GOD EXISTS, HER NAME IS PETRUNYA

A FILM BY TEONA STRUGAR MITEVSKA
In Stip, a small town in Macedonia, every January the local priest throws a wooden cross into the river and hundreds of men dive after it. Good fortune and prosperity are guaranteed to the man who retrieves it. This time, Petrunya dives into the water on a whim and manages to grab the cross before the others. Her competitors are furious - how dare a woman take part in their ritual? All hell breaks loose, but Petrunya holds her ground. She won her cross and will not give it up.
WHERE DOES THIS STORY COME FROM?

Every 19th of January for the holiday of Epiphany, the throwing of the cross event takes place in almost all the Orthodox world of Eastern Europe, including in Macedonia. In 2014, a woman caught the cross in the town of Štip, in Eastern part of Macedonia… Her act was deemed as an outrage from the local population as well as the religious authorities. As a matter of fact, women are not allowed to participate in the event. Consequently, they tried to take the cross away from her, but she would not give in. Next day, she gave an interview to the local station encouraging more women to jump for the cross in the future. She was labelled by the population as a “crazy”, “disturbed”, “troubled” young woman.

To me and my producer, Labina Mitevska, these reactions exposed a natural reflex of social conformism; they also revealed the misogyny that is supported by the deeply incrusted patriarchal norms within our society. It was frustrating and maddening. The story of Petrunya rose from this frustration, we had to react.

COULD THE FILM BE SEEN AS THE FIGHT OF TRADITION AGAINST MODERNITY?

Imagine if tradition were a bag of salt (salt being essential for human life) to be carried through a large, deep, strong stream of water, which in this constellation, represents modernity? What would happen? The salt would melt and the person would drown, and what then?

If this story was happening in an office and was about breaking the glass ceiling, things would be more evident, but by placing it in a traditional environment, a small Macedonian town, things become more complex. Petrunya, as a symbol of modernity, stands against not one but two establishments, the Church and the State. She is powerless facing both but hopefully education is her saviour.

I don’t have the answer of how to balance tradition and modernity, neither of what is the place of tradition in the future. What I am concerned is how can tradition be modulated to, for example, involve the second sex on a more equal level?

PETRUNYA COULD SEEM WEAK AND ARMLESS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE FILM BUT SHE PROVES TO BE STRONGER AND STRONGER AS LONG AS THE FILM MOVES FORWARD AND THE WHOLE VILLAGE TAKES SIDE AGAINST HER. WHERE DOES SHE FIND THIS ENERGY?

I have always believed in the idea of universal truth, the ideal as something all humans consciously or unconsciously strive for. The circumstances of place and environment, social or cultural we were born and raised in, inform us but do not define us. I firmly believe that women are inherently more sensitive to injustice, solemnly because we were born in unfair and unequal world. From early age, we were forced to justify ourselves, our existence, purpose and role. Women are in a constant

DO YOU FEEL YOU MADE A FEMINIST MOVIE?

All patriarchal societies are constructed to support male domination, where the woman status and social space is decided by man, so every time a story is told about, or around the so-called “second sex”, it is inevitably a feminist movie. Every film with a female character in main a role or not, which treats the subject matter by not conforming to traditional roles is a feminist film.

It is difficult for me to imagine to be a woman and not be a feminist. Feminism is not a disease, or something to be afraid of. Equality, justice and equity for all is in the forefront of its ideology.
mode of modification, and modification leads to indefinite transcendence, the need to become better and do better. I am not the first or the last to say this, Simone de Beauvoir already did.

I am not saying that Petrunya is aware of all of this but as a member of the longest and most prosecuted majority in human history, she certainly unconsciously is. So she transcends through the story, through the obstacles that are put in her way, in her search for justice. Yes, she is weak in the beginning, or quiet as I would rather define her, and that was a big discussion with Elma Tataragic (my cowriter): should Petrunya be a strong character as Slavica, the journalist, is or should she transform throughout the story? We chose the second because change is positive. What is certain is that it is her situation that disposes her to seek the truth, and it is this need to seek justice that ultimately gives her the force to become from her humble beginnings what she truly is-a woman in her own right and a force for change.

TELL US ABOUT THE VIOLENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MOTHER AND THE DAUGHTER...

The way modernity relates to tradition perfectly correlates to how Petrunya relates to her mother, Vaska. The two women are on the opposite spectrum of the matter; the clash of the two is inevitable and necessary for progress to happen.

The legend says: “whoever catches the cross will be happy for the year to come”. Petrunya’s pursuit of happiness relies on her participation to the traditional race and therefore being happy for a year. The mother cannot understand this, unable to define happiness outside of the traditional codes. The violence between both is rooted in something much deeper and sinister: injustice dressed as a tradition. If the mother would accept Petrunya’s behaviour, she would deny everything she is and everything she ever was, becoming nothing in the eyes of her society.

SLAVICA, THE JOURNALIST, IS ANOTHER STRONG CHARACTER IN YOUR FILM... HOW DO YOU RELATE HER TO PETRUNYA?

