

INTERVIEW

# Sonja Prosenc on *History of Love*

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We met Sonja Prosenc at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, where her feature “History of Love” screened in the main competition. We spoke to Prosenc about her new approach compared to her feature debut, her new film’s main themes, and its style.

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**Your last film which was featured at Karlovy Vary, *The Tree*, was more atmospheric than your latest film, which seems to be much more plot-based. How did you make that transition to a straightforward plot-line?**

I think it was a natural transition. I never saw telling a really complicated story to be the aim in this film, but rather my goal was to build a different cinematic experience which relies on the very subjective experience of the main character. Even though there is a story-line, my main approach was to follow her in her state of mind. The dramaturgical line didn't rely on the story itself but on the psychological journey.

This is why I chose a non-binary approach. I don't call these sequences flashbacks or anything like that. It's very important to see which shot or sequence followed the next and to connect this with the sound, so often we took sound from one sequence and layered it over the beginning of the next one. The sound designer from Norway first used the word "meandering" to describe the sequence, he said "Now I realize, it's about memories, not about jumping back and forth". It's really about portraying Iva's complex experience of reality. Life never happens to us in a linear way – for example, we are sitting here now but in our mind and in our emotions many things are happening.

**So for you the film is about memory?**

It's about people who are trying to deal with loss in the light of a new discovery about the person they loved. What is behind that is not social commentary, but it originates from reflecting about things like nihilism, emotional detachment and violence. All of this prevents us from mourning. Mitja Ličen [present at the interview] is my DoP, but we've also been in a relationship for the past 15 years, we lost a loved one during the filming, but we didn't want to tell the whole crew so we felt all this pressure to smile and make things simple for those around us. In many cases because of all of this we suppress our most intimate emotions.

**Could you please talk a little bit about the sound in the film?**

There are some narrative details that are connected to my life. That of water for example. I was a swimmer and when you spend such a big part of your life in this element, in a way you are isolated from the rest of the world. I imagine it is similar with hearing. You can turn off the world. So it plays a part in the way she perceives sound. Water was also an important element for the way the film flows.

## What about the choice you made to blur faces of characters in the background?

It's mostly connected to her isolation and emotional detachment. You can sense the underlying need to connect with other people, which eventually happens to her with the conductor. The reflection behind all of this is about alienation in society. This formal approach steps a little bit away from very conventional storytelling.

## When you were writing the script, were you already conscious about showing subjectivity through sound and the camera?

[Dof] Mitja Ličen replies] When I was shooting *The Tree*, I was like a tree branch, filming from the shoulder but static. Now it's much more fluid, so I was changing perspective a lot. I chose to blur the background to isolate her more. Those were all conceptual ideas, and I think it worked. With the sound we had this concept, but when you have other authors around you they bring so much more. The sound designing takes it to the next level.

## Does the actor who plays the conductor, Kristoffer Joner, have any experience directing musicians?

He was training for months. He had his personal conducting instructor. He had remarked that many times musicians noticed that it's not correct so he spent months exercising and practicing.

## Why did he speak English?

Usually it's foreigners who direct national orchestras in Slovenia. I really wanted him to be someone who came from another world from the main character's point of view. So the only thing they have in common is this person that they both loved.

## How did you decide on the music for the film?

I had already chosen the Bach piece at the beginning before I wrote the script. I

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band who did the music. I chose this music because it's classical, but also contemporary and a bit dark.

**Thank You for the interview.**

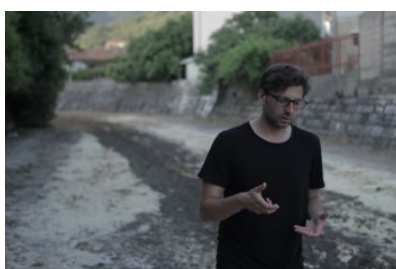
*Interview conducted by Colette de Castro and Moritz Pfeifer*

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## INTERVIEW WITH SONJA PROSENC



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

BY TARA KARAJICA

OCTOBER 2018

*After graduating from university, Slovenian film director Sonja Prosenč 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 Prosenč 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.



