Interview with Lucija Stojevic by Dimitra Kouzi

She originally comes from Croatia, but moved to Austria when she was 6. While studying architecture in Edinburgh, she discovered she loved film more, so she moved to the Czech Republic to study film for one very intensive year. After that, she moved to Barcelona, Spain, and started to work for production companies and independently doing video journalism for newspapers like *The Guardian. La Chana* was the reason why she set up her own production company. She produced and directed this feature-length documentary against all the financial obstacles for a newcomer. Four years later, *La Chana* is premiering at Idfa Panorama and is also nominated for the best female-directed film. While this interview was taking place in her co-working space in Barcelona, her seven-month-old daughter was one floor above, playing in the baby facility provided by this co-working space.

Is it common in Spain to have a baby facility if you are a working woman?
No, it's a completely new thing; we are pioneers and trying it out.
It's a colleague here; she just started it in September, and we were the first ones who signed up. I was like, "This is perfect" because, you know, she is depending on me, but I need to work, so it's a good solution.

This is amazing. So how many babies do you have upstairs?
[laughing] There are only five babies at the moment.

Five? Only? (laughing)
Yeah, they are up there, playing, learning, enjoining it. They have an outside terrace – it's really nice.

I think this is great. It already shows so much.
I think it's important for women to find a way to combine different aspects they want to have in life. It's not one thing or another; it's possible to do both. My poor baby is seven months old and has been to five countries in seven months. It's going to be her sixth country now.

Wow! So, you were pregnant while doing the film?
During the editing process, my belly was just growing. So, I was thinking, if she doesn't have a sense of rhythm, I will be surprised. She is getting so much flamenco, she'd better have a good sense of rhythm.

You delivered both a film and a baby.
It puts pressure on you, like you wouldn't believe, because you think you have this mental feeling that, 'My life is going to be over when the baby arrives,' but then of course it doesn't happen that way – you incorporate it into your life and it's possible to do both. We are lucky because my baby is pretty chilled; she's not a high-maintenance, high-energy baby; she is more of a little intellectual just sitting there, analysing things for long periods of

time,so she makes it easier. The feeling of your life being over is definitely not true – it's just a new beginning.

Where does the quiet character of the baby come from?
I am pretty calm I think; I do have character, so if I get angry, I get angry (laughing), but generally I am pretty calm and I am good under stress.

Do you think your background in architecture influences this way of reacting and thinking? This structure you have, is it coming from there?

There are overlaps between film and architecture. For example, in the working process, in both film and architecture, you work on different aspects and still always have an overall picture the whole time, too. It's also a echnical and creative mix, and I think there are a lot of crossovers, which is actually why I got into film. I did my final project on editing theory in film and architecture and was looking at how these two things can influence each other in the creative process, in the way you think about montage and architecture and construction, and the way you think about montage and constructing through sequences in storytelling. There is similarity. During that period, I became much more interested in film than architecture, so my boyfriend at the time told me, 'You seem so much more into the film aspect, why don't you just go to film school?' and I thought that actually was not such a bad idea.

You have a pretty colourful background.
I lived in Vienna for many years. We moved to Vienna when I was seven, and I graduated from high school in Vienna, and then I moved to Italy for a year and then I moved to Edinburgh, where I studied architecture and then to Prague and then back to Vienna and then to Barcelona, so it's been quite a ride.

Why Barcelona, was it because of flamenco?
No, even though I took classes in both Vienna and Prague and loved it. Maybe there was an aspect of that subconsciously. At the time, I got a place in a Master's degree at the University here in Barcelona; in the end I decided not to go and do it, but to work in film production companies instead, which were producing documentary films because I felt a little bit that this is a more hands-on way of learning and building your network. I started doing a lot of video journalism during that time, as well, so I was producing entire short docs in different areas for newspapers, such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and I did that for a few years. Then, I started on this big project – *La Chana*.

How did you meet La Chana?
I met her through my teacher, Beatriz del Pozo. La Chana is her 'maestro'. Beatriz always talks about La Chana, about her rhythms, about her beats, about how she had fallen into the shadows and she shouldn't have because she is an amazing, wonderful artist and does things nobody else had done. She put some videos on for me when I was at her house, of La Chana dancing and I was just dumbstruck. I think the one that really struck

me was the one where La Chana was dancing in *The Bobo* [the Peter Sellers film], where she is nineteen years old and looks like she is forty – the passion and the pain and the suffering – she was like a sorceress!
Beatriz suggested that we meet so we went to her home, and she prepared an amazing paella for us. She was very open with me from the beginning in terms of what happened to her, she just told me everything. There was so much story here, and this character was amazing. She could carry a film as an individual character – nothing else was necessary. I proposed we start working together, and the first thing she told me was, 'OK, come to the party on Saturday. I am having my whole family here, but only you can come, you can't bring any men with you, no camera guys, and if my family ask you, tell them that you are a student of mine.' She was very careful, and what worried her the most was her own environment, and how they were going to react if they knew she was doing this film. But then, little by little, she became much more open about this.

It does come across in the film that she has this worry about how others will think of things and that she was always between these two things, what do others think and what is my own soul telling me.
Exactly, very much so. It has always been a struggle for her, this combination of 'this is me, this is what I want, what I am feeling and this is what I am supposed to be doing.