I was a journalist in a previous life, and I have a suspicion that Labina (my producer who also plays the part of Slavica) took me as an inspiration when she worked on her character. Needless to say, I have been called a witch, a pushy and arrogant bitch most of my life. Even today it is very difficult to function as a strong woman in the Balkan environment. If you are, you are immediately perceived as aggressive. By creating Slavica, my primary idea was solidarity, sisterhood between the two women, Petrunya and her. There are as many ways to tackle the subject of change as there are variety of characters, but there is only one way to obtain that change and that is by standing united. And here comes the good old dilemma between individualistic and social feminism. I know many people have a problem with the #MeToo movement, mostly with the lack of ideology behind it, but what we have definitely learned from it is that when idea becomes part of a united front, change is possible, and SOLIDARITY becomes the key.

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES FOR PETRUNYA TO FIND HER OWN PLACE IN THE SOCIETY SHE LIVES IN AFTER THIS EVENT?

I have heard that the real girl who caught the cross now lives in London... To be frank, her life would have been very difficult if she had stayed in Stip. I am happy she has had the opportunity to leave. This year a woman caught the cross in Zemun, Serbia. She was celebrated. The world is fast changing, hopefully!

WHERE DID YOU FIND THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYS THE MAIN PART?

It is her first role in a long feature film. Zorica is mostly casted as a comic actress; she is employed in the Comic Theater of Skopje. What is wonderful with comic actors is their impeccable understanding of rhythm and timing. It usually takes me a lot of time to cast actors and rehearse with them. It is a process of many months. Rehearsals become part of the casting process, and this is extremely helpful and rewarding. I was looking for someone who projects a quiet and persistent strength, and it is what I found in Zorica, I immediately knew she would be my Petrunya.
CAST

ZORICA NUSHEVA
Petrunya
LABINA MITEVSKA
journalist Slavica
SIMEON MONI DAMEVSKI
chief inspector Milan
SUAD BEGOVSKI
priest
STEFAN VUJISIC
young officer
VIOLETA SHAPKOVSKA
mother Vaska
XHEVDET JASHARI
cameraman

CREW

Directed by
TEONA STRUGAR MITEVSKA
Written by
ELMA TATARAGIC and TEONA STRUGAR MITEVSKA
Producer
LABINA MITEVSKA (SISTERS AND BROTHER MITEVSKI)
Co-producers
SEBASTIEN DELLOYE (ENTRE CHIEN ET LOUP)

Sound recordist
HRVOJE PETEK
VUK MITEVSKI

Set designer
MONIKA LORBER

Costumes
MARIJA GOROGRANC PETRUSEVSKA

Hair & Make-up
INGRID SIMON

Sound design
THOMAS GAUDER

Mix
OLIVIER SAMOUILLAN

Music
JANE KORTOSHEV

First assistant director
KIRIJANA A. NIKOLOSKA

Casting director
PETRA TRAMPUŽ BOCEVSKA

Script supervisor
SAMUEL ESSelinCKX

Focus puller
EMILIE GUERET

Gaffer
JOSIP MATAUŠIC

Key grip
ELENA STANISHEVA

Production manager
FABIAN HANNAERT

Post - production manager
PYRAMIDE INTERNATIONAL

Production manager
MONIKA LORBER

Post - production manager
MARIJA GOROGRANC PETRUSEVSKA

International sales
INGRID SIMON

Dir. of Photography
THOMAS GAUDER

Editor
OLIVIER SAMOUILLAN

Sound
JANE KORTOSHEV

Costumes
MONIKA LORBER

Hair & Make-up
INGRID SIMON

Set designer
THOMAS GAUDER

Sound design
OLIVIER SAMOUILLAN
Teona Strugar Mitevska was born in 1974 in an artistic family in Skopje, Macedonia. She started as a child actor, trained as a painter and a graphic designer and later studied at MFA program in film at the Tisch School of Arts, New York University.

She made her debut as short film director in 2001 with VETA (Special Jury Prize, Berlin International Film Festival 2002). Film HOW I KILLED A SAINT (Tiger Awards Competition of the 2004 Rotterdam International Film Festival) is Teona’s first feature made under the auspices of SISTERS AND BROTHER MITEVSKI, a company she established together with her brother Vuk and sister Labina.

Her next feature film, I AM FROM TITOV VELES, received Special Jury Prize at the 2007 Sarajevo Film Festival and was selected for the 2007 Toronto International Film festival (Discovery section), 2008 Berlin International Film Festival (Panorama) and Cannes Film Festival (ACID).

Feature film THE WOMAN WHO BRUSHED OFF HER TEARS premiered at 2012 Berlin International Film Festival (Panorama Special) and in 2013 Teona directed and edited film TERESA AND I, a feature documentary about Mother Teresa, her life and work through the perspective of a woman of today.

Feature film WHEN THE DAY HAD NO NAME premiered in the Panorama Special of the 2017 Berlin International Film Festival, while her latest feature film GOD EXISTS, HER NAME IS PETRUNYA will be premiered in the Competition of the 2019 Berlin International Film Festival.

Since its founding, SISTERS AND BROTHER MITEVSKI have also co-produced several feature films: THE WILD PEAR TREE by Nuri Bilge Ceylan; NIGHTLIFE by Damjan Kozole and SIERRANEVADA by Cristi Puiu.

Teona Strugar Mitevska lives in Brussels, Belgium with her son Kaeliok.