

Olga Delane

Interview to Dimitra Kouzi

About her documentary *Siberian LOVE*

(official **idfa** selection 2016)

Dimitra Kouzi: Olga, where are you from?

Olga Delane: People consider me a Russian in Germany and a German in Russia. My grandmother's name was Wilhelmine; she moved from Germany to Russia 200 years ago. The fact is that I am a German-Russian who moved back to Germany 20 years ago. I grew up under the Soviet culture, so I am a 'Soviet', too, even though the USSR is no longer. I was lucky to move to Germany with my parents when I was only 16 years old. Ultimately, I can feel at home everywhere. This is a great privilege.

What is your film about?

On the one hand, it is an opportunity for viewers to discover a place such as Siberia, which for most people is a remote, extreme and exotic place. How do people live in Siberia? You can experience that in the film. Viewers can feel very close to the people who live there. Get to know them. On the other hand, this is a film about relationships – human relationships between men and women, family relationships. This is the basic storyline for the film. I live in a country (Germany) in which there are many opportunities in all aspects of life. As a free person, I am tempted to try them all, to experience, to evolve. On the other hand, the pace of life prevents us from experiencing all that we want, and to evolve as human beings, to taste this life and learn from our choices. In this incredible and inexhaustible freedom, there is less and less room for family, relationships, children. We are a generation that cannot develop relationships.

What are the general characteristics of a Russian woman?

A Russian woman loves to show herself, to be feminine, to be adored by men, to be a woman is very important. Dressed luxuriously, in trim. A woman always has a fascinating secret. The 'classical' role. A Russian woman can't deal easily with the 'feminine' side of man. I love to be a Russian in Germany. As a Russian woman I will always be excused. 'She is foreign, a Russian, and on top of that an artist.'

And men?

Russian men are protectors. They will do anything to please their women. In Russia, a man takes full responsibility for the happiness of a woman. He will offer you everything. Will even replace your worn shoelaces. He will travel 800 km a day to buy fresh fruit and vegetables for you. On the other hand, they are not so courteous, and generally do not speak so much.

How did you find the village?

A few years ago, in 2009, my father took me to the village and introduced me to relatives and friends. It is a Cossack village; once there lived 700 families, now there are only 50, mainly working on land and animal-farming. It's a small scale. Here, people can dream that they will win one million, but they cannot 'conceive' a sum of one billion. When I first visited, word got around that I was an American journalist. If you carry a camera, you are a journalist for them.

What was your motivation to make this film?

I was immediately interested in Ljuba. I noticed that although she had a hard life she never complained. She did not struggle to change that and at the same time she seemed very happy and satisfied with her life. I was fascinated in her attitude towards life. She can do so many things, she is so talented. She can weave, sew, embroider; She sings, dances, bakes, cooks; she is as wise as in the Thousand and One Nights. It was clear to me while observing her that her power did not lie in 'equality' as we know it in the West, but in the fact that she was the complementary element in a relationship. So, I became interested in her relationship, and I started the film with her.

Then I decided to observe these people, to get answers. Are they right? How do they go about things? How are they shaped by the traditional social conditions in their environment? How do they live and love? How do they interpret 'happiness'?

What about the men?

The basis of a woman's life in the village is caring, working and children. She is safe. We in our world are far away from that. We have much higher expectations, but in the meantime we lost track in dealing with this freedom.

Would you 'survive' in that village?

I haven't tried. I know I need to be in constant motion: do projects, have plans; I have to do something all the time. I guess I would be very anxious, sooner or later, or even aggressive. I have the feeling that people there do not develop. Everything stays the same. Undoubtedly, when you arrive at a place like that, a village where time has stopped, devoid of big-city 'temptations', there is no pressure to have a 'career'; there is no advertising, no internet – there is no telephone line sometimes. You are then forced to deal with the inhabitants of this place, and with your own, Western lifestyle.