How did you deal with all these layers of her character, all these directions the film could take?
There were many directions the film could have taken, as there were many elements to deal with: her art, the social circumstances, the abuse. But I think going into general topics would have been a mistake. So, it was very important that we just stick to the core, and let her lead it, and just look more how these different things influenced her, rather than what they are.
And La Chana's core is her dance, her art. That's why there is a narrative told through the transformation of the way you perceive her dance in the film. When you watch the early part of the film and you discover who she was, you see her dancing and you think, 'Wow, amazing dancer,' but it's only when you find out those different obstacles that she had, that her dances take on other meanings, other layers. You understand all that emotional charge then. That was very important to me, that we go to where her core is – her music, her rhythm, her dance – and to do that we should understand her pain and her suffering and her environment, and her tragedy, and stay close to that.

I could see the passion of La Chana but I could also feel your passion in doing this film. I am sure you had difficulties in many ways to make it. How did you balance these two roles – director and producer?
I think the way the documentary world is today, if I look at it from the producers' perspective, most people would have just put this film into the drawer looking at it in terms of financing and what was possible to raise, unfortunately. That was one of my worries initially, because we started this film exactly when the crisis hit, so we had the problem that the arts were the first thing to get cut – production companies were closing left, right and

centre. Everybody was telling me, ‘We love the film, we love the idea but we don't know if we are going to survive one more year, and it will be very difficult to get funding for your film.’ We had a lot of interest also at the international level, but this was complicated, because of the fact that it is character-driven, a human-interest story, but of a character who is not so well-known outside of Spain – I mean she is not so well known inside of Spain either, except to the older generation. Only Spanish is spoken, and it was very hard to find co-producers who could do anything. In the end, I established a production company in order to be able to produce it, and then we eventually started getting interest from a direct audience. We ended up raising a huge part, more than 50% of our budget, from individuals. Otherwise, it would have been impossible.
It was funded by women mostly. Women wanted to watch this film.

How did you approach individual donors; what kind of campaign did you do?
We partnered with New York Women in Film and Television in the U.S. where we managed to attract tax-deductible donations.

What about the Icelandic Film Centre? How did they get involved?
At one point, we talked to potential US funders. In order to apply for some of their funds, we needed an American co-production company. We approached a company called Bless Bless Productions in New York, and they have offices in New York and in Reykjavik. They approached the Icelandic Film Centre and got funding for post-production.

You need inner strength to go into this process. What was your motivation, the inner strength that helped you when you were thinking that nothing would work out?
I am a stubborn person, like a bulldog. One thing that really had me was that I knew I had a good story in my hands. Nobody could tell me I didn’t have a good story in my hands. This story needed to be told. Also, you end up having a responsibility towards many different people throughout the process towards La Chana, first and foremost, towards the team, towards people who had already helped us get to a certain point. You come to a point of no return. One way or another we had to figure out a way to get to the end. I don't abandon things. It’s just not my style. It’s one of the characteristics that annoy me the most when people do abandon things.

In a film like La Chana *it is important that you are a woman. Do you think that the fact that you were a woman filmmaker made her trust you and open up to tell her story? Was it important that you were a woman?*
I think so. She grew up in such a macho society that I think there are certain things that she would certainly not share with a man. It made it easier for her to relate to me and open up to me. Initially, one of the things I was worried about is that I am a foreigner and I think that played as an advantage for me because, especially in the beginning, she didn't feel threatened by me. She thought ‘the girl with the funny accent’, you know (laughing). That, in some way, helped her to relax.

You are not only stubborn, but very smart, too. I wanted to ask you a bit more about flamenco. Do you dance?

I am interested from an intellectual point of view but you can't be shy and perform in flamenco. I absolutely adore it and I loved learning it, but I wouldn't describe myself as a flamenco dancer. In order to be really good, you need to be really raw and really let everything come out; show everything that you are. In flamenco for it to work you have to let all that fall, and I am too private of a person to do that.

In the film, you talk about the aging process, the loss of acceptance, but also the reinvention. You manage to do this very smoothly. I wanted to hear more about that coming from you, what are your thoughts about aging and reinvention?

What La Chana shows us in a very nice way is that you have to accept the passing of time and that you can do something with it; you don't have to just sit there and do nothing anymore. She demonstrates it so beautifully, that you can't let your passions die even if you are physically getting older. You have to find a way to change them into a format that you can still enjoy.

Through the film, you helped her do this also, to go back.

We kind of inspired her to go back on stage, which she loves; she loves the attention, she loves the audience, but she also loves being filmed. She is living with memories but quite isolated. Now, I think we won't be able to stop her anymore (laughing) – she wants to go everywhere and is going to be the great diva again, and she will do anything.

What was her reaction when she saw the film?

She always said she prayed for us (the film team), but when I showed her the film in January she told me she stopped praying for me. Over a nine-month period.

Why?

She hated it; she had a really hard time with it, which was normal. I mean, I was expecting her to react, but she reacted very strongly. It might sound sadistic and horrible, but i thought, 'OK, this is a good sign'. Because if she loved it from the beginning, it means we didn't really go under the surface. It had to affect her; it wouldn't be normal if it didn't affect her because it's her life. There is a psychological process she never went through. It was extremely difficult, and she was very angry at me, but by the time we showed her a final version, after many months had passed, she had had time to process it and now stands behind it.

What about the editing?

I think the selection process wasn't so difficult. It wasn't like one of those films where you have hundreds of hours of footage that you must sit through. After each shooting, it was kind of like, ‘OK, these were the gems.’ The hard bit was how to pull all of this together. How to structure the material.

Did your participation in Docu Rough Cut Boutique workshop help you in this?

Absolutely. It was amazing – both European training initiatives, EsoDoc more for development and Rough-cut Boutique more for postproduction. They were absolutely amazing. We were so alone in this project producing it, these workshops gave us some anchors – so a huge, huge thank you to both EsoDoc and Docu Rough Cut Boutique; they made a huge difference for us.