

New Zealand Filmmakers' Masterclass with ATHINA TSOULIS

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An interview with director Athina Tsoulis, on
how she makes movies. October 2008.

New Zealand Moviemaker Masterclass; *a series of interviews with New Zealand's foremost directors, on how they make movies.*

Based on the excellent book 'Moviemakers' Masterclass' by French director Laurent Tirard, the same set of questions is posed to a range of New Zealand directors. The questions are deliberately pragmatic and focus on the craft of filmmaking. The result aims to offer a cross-section of opinions, and a rare insight into Kiwi filmmakers' creative processes; valuable to both those wanting to make films and film fans looking for a more insightful way to watch them.

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Athina Tsoulis

*Athina Tsoulis (Greek-born, Australian-raised and New Zealand-based) made her feature debut with 1999's **I'll Make You Happy**. It's been a long time between drinks (working on various projects including **Wedding a la Grecque**, which was stopped in its tracks by the release of **My Big Fat Greek Wedding** in 2002), but Athina returns to the big screen with her second feature **Jinx Sister** – self-funded, at the cost of \$120,000.*

*It premiered at this year's NZ International Film Festival, and received three nominations at the NZ Screen Awards (including best low budget film, and best actress for Sara Wiseman). **Jinx Sister** is released in cinemas October 23.*

We speak to Athina, as part of our NZ Moviemakers Masterclass series, about her process and the challenges of low budget filmmaking.

Athina Tsoulis Filmography

A Bitter Song [short film] (1990)

The Invisible Hand [short film] (1992)

Revelations [short film] (1995)

I'll Make You Happy (1999)

Jinx Sister (2008)

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How would you teach filmmaking if you had to? Would you screen films, and if yes, which ones, and why?

As it happens, I do teach film making at Unitec, School of Performing and Screen Arts in Auckland, in particular directing for screen. I usually begin students with the basics – screen grammar and the technical aspects because they are often easier to grasp. Text analysis, which lies at the heart of all directorial decisions, is something that I emphasize. Working with actors is the hardest skill for would-be directors to learn. Learning through doing and making mistakes is the best way to learn so we work on a lot of projects. Observing and participating in the edit is also vital as you get the time to sit and look at why things are or are not working and why.

I encourage students to watch films so they can develop a sense of their own voice/tastes, what appeals to them and what type of films they want to make, as well as learning from the work of great film makers. If you want to learn how to write a novel, I would expect the works of great writers to be read. It is the same principal with film. The films I show are the ones where all the elements work in harmony to provide great storytelling (the performances, the visual elements, the sound design). Some of my favourites, which have stood the test of time, are from the 60's and 70's: **Midnight Cowboy, The Graduate, Taxi Driver, Badlands, Paris Texas, and Apocalypse Now.** More recent films would include **The Celebration, Happiness** and **Somersault.**

Milos Forman, who taught film making, said he saw two different kinds of students: those who want to make films because they admire great cinema, and those who want to make films as a rebellion against bad cinema. In which of these two categories do you think you belong?

Part of me probably belongs in both camps – I admire great cinema and abhor bad cinema. However, my motives for making films is that I want to tell stories that come from my experience, to contribute to the diverse voices that exist in our community which struggle against the American juggernaut. They are usually about marginalized people so in a sense I want to make films that rebel against the ethos of the dominant culture, which is so often reflected in the films that bombard us.

How did you learn film making?

I came to film making through doing an MA class in Film run by Roger Horrocks at Auckland University. Studying films – I was already an avid film viewer – made me aware that there were many absent voices. So, I made a decision to become a filmmaker and I learnt largely by doing and making mistakes. There weren't many opportunities to study film making in the Auckland of the late 80's. I had the opportunity to live in London during 1987/1988 and attended as many workshops as I could. I took writing courses with the London Screenwriter's Guild, Sankofa and Women in Sync. I also won a small bursary to make a documentary in King's Cross through Women in Sync who provided the backup and training. When I returned to NZ I did what most people did who wanted to become a filmmaker. I applied to The Arts Council (now called Creative NZ) and made my first short film, **A Bitter Song**, and then a second, **The Invisible Hand**.

