



STORY OF MY WE STORY OF MY

directed by

ILDIKÓ ENYEDI

a film by

ILDIKÓ ENYEDI

with

LÉA SEYDOUX GIJS NABER LOUIS GARREL SERGIO RUBINI JASMINE TRINCA

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You get a present. A nice, elegant little box - tightly closed. It is yours - you can see it every day on your mantelpiece. But what for, if you cannot ever open it? You try first delicately, then with a knife. When you bring the hammer you realize that it would destroy the thing. For some days you feign you are not interested. Then you admit you would give anything just to peek inside it for a second. Slowly, that tiny box will drive you mad...

We made this film about love, passion, drama, adventure, about the thousand colors of life - a shamelessly emotional tale about what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, what it means to be human.

If you look at Lizzy and Jakob, at Lea Seydoux and Gijs Naber, you do not see opposites. You see two people with fair skin, blond hair, high cheekbones and quite similar, unusually slit eyes. They could be brother and sister. Or, they could be the male and female part of the same soul...

Ildikó Enyedi



interview with

ILDIKÓ ENYEDI

What made you want to adapt the novel by Milán Füst?

I usually write my own original scripts, and this is the first time I'm adapting a literary work. Milán Füst is a sort of outlier in Hungarian and world literature. Very often, he is misunderstood, praised for the wrong aspects. For me, he is first and foremost a radical thinker who envelops his thoughts into a rich, sensual texture full of humour and playfulness. He wrote this deeply personal book during the Second World War when his life was in danger. It is a telling choice. It isn't about escapism. It means that when mean and unacceptable forces define your circumstances, you step back and focus on a larger picture from where the elementary meanness of the present seems what it really is: mediocre. And, from where the elementary beauty of life - shadowed temporarily by these forces can appear. It is this apparent frivolousness, this boldness of his attitude without wanting to seem bold or wise, that I found charming when I read the book the first time as a teenager.

Although the book is about a married couple, he speaks about this big burning question, which can seem a bit ridiculous to pose after we are 16 or 17: How should we live our little, short lives on Earth? We investigate this question through the point of view of a freighter sea captain who wants to understand his wife, a little French woman,

and through her, in fact, he just wants to understand life. He gets some very tough lessons where he must learn to accept and embrace that life is not something controllable. Is the film not also a parable about the death of patriarchy?

It can be called that, although the film intends to communicate with you in a more basic, sensual way than as a parable. It's more an invitation for the members of this fallen patriarchy to join us in building something together which is fun and fulfilling for all of us. Today, we have a great historic occasion for the male part of humanity to grab a chance to have a better life with a more fulfilling life model.

How did you decide upon the film's language? What was your process?

When I sat down to write the final version of the script, after some hesitation, I threw out a quite complex visual storytelling structure where all happened inside an artificial world, inside the mind of captain Störr. I decided to take a risk and not hide behind a strong auteur vision that can somehow act as a kind of armour for a filmmaker. I went for an indirect effect, to make the film happen not on screen but in a hidden, personal way in every single spectator.

The challenge was to work with my collaborators to make an apparently classical surface that would also allow audiences to wander into the layers underneath. The story is told from the perspective of Jakob, a cargo sea captain. The DOP, Marcell Rév, and I wanted to build the film the same way cargo boats are built, only using what is essential in the construction: wood, metal, ropes and nothing else. The film starts in and on water, aboard a ship. The sun, the wind, the power of the sea. It is a transparent, logical world. To deal with the forces of nature, seamen developed a very fine-tuned but limited human skillset. This is the world of Jakob Störr.

When he puts his feet on dry land, this skillset proves to be highly inadequate. The rules are really somewhat different there. During the whole film, he tries to figure out these rules without much success. In the café in Paris, the chit-chat, the quickness, the sleekness and elegance and how they communicate is indicative of this sensual labyrinth he discovers, sensual not only in the sexual sense but in every sense.

It's a terrific performance by Gijs Naber as Jakob Störr, powerful and vulnerable at the same time. How did you work with him?

