

Interview with Stefan Djordjevic

By Lorena-Theodora Neacșu

On the occasion of the screening of his new film “Wind, Talk to Me,” I got to talk to director Stefan Djordjevic about family, grief and how to fill the void. It follows Stefan and his family, all dealing with the loss of Stefan’s mother. Djordjevic had wanted to make a film about her for a long time and already had footage of her that he intended to use in the future. Her passing prompted him to turn this project into one about remembering her.

“I wanted to make a film about presence. I didn’t want it to be ‘past versus present’. I wanted the audience to feel my mother’s presence, as if she were still around us,” he said.

“This isn’t their way of dealing with loss; it’s mine. I chose this approach and I knew what I was putting myself through. They didn’t, but they immediately accepted it because my mom gave us so much love. This was the least we could do. Still, it was a sensitive topic, especially for my grandparents, as there’s nothing more tragic than losing a child.”

Djordjevic’s process involved revisiting the past and listening to the present.

“First, I transcribed all the scenes with my mother. I noticed that when my family talked about her, I could feel her presence. And then I thought: ‘If I make a film about my mother, I should make a film about my family, too.’ I started recording conversations with my family and then I wrote everything down in an attempt to find some emotional threads.”

When asked about how it felt to switch between being in front of and behind the camera, he said: “It was schizophrenic. I put a lot of pressure on myself. If I didn’t feel something during the scenes, I would be so hard on myself. When I started editing, it became so difficult emotionally. I was seeing myself in tough situations, and being rough with my mother. The public will see me in a negative light, yelling at my nephew, yelling at my dog. I needed time to accept it.”

Navigating how to work with everyone was hard.

“I took a different approach with every family member. In real life, my grandfather has a very childlike energy and smile. It was very hard to capture that on film. With more takes, he just felt guilty as the crew was waiting for him. I was trying to find the best way to portray him.” His brother is a filmmaker, too.

“He wrote his own scenes and he asked for multiple takes. As for the kids, it was just fun. My grandma suffers from dementia, so she would forget stuff.”

At the beginning of the film, Stefan arrives at his grandparents’ house for her birthday.

“She had one line: ‘Where is your girlfriend?’ We shot that for two days. It was hard to manage.”

With a subject that delicate, having the right crew was important. “With producer Dragana Jovović, we realized we needed to create a family also with our crew. I had private conversations with everyone, telling them it was going to be sensitive. We had to make room for my family. We needed intimacy. The scene with my grandma was a good example of that. It broke me.”

It follows a conversation between Stefan and his grandmother in which he asks why she washed his mother’s dress after her death.

“My grandma opened herself up so much. I went to my crew and said: ‘We are not repeating this. This is life itself, happening in front of the camera’.”

Another big part of the film? Lija, the dog Stefan adopts in the opening scene after accidentally hitting her with his car. She is right next to him throughout the whole film. “In a way, Lija filled the empty space in my family. I felt she was the missing piece after my mom passed away. She represents this tough period of grief, but we made a film about living, not about dying.” He adds: “Dying isn’t as romantic as we made it seem. I wanted to have this feeling of caring so much about someone but being unable to save them. I felt so overprotective of Lija; I just wanted to protect her. Lija is the most important figure in my life right now.”

One of the best things about the film is the way people connect to it, he says. “After screenings, people would approach me and say they had lost someone too. One time, in Zagreb, a man told me he had cried throughout the whole film, in front of everyone. I thanked him for saying that. It’s very brave to admit that, especially for a man. We should get over this stereotype that guys should be tough.”

He continues: “This is what art should do. When we share our sadness, we break down these boundaries of religion and cultural differences: we become one. Art should encourage us to connect, and that’s what happened here. At first, this kind of intimacy was difficult. Now, I’m very thankful for it.”

Djordjevic admits he still thinks about his mother every day.

“There’s so much of her in me. I am like her and I’m learning how to deal with it. Then again, when you accept sadness, your life gets so much bigger.”