History of Love | Sonja Prosenc | Photos courtesy of Big Time PR

# SLAMDANCE FILM REVIEW: HISTORY OF LOVE

By Erin Moore

January 27, 2019

FILM REVIEWS

## *History of Love* Slamdance Film Festival

Director: Sonja Prosenc

*History of Love* comes to us from Slovenian director Sonja Prosenc. This, her second film, is a record breaker in that it is the first joint Slovenian-Norwegian-Italian production. The movie stars Norwegian actor **Kristoffer Joner** and Slovenian actress **Doroteja Nadrah** as two strangers linked by the death of a loved one. *History of Love* is no romance, but is rather a long, slow reveal of the stark image of the confusion and pain left by death, and how absence—as much as relationships themselves—is also part of the narrative of love. Though the film contains little dialogue, lush, rich imagery tells a story that must be followed closely, one that is less acutely about the family and their grief but shows us what that feeling can be imagined as looking like.

The film begins with the sad profile of Ema, but the story is only about where this woman isn't—she's dead, and the film follows the members of her family, who are all searching for her, or figuring the parameters of the space she has left behind. There's her daughter, Iva, a diver with a face as mysterious and composed as **Mona Lisa's**, whose inner world we see via murky, underwater shots, where her pensive, calm face expresses ineffable things. Of the rest of the family left behind in the wake of the mother's loss—a brother, a little sister and a very shaken father—it is Iva whom the film follows most closely, and her obsession with another man her mother left behind.

There is an unspeakable, moth-to-flame relationship that springs up between Iva and this man, a conductor of a local orchestra that Ema seems to have been part of. As Iva drifts further from reality and into her own private world, she also rotates around the conductor, stalking him as he stalks her. In their few moments of dialogue, they express their confusion and incredulousness about each other and to each other. It becomes clearer that their obsession lies in getting closer to the parts of Ema that were never theirs, even when she was alive. Iva rages halfheartedly at this man, the other man in her mother's life, while the conductor, in one scene, picks ants tenderly from her resting body, fingers the fabric of Ema's cardigan that Iva wears, which she had stolen back from his apartment.

Each character moves silently through bright, empty spaces that are as quiet as they are: The home of Ema's family, her dressing room, the pools where Iva dives. There is a tension in these spaces—a feeling of bold potential rocking below every composed surface—which blooms later into the near-feverish, dreamy spaces they all rush through as they all cede control. Iva dives into a rushing river, abandoning her hearing aid to it, while her father builds a bonfire out of the brush in their backyard, burns it with his youngest daughter watching. *History of Love* is a visual exploration of what grief looks as it unwinds, and as it unwinds people. It mimics the mute sound of loss, the space it takes up, and shows the spiral of desperation as Iva, her family and her mother's lover search for something to hold onto even as they realize that there's nothing there. A fascinating film more than a moving one, it's somehow soothing to see these feelings visualized so poetically, so minimally, so deftly. —Erin Moore

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## Oscars: Slovenia Selects 'History of Love' for International Feature Film Category

Slovenia has submitted Sonjan Prosenc's 'History of Love,' a story of a young woman coming to terms with the death of her mother, for consideration in the international feature Oscar category.

BY NICK HOLDSWORTH SEPTEMBER 9, 2019 10:40AM



COURTESY OF KARLOVY VARY IFF

Slovenia has submitted Sonjan Prosenc's *History of Love*, a story of a young woman coming to terms with the death of her mother, for consideration in the **international** feature Oscar category.

The drama — Prosenc's second feature — was chosen by a jury from the Association of Slovenian Filmmakers, who said it was "an unconventional film, characterized by the superb contributions of all team members who were so clearly tuned into a single story, it would be difficult to add or take anything away."

*History of Love* tells the story of 17-year-old Iva, who is coping with the death of her mother. The huge loss — and the discovery that she actually knew little about her mother — prompts her to sink into an altered reality, a dream-like state where she examines what is important to her in life.



Through strong images and direction, viewers are drawn into Iva's inner world, where she confronts her mother's secret past and through it seeks to find meaning in new relationships.