The Story of My Wife is actually the husband's story. We enter in this gradually speeding maelstrom through him,

and we remain a hostage of his perspective throughout the whole film. He's a good sea captain. In his world at sea, there are no maybes. When you face a problem, you have to resolve it. This is how he faces every new situation, again and again with the naive faith that he can open it as a box, look in it and plan his adequate response to it. He becomes more and more puzzled and desperate when he has to experience that he cannot grab anything with this method, that the essence eludes him. What he finally learns through his relationship with his wife, Lizzy, is that you have to embrace and love this sort of ephemeral, unattainable quality of life. So in a way, with humour, passion, conflicts and twists and turns, Lizzy functions like some unusual Zen teacher. When disciples are slow to understand, a Zen teacher never explains but gives powerful impulses - sometimes just a hit on the head...

Gijs is a great talent, a focused, hard-working colleague who is actually in every scene of this movie - he was on top of his game on every single shooting day. His presence is full, meaningful, and he brings Jakob close to us without big gestures, just by the depth and honesty of his performance. He is strong and vulnerable - the secret of all big stars...

When we worked on finding the character of Jakob Störr, we both shared, as usual, also personal memories. He spoke a lot about his father, with love and understanding,

about the mindset his father and all boys in his generation acquired while growing up and the limits of this mindset. It was truly touching to see that during the shooting of our film Gijs father, who is no longer so young, revised a lot from his earlier, solid beliefs, opened up and became more accessible and communicative. It is never too late.

This unattainable quality of life you have put into the persona of Lizzy, how did Léa Seydoux deal with this complex task?

Well, it's an extremely tricky role to play. In The Story of My Wife, we never ever, even for a second, enter a moment from the perspective of Lizzy. What I told Léa and what we agreed on from the first moment was that this is not a story about a femme fatale, that Lizzy is not some mystery. She is a full, complex person and, as every one of us, she has a lot of what is unattainable for others, even for the closest ones. The story is set in the 1920s, and all the characters, including Lizzy, are an organic part of their present; they follow the roles society offers them. It means Léa had an even bigger responsibility to dissolve the arising prejudices about Lizzy's character purely by the complexity of her performance.

But how to play a person whose motivations remain hidden to us, spectators? Instead of a backstory, we worked on an attitude, on an approach to life - I tried to create a space for Léa where, instead of playing it, she could become Lizzy with all the secrets and beautiful irregularities of a real person.

For this reason, we worked quite separately with Gijs and Léa, approaching the roles with quite a different method. My intention is that when the spectator walks out of the cinema, the film shouldn't have a sort of final explanation. Rather I wanted to achieve that the spectator wouldn't need a final explanation anymore. Nobody sees it on screen, but it was an extremely tough job for her to balance that sort of ambiguity throughout the film. It's in our nature to always look for solutions. After every scene, we instinctively think, aha, she's up to this. Then, in the next scene, she has to destabilize this certainty in the spectator and, effortlessly, offer the hints for some other clue. We worked together as accomplices, with trust and intimacy. Léa does an incredible job at pulling off this complex role.

Louis Garrel plays almost against type as Dedin, was that why you cast him?

Louis was the first person I cast in the film. Sincerely, I didn't have a B option and I am delighted with the end result. Dedin's effortless elegance, swift thinking, irony and natural air of superiority function for Jakob as a red rag to a bull, and in a way, he is the most irritating

and dangerous person that someone like Jakob can come across because he represents everything that he is not. Jakob is a very powerful and capable person when at sea, but when he's in the company of Dedin he feels clumsy, awkward, out of place, slow and dumb. Therefore, he is uncertain of how he should think about Dedin. Are Dedin and Lizzy shamelessly making a fool of him laughing behind his back? Or is it him, Jakob, who is too simple-minded to understand this sophisticated intellectual friendship that ties Lizzy to Dedin? Should he get it right directly with Dedin, man to man? Or, if he would do so, would he become a laughingstock of them being ridiculously jealous? The more a role is small, the more you need to find an exceptional actor for it who, even in a brief screen time, can create a complex and involving aura around the scenes he/she are in. Louis had not many shooting days, but his role in the film is pivotal. I absolutely needed his sharpness, his intellectual alertness, his great presence.

The film has seven chapter - headings not taken from the book. How did you come up with these?

