

INTERVIEW

1. Grbavica is a word which many foreign viewers will break their tongues on. What is Grbavica ?

Grbavica is a settlement just across from the building where I live. During the war this settlement was held under siege by the Serbo-Montenegrin Army, and transformed into a special war camp where the population was tortured. When you walk through Grbavica today you can see common buildings from the socialist regime, people who live there, shops, children, dogs... but at the same time you can feel the presence of something unspoken and invisible, this strange feeling that you have when you are in a place that was marked by big human suffering. Grbavica is a microcosmos that Esma, and other heroes, belong to. Etymologically, the word Grbavica means woman with a hump. Although it is a bit difficult to pronounce - I thought that these unattractive letters give a very good sound picture of Esma's world.

2. What is the essence of the story?

When the war started, I was happy because my maths test was cancelled. What interested me most, as a teenager, was sex, or it was more talking about sex, dreaming about sex as the highest realisation of love. But in 1992 everything changed and I realised that I was living in a war, in which sex was used as part of a war strategy to humiliate women and thereby cause the destruction of an ethnic group! 20.000 women were systematically raped in Bosnia during the war. I lived 100 metres from the front line and was most afraid of this kind of fight. Since then, rape and its consequences have become an obsession for me: I read and followed everything that was related to this topic. I still didn't know why I did this, or what I wanted to do with this. When I gave birth to my child, that was a fruit of love, motherhood – which triggered a whole set of emotions in me – this shocked me completely. I asked myself, what emotional significance does this have for a woman that has a child who was conceived in hate. That was the moment I knew what I wanted from Grbavica and I wrote it - between breast feeds.

3. You directed the film and wrote a scenario for it? How did you develop the characters?

When a very dear person died, I got up in the morning and brushed my teeth. I asked myself if this world still exists, is it possible that I still exist and brush my teeth, that everything is still in the same place as it was yesterday, as if nothing had happened. Because of my personal suffering, no leaf will fall from the tree. I thought about Esma in the same way. Her tragedy did not make the

world stop turning. Her life goes on, she is making a sandwich for her child, she laughs and makes jokes, irons, uses public transport...Whilst writing the screenplay for the film, and later while I was directing it, I observed things from that perspective. Christine Maier, DOP and I felt that photography, with its movement and composition, should be non dramatic in order to lead us into this world of everyday life under which volcanos are gushing. We are as close to Esma as she allows us to be, at a distance she wants to keep us. What was also very important to us was to portray Sarajevo as one of the characters.

4. To the international audience Mirjana Karanovic is best known for her roles in films directed by Emir Kusturica. But maybe for a long time she did not have a role that would give her the opportunity to express her full acting ability and her personal charisma.

Mirjana is a great artist. She is like the most secret instrument that is playing every flicker of the human soul and that is hurt by every, even the smallest false tune. She is always playing in more than one dimension. As it happens Esma is a woman with a secret, her every sentence is a lie, almost everything that she utters has a completely different meaning. Mirjana shades all levels. I have learned a lot from her, and the more I worked with her, the more I admired her. One of my favourite films is a film by Emir Kusturica "When Father Was Away on Business", where Mirjana portrayed the mother Sena. If we compare these two characters that Mirjana is playing, one from the socialist's period and the other from the present day, we can see notice the transition that has happened within a society and a woman in one country.

5. To all actors, even those with "most secondary" roles, you gave the opportunity to make their little life-works.

Grbavica is first of all an actor's film. I was aware of the fact that I could only make this film alive if I had great actors, especially the mother and daughter characters. That is why we took a lot of time working on casting. For example, we went from school to school and interviewed over 2000 children. Then we made a close selection of 200 children who I spoke to personally, and then we selected 20 children who we worked with for seven days – to see which child had talent, but also the ability to progress, to concentrate and to listen to indications. As for the other actors, after a very long and careful selection, we had many rehearsals, some of which took place on real locations, so that actors would be able to accommodate to the world we were supposed to create. What made me very happy, beside the fact that the actors were perfect professionals, was that they loved their characters, the

screenplay and the crew . Everyone wanted to give everything from themselves. To me personally, they were very supportive.

6. What is it like working with children on film?

Luna and Kenan, and their “child” crew were not treated as children, but as equal authors of our project. And this is how they understood their roles, they were very serious, responsible and creative. And beside that professional part, the whole crew was in love with them and they felt that they had our full support.

7. Is it true that Luna broke her leg during shooting?

Unfortunately, yes. We were shooting scene in which Sara is playing football with Samir. Because of a false alarm that there was a bomb in the OHR building (The Office of High Representative) that is near our location, shooting was late. Trucks had to cruise through half the city, actors were late and everything started very chaotically. When it began we had made a few dubs on the hard snow. In the meantime, the snow started to melt and Luna’s leg fell through the snow. Kenan fell over her and... crack. The sound crew claimed that they heard the sound of bone breaking. It was horrible. Luna’s leg was in pain, and I couldn’t forgive myself, for although I did have one good take, I requested another one! We stopped the shooting and continued two months later once Luna’s leg was in function again, and when she felt that she could continue with the shooting. Spring came... some of the locations had to be changed, so that we could edit the film. For the football scene which is partly from March during the snow, and partly from May, we had to “fake” the distance of the children from the building in order to hide the blossom.

8. Music and songs, play very important roles in your film. A couple of different songs appear in very significant moments in the film: the film starts with Ilahija*, and ends with a hit from the 70’s. In between, there are levels of turbo folk* hits...

Esma’s inner life is non-verbal and can be expressed most deeply with music that has a dramatic function. Ilahijas*, which are songs dedicated to God, expressed her feelings and provoked Esma to speak. Contrasting with the sensibility of Ilahijas, is the aggressive and inconsiderate turbo folk music, specific to the Balkans today. In other scenes music is used to contrast Esma’s and Sara’s emotions or it is a part of their environment. The film ends with a popular song “Sarajevo, my love”, which is often sung on school-trips. For me, this song also has a dramatic function, because its merriness is

contrast to Sara's feeling, it helps her to fit among her peers, and through the words of the song Sara expresses her thoughts that she is returning to her city (her mother) which makes the ending ambivalent.

9. Although the story about Esma and Sara in its essence is moving, it is also very optimistic. Is it possible that there is a hidden possibility for forgiveness for Sara's father?

I think that first there must be penitence from the side of war criminals, and then forgiveness from the side of victims. One of the problems in BiH is that not many people feel repentant for what has happened. Over 100.000 people were killed, 1,000.000 expelled – and there has been almost no penitence. On the other hand, it is very interesting that revenge almost does not exist which is a huge achievement for this society. I think that Esma is thinking neither about forgiveness nor revenge. Sara is both victim and criminal. Our future is made up of recognition of both components, because they both belong to us. They are inside us.

10. What are the conditions in BiH for film shootings?

BiH is the only country in Europe that does not have a 35 mm camera, or laboratory for developing negatives. This absurd fact is incorporated into the very creation of film in Bosnia. We lack many professions, and try to make up for it with crew members from other parts of ex-Yugoslavia, or in this case from co-production countries. But I believe that there is a huge need to tell stories which overcome all other defects.

* Turbo-folk is a music genre originating in Serbia. It was a dominant style during the Milosevic era, and is often associated with war, mafia and macho culture which has accompanied it. It is very popular today as well.