What misconceptions are there between East and West – Russians and Europeans?

How can we have an opinion without knowing each other 100%?

Did this experience change you?

Yes, for me my protagonists are a symbol of endurance and strength. Despite their hard life they manage not to complain, but go through life as it comes. When I have problems, I immediately think of them and calm down. And what was for me only a suspicion before filming, that we need to keep our egos outside of a relationship, was confirmed. Yet, this is a huge process of working with ourselves.

What was your biggest challenge (technically and/or emotionally)?

My first shock was when one of my leading characters refused to be in the film. A German woman who got married to a Siberian hunter. I had to travel two days by train and two days by boat to reach her. I lived in her village (population 57) for two weeks because there was no boat for me to leave. On the other hand, this enabled me to work very well. One month after filming, she decided she did not wish to participate in the film and prohibited me from using the material.

What was even harder was when, one night before leaving for Siberia, something happened to our cameraman and he had to cancel his trip. We only had 10 hours to find a replacement. It could not be someone from Germany, as we would have to get them a visa, and we could not afford new extra-expensive tickets to Siberia. A thriller. In the end, we found a solution. We found a young talented and motivated cameraman in Siberia who, in addition, had his own equipment.

There were emotional difficulties, too. When one of my leading characters died.

Take us into your editing room. What decisions did you have to make while editing the film?

First of all, to decide to start editing! I have not been to film school. And I had only one prior experience. But for that previous film there were no financiers who had requirements. We just did what we liked. For *Siberian Love*, everybody had expectations already about where the story should go. And we had tons of material after four years of shooting. We had filmed using three different cameras in different qualities, and we had six families as protagonists. My editor, Phillip Gromov, with his passion, helped me a lot to manage all this enormous work. It is not important what you prefer, but how you will make a good film.

In your opinion, why are there so many people nowadays who are alone, unwilling to make a commitment?

It is because of too much freedom and too many choices. At 30, we are still 'children', unable to be responsible for ourselves. We cannot take the responsibility for somebody else, for a relationship. We are eager to stay in our comfort zone in every way. And we grow unused to dealing with the difficulties in a real-life relationship. You can't expect your partner to be there just to make you happy.

What about feminism? Why are you about to answer immediately, 'No, I am not a feminist!'

Because I am not! I was born in today's Russia. There, there are specified roles, starting when you are at Kindergarten. I love to be a woman. I love to cook for my man, to wash his socks and sometimes even to iron. I love it when I feel the man's power in a relationship, and when a man takes it upon himself to make me happy, while that makes him self-confident. This to me is a healthy relationship. In no way am I dependent on a man, or stripped off of my rights as a woman. On the contrary, I evolve as a woman, and my happiness is also transmitted to him. Yet, I can be happy by myself; I can fend for myself. Is there anything more beautiful? God has made us so different just to have fun. I'm sure he had something in mind, and I do not underestimate that in any way.

Do you believe in love?

Of course I do! Without love there is no life!

What about marriage?

It is a magical ritual. But you do not have to believe in that. What we need today is spiritual power. Tradition provides roots for a harmonious coexistence.

What is the biggest cliché about women directors?

Once, I heard this comment when I went to a shooting wearing a tight cigarette skirt. A German woman told me, 'Olga, you can't go on a set dressed like this. You are a filmmaker now!' That is perhaps a cliché.

Would you have any special advice to give to female directors?

Actually, no. I know one thing. Women have great power in them. If they activate this power, they can make a fantastic experience. I wish that many women have this experience. The world will immediately change – everybody stands to benefit, especially women directors.

Name your favourite woman-directed film and why you love it.

For a few years now, I have been observing the highly talented Ekaterina Eremenko. I am a friend of hers, and that is why I speak about her. She has intensity and power that can seldom be found in a man. At work, she is like a tank, and at the same time she is a lady, a mother. That's a beautiful combination for a modern woman, who always stays feminine.