The novel is one huge rambling of an inner monologue, a stream of self-analysis and reflection. When I shaped the storyline, I made a sort of itinerary for Jakob when again and again he summarizes his failure and chooses

a new approach in the hope of getting it right this time. He "reboots" his perception - he wants to understand so badly what happens with and around him. He wants to get back in control.

These chapter headings can help the spectator to have a moment of calm, a moment for assessing what he/she experienced, and where they can get ready for a new adventure in the meandering story of Lizzy and Jakob.

How did you go about creating the different worlds in Paris and then Hamburg?

I have worked several times with the wonderful Imola Láng, who was the production designer of On Body and Soul. I love to work with her because of her high professional competence but also because of her personality - smart and sensitive with a great sense of humour that transpires into the film's visual world. She is not going for a style; she's going for the heart of the story. We built this cargo boat, the minimalist world of the captain, as a contrast to the labyrinth of dry land. We wanted to give a shock of impulses invading the captain when he sets foot on dry land and gets further and further from his element - the sea.

We arrive in Paris with the same sort of naive look as the captain. Paris is the emanation of Lizzy, the continuation

of her character. The lush, busy, dense world of the streets and the cafes and the elegant and simple apartment full of light we built around her has all one major quality: effortlessness. An effortlessness that Jakob finds so irresistible and at the same time infuriatingly impenetrable in Lizzy, without really understanding it. Irresistible because it has that calm, self-contained attitude we call grace.

Irritating because this doesn't fit into the system of the captain based on clear challenges and their competent resolutions. It is beyond that. The smart production design secretly helps us to perceive Lizzy as a complex person, not just some "femme fatale" even though she follows the roles offered to her by society.

Then, the couple moves to Hamburg. I chose this Hanseatic town of the North (in the novel, it is London) because it is a big harbour town. Actually, there is the biggest existing old harbour, a world heritage site. I wanted to give the captain a place where, even on dry land, he can feel at home. It is a powerful town, proud and well-built of dark red brick - it celebrates hard work and protestant values. Here, he is less an alien, he can have high hopes that they can open a new chapter, that their relationship can go further and deeper and be more intimate. Hamburg is the emanation of Jakob's character. But, this place finally becomes a trap, the witness of his humiliation. Imola built an apartment

with a low ceiling, thick walls painted with dark, dense colours, ornate with intense patterns. There is unwieldy furniture, heavy curtains, tall but narrow windows, so everything is strange and oppressing for Lizzy. It's a rented apartment, and therefore, they remain strangers in it, it's not their space, and that is where their problems get deeper.

How long did it take to shoot the film, and how were the choices of location made?

The shoot took 58 days, which is extremely short for the film's length and complexity. We started in Hamburg to build the world of the captain. My husband is a 2-meter tall German guy from North Rhine-Westphalia, near the Dutch border, and many things I've understood about the vulnerability of men comes through him. I met my husband in Hamburg while shooting my first film, My XX. Century. The Hamburger Film Fund gave the first money for that film - to an unknown, Eastern European debutant woman filmmaker. I had no diploma from the film school, my diploma film, called "Invasion" was banned, it was a true miracle that I could make at all My XX. Century which then landed and won the best first film in Cannes. That all this could happen was partly thanks to this initial bold decision of the Hamburger Fund. It was a great feeling to return there after so many years and discover great new collaborators.

The biggest part of the film was shot in Budapest. We were very strongly supported by our National Film Fund. As this is a cult novel in Hungary that already many notable Hungarian filmmakers intended to adapt, we were also aware of our responsibility towards this heritage. I really felt at home, in an encouraging, extremely helpful ambience. We built the two apartments in the studio and had some challenging locations. As most of the dramatic scenes happen inside the four walls, it was important to create the time and the peace for the two main actors to give their best. So, we were rather hurrying with great efforts in the big, technically challenging sets and slowed down, focused uniquely on Léa and Gijs in the intimate scenes which give the actual backbone of the film.

Thanks to the great Italian support, we finished in Malta, also with the help of the Maltese Film Fund. Something similar happened there as with my first film: although it has very few Italian connotations - except the key character of Kodor, played by the wonderful Sergio Rubini - they just genuinely loved the project and strongly supported it. I am thankful to all of them because to love a project you first must understand its true intentions. They looked through the passionate love story surface and were touched by what they found underneath it. It is thanks to all the smart and sensitive people sitting on these boards that I could make this film so deeply important for me.