*History of Love*, which has its world premiere in the main competition at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 2018, stars Doroteja Nadrah, Kristoffer Joner, Matej Zemljic, Zita Fusco, Zoja Florjanc Lukan and Matija Vastl. It was produced by Slovenia's Monoo with co-producers Nefertiti Films (Italy) and Incitus Film (Norway) with the support of Eurimages.

It received its North American premiere in the inaugural Breakout section of Slamdance, the sister festival of Sundance.

"This is a film that speaks with silence, not with words, and does not underestimate the view, but provides him the the space for his own reflection," said Slovenia's Oscar selection committee.

Slovenia has been submitting films to the **Oscars** most years since 1993; in 2011, its choice *Silent Sonata* was disqualified because officials forgot to submit the pic.

The 92nd Academy Awards are set to be held Feb. 9, 2020.

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## NOTICIAS

## History of Love (Sonja Prosenc)

21 mayo, 2020 - por Alberto Mulas - [Deja un comentario](#)

Dirigida por Sonja Prosenc, *History of Love* fue la película enviada por Eslovenia para competir en los Oscar al premio de mejor película de habla no inglesa en 2020 (a pesar de haber sido estrenada en su país en 2018). No estuvo nominada en dicha categoría, pero lo importante es participar.

La película cuenta la historia de Iva, una joven de 17 años que se enfrenta a la muerte de su madre y al descubrimiento de algunos secretos que no conocía sobre ella. Como buena saltadora de trampolín que es, se sumerge en un mundo nuevo que está lejos de su realidad.



Así, sin más, podríamos estar hablando de una película cien veces vista antes, y tal vez sea así, pero no siempre. *History of Love* se desarrolla frente a los espectadores en un lenguaje cinematográfico que nos baña en la experiencia interna de la protagonista durante su viaje en busca de significados y respuestas. Con una dramaturgia sutil y silenciosa, utiliza algunos destellos de sonido para destacarlos sobre los detalles visuales, creando una atmósfera única que invita al espectador a realizar su propio viaje a través del paisaje creado por la directora.

Esto, a grandes rasgos, resumido más como lo que le gustaría ser que como lo que es. Después de todo, en tanto en cuanto intenta concentrarse en los silencios, buena parte de la historia resulta difícil de creer, o más bien el mundo interno de los personajes. Está claro que la ausencia de diálogo existe para conseguir que el espectador entre en un espacio más abstracto, el de la intimidad, pero ante tanto personaje silente no siempre es sencillo.

Quizá porque no vemos la mayor parte de la vida cotidiana de los personajes, y sólo los momentos de especial tensión y contemplación. O quizá porque la película nunca termine de desarrollar su potencial del todo. Y no lo hace porque, si bien a veces hay buenas ideas, a veces resuelve la idea original con modos de ejecución monótonos y tópicos. En cierto modo es

como si, intentando contar una historia cien veces contada de forma diferente, se hundiese en los mismos afluentes donde otros no supieron ni nadar.



Está bien intentar crear una elegía audiovisual sobre la pérdida, el duelo, el amor y los secretos. Todos empatizamos. También lo está hacerse preguntas al respecto: ¿a qué profundidad ahogamos el dolor? ¿cuánta agua se necesita para eliminarlo totalmente? Sobre todo, si es usando un lenguaje de imágenes acorde, como ensoñaciones. Imágenes etéreas, presentimientos arquetípicos y metáforas visuales y sonoras que crean una experiencia sensorial muy poderosa (aunque no siempre para bien) y capturan precisamente la sensación de estar atrapados a pesar de no poder parar el tiempo.

En definitiva, está claro que la autora exige un espectador activo, listo para salir de su zona de confort y lo más lejos posible de lo que nos brinda el cine comercial. Debido a su estética visual y a la estructura de la cinta, no cabe duda de que es una película que pone a funcionar todos los sentidos del espectador. Sin embargo, no siempre los pone a funcionar en el mejor sentido: definida por algunos como la Historia de un bostezo, *History of Love* es una de esas películas rodadas a cámara lenta y con largos silencios que te meten sustos con un ruido tocho inesperado. Así que, si eres de los del bostezo, para ti también tiene remedio.



[Alberto Mulas](#)

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