE PRINCIPLES. EVERY TIME, SHE INVENTS A FILM LANGUAGE WHICH IS COMPLETELY HERS AND WHICH COMES AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE DEFINITION OF “PURE CINEMA”. HER “HISTORY OF LOVE” IS AN IMPRESSIVE MEDITATION ON HUMAN FRAGILITY.” CAN YOU COMMENT ON THAT? DO YOU AGREE?

I think the film is open to many different interpretations. But I am very happy about Damjan’s description or comment on the form and content of the film.

“HISTORY OF LOVE” IS A SLOVENIAN-ITALIAN-NORWEGIAN CO-PRODUCTION, HAS RECEIVED SEVERAL DEVELOPMENT AWARDS AND HAS ALSO BEEN SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES. IT IS THE EPITOME OF

A EUROPEAN FILM, RIGHT? WHAT DOES IT MEAN IN TERMS OF YOUR FILM-MAKING STYLE AND THE LIFE OF THE FILM?

“History of Love” is a natural co-production with Italy because we planned to shoot there (like we did Monoo’s previous two films), and also with Norway since one of the characters in the script was from abroad, as philharmonic or opera conductors in Slovenia usually are. But there is also a more substantial reason for this, which is that I didn’t want Iva and the conductor to have any mutual history or to be linked in any other way other than through the person they both loved and lost. These are universal things that connect us. The collaboration with our Italian and Norwegian partners – now also friends – enabled us to follow our visions and plans. We made this film thanks to strong co-operation with authors from all three countries.

YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED BY CINEUROPA AMONG EIGHT NOTABLE UP-AND-COMING EUROPEAN FEMALE DIRECTORS. WHAT DOES THIS RECOGNITION MEAN TO YOU?

On a personal level, in a way, it felt like an encouragement to continue to develop my approach to film-making.

AND, LAST BUT NOT LEAST, WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN FILM TODAY? THE PRECARIOUS SITUATION IN SLOVENIA WAS HIGHLIGHTED LAST MARCH AT THE “WOMEN IN THE FILM SECTOR: A GENDER ISSUE” PANEL, WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK

OF THE 20TH EDITION OF THE DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL IN LJUBLJANA.

The research on women in film that was conducted with the support of our national funding body coincided with the #MeToo campaign timewise. Because of the fact that so much attention has been given to issues of inequality and lack of gender equity worldwide, we all felt a bit more optimistic. I think the recommendations made by Eurimages and the European Women's Audiovisual Network (EWA) connected to this issue can help a lot with progress on a very concrete level. In the Directors Guild of Slovenia, we penned and published a National Programme for Film in which we included a section on gender equality, with an analysis of the current situation, and suggested very concrete measures based on those recommendations.