There are so many beautifully constructed scenes. How did you work with the cinematographer, Marcell Rév, especially on the complex lighting design of the movie?

Marcell has an unusually wide range as a cinematographer. From the films with Kornél Mundruczó through original videoclips and the daring visual world of the HBO series Euphoria to the luscious black and white of Malcolm and Marie - another project he made with Sam Levinson - he can be expressive and inventive in so many ways. For The Story of My Wife, he dared to seem simple - which is actually the result of incredibly multilayered and complex lighting work.

I've always found that one of the most powerful dramaturgical tools in films is lighting. That's how I think about it, quite often already during scriptwriting. You can tell so much with light for what dialogue would be a clumsy and inexact tool. In this film, we did not want to push through a very harsh and identifiable aesthetic but rather to create room for the audience to fill it with their own feelings, own experiences. We wanted to invite the spectator to be a sort of co-author of the film. Therefore, Marcell worked with a humble assiduousness to create this space and pull himself, as a creator, into the background.



ILDIKÓ ENYEDI

Ildikó Enyedi began her career as a concept and media artist. She was a member of the art group Indigo and the Balázs Béla Studio, the only independent film studio in Eastern Europe before 1989. She then turned to film directing and screenwriting.

Enyedi's first film MY TWENTIETH CENTURY won the Cannes Camera d'Or at Cannes film Festival in 1989 and was chosen as one of the 12 Best Hungarian Films of All Time and selected among the 10 Best Films of the Year by The New York Times. In 1994, MAGIC HUNTER was selected in competition at Venice Film Festival. Her 1999 feature SIMON MAGUS won Locarno's Special Jury Prize, and 1997's TAMAS AND JULI won Belfort's Grand Prix. Ildikó Enyedi has directed TERAPIA for HBO Europe, the Hungarian version of "In Treatment." She also has lectured at European master classes (Switzerland, Poland) and taught at the University of Film and Theatrical Arts in Budapest. She worked in Berlin in the frames of the Artist in Residence program of the DAAD. She was a founding member of EUCROMA, the European Cross Media Academy. In 2011 she defended her DLA paper "Summa cum Laude" in the field of Transmedia (CREATED WORLDS / The Relationship of Technique and Fantasy in Moving images). In 2017, Enyedi's former feature, ON BODY AND SOUL, won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale Film Festival and has been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

A member of the European Film Academy, she was awarded the Balázs Béla and the Merited Artist Prizes, and has received the Republic President's Order of Merit Cross.

Ildikó Enyedi lives between Budapest and Nordrhein Westfalen in Germany.





















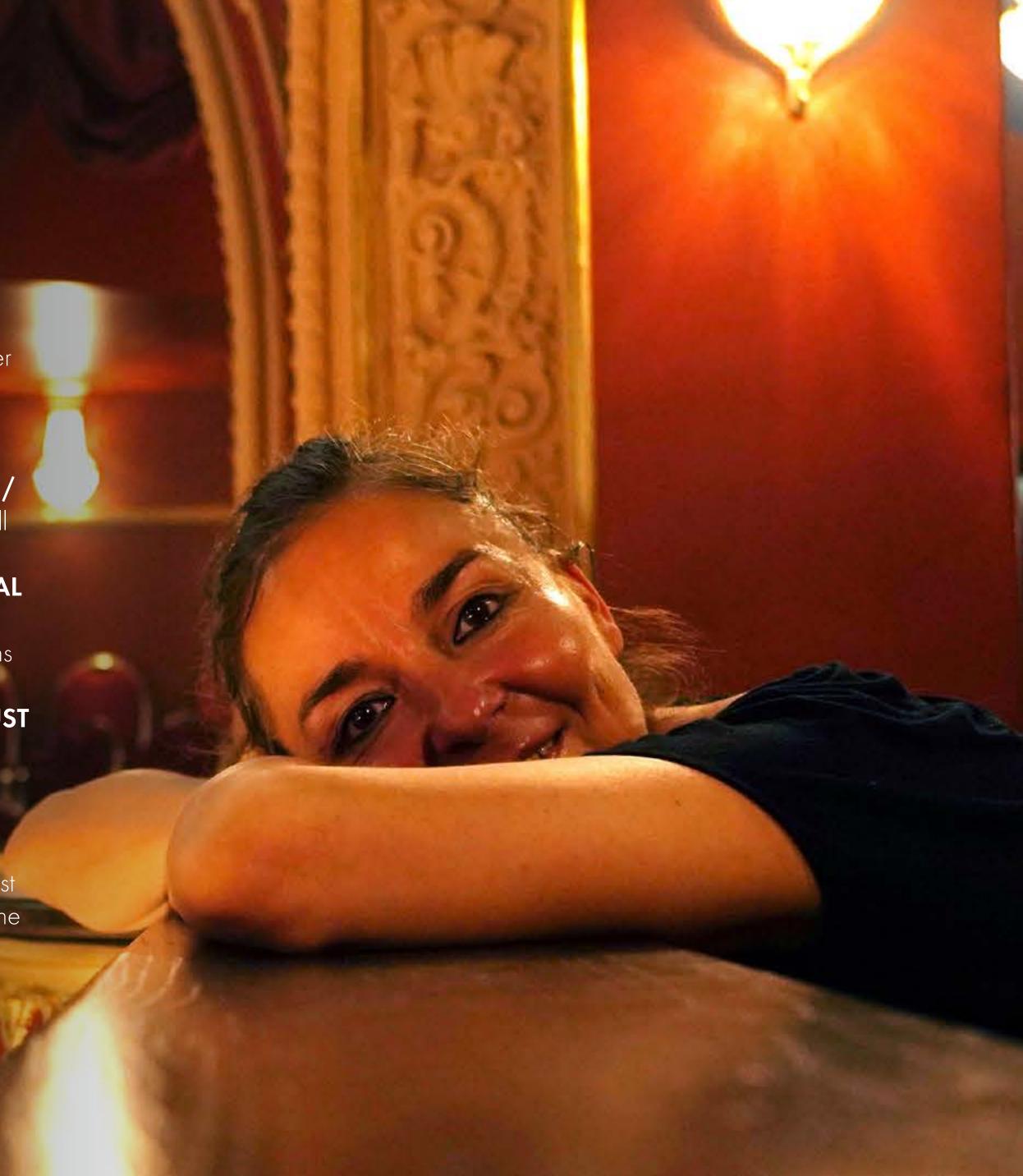
MÓNIKAMÉCS

PRODUCER

Mónika Mécs studied as a producer at the **University of Theatre and Film Arts** Budapest, and after her graduate she started working as documentary filmmaker at **Black Box** – the notorius independent documentary company. Since than she has produced numerous award winner movies.

In 2005 she founded M&M FILM with Ernő Mesterházy. The company's first big hit was KONYEC / THE END in 2007 (directed by Gábor Rohonyi). Since then M&M Film produced the most successfull mainstream movies in Hungary in the last 10 years, and also produced artistic short films such as THE BEAST (2011, Attila Till), and took part as a coproducer Szabolcs Hajdu's BIBLIOTHÉQUE PASCAL in 2010. Meanwhile Mónika Mécs started working with András Muhi at INFORG STUDIO, where she co-produced both indie shortfilms (GRAVEDIGGER, 2010, dir.: Sándor Kardos) and feature films (MILKY WAY, 2007; WOMB, 2010 dir.: Bence Fliegauf). In 2010 Inforg and M&M Film made a fusion and became INFORG-M&M FILM. The new company's first film was the Berlinale prized JUST THE WIND in 2012, dir.: Bence Fliegauf). Since then Inforg-M&M Film has several productions in developement, in 2017 Idikó Enyedi's ON BODY AND SOUL won the Berlinale Golden Bear.

Paralell with Inforg-M&M Film, M&M FILM is still a very active company with several productions, just like AS FAR AS I KNOW, which premiered in Tallinn at 2020. Forest – I see you everywhere just premiered in Berlinale International Film Festival, and won a Silver Bear. Mécs is a member of the European Film Academy.









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