What do you feel have been the main turning points in your approach to film making?

Developing a growing understanding of what it was I wanted to achieve. I've always seen myself as an apprentice filmmaker and tried different things in order to grow and develop. I gave away many opportunities because I did not feel ready or was wary of some of the working relationships on offer. I wasn't after a career as such but wanted to make films I could be proud of and to live with.

Do you feel you make films to express a particular idea, or is the making of the film a way to explore what it is that you want to say?

I write my films so in a sense I am exploring an idea. If something grabs me and takes hold, exploring why it has that effect and why it is important to me, is often the starting point. Seeing that idea take shape and develop into characters and a story is at times painful but immensely satisfying.

Is the final product always exactly what you had in mind, or is it more of a surprise?

It is always a surprise. And a large part of why I am bitten by the filmmaking bug is precisely seeing something that I could not have envisaged at the outset take life as I journey from the script to a finished film, working alongside my collaborators each of whom brings something to the work. The excitement comes from seeing the layers build and take shape, how each decision comes to impact the end product. If I could see it exactly before I made the film, the fun would be gone as it would just be a predictable exercise. As long as the finished film retains the script's intentions and my vision for realising it, I am happy.

Do you make films for yourself or for the audience? And if for an audience, is it necessary for NZ filmmakers to be aware of not just their local audience, but a greater international audience as well? Does this influence how you direct your films?

I love making films because I enjoy every aspect of it, apart from raising finance. It is such a complete experience that suits my personality and work ethic. What could be more fun than working on a creative project with a bunch of talented collaborators? Having said that, filmmaking is about story telling, which necessitates an audience unless you like the sound of your own voice. They say that part of the director's job is to be the audience's representative and to be looking at the work from their point of view. Obviously, I have a particular audience in mind – like-minded individuals – as I am not making films for a mass audience and there are particular stories I want to tell. But I DO want people to see my work – why else go through such an expensive exercise? Filmmaking is about communicating and you need someone to communicate to. Having said that, I am also a viewer so I try to satisfy myself first and I will not compromise on what I have to say. But I have many screenings during the edit stage and I listen to people's feedback because they are seeing it for the first time.

What I look for is whether they get what I'm trying to say, is there clarity in my story telling? But not changing the ending because some people don't like it. Telling universal stories with regional specificity should ensure a local and international audience. I have shown my work in many overseas countries (France, Portugal, India, UK, Australia, US) and the reaction is similar.

On a given film, what is the share of decisions that are made for artistic reasons, and what is the share of decisions made for economic reasons?

The creative, artistic decisions arise out of the size of my budget, which is usually low. Therefore, it does pose challenges, as I can't do the things I would like, or sometimes work with certain collaborators I'd like to, who would bring a whole other dimension to the work. However, a low budget does not necessarily mean a compromise in the artistic vision - sometimes it means you are free to be more creativity because you do not have to answer to as many masters when you make a low budget film.

Is there, for you, a real difference between a director who writes his own material and one who doesn't? And do you have to write the screenplay to be the author of the film?

Authorship is an interesting issue. I do write and direct my own material and there is a point when I have to take one hat off and wear the other. When you write and direct you CAN have a stronger vision but not necessarily. If you only direct you CAN play a big role in authorship. I discovered this when I tried to read the script for **Taxi Driver**. Scorsese made a huge contribution, as did the actors, especially Robert de Niro. My personal view is that many people can claim authorship from the writer/director/lead actors/cinematographer/editor and we should give over being precious about it. The director's job, however, is to have a clear vision of how to realize the script whilst honouring the writer's intentions and to mediate the contributions of the various collaborators to that end.

What is, for you, the ideal way to work between a director and a writer?

Respectfully is always good. From my experience of writing a feature film script for another director, it involves being clear at the outset what story you both want to tell. As I am writing on commission, I have to write it for the other person as well as for myself. Therefore, I will only write for someone who has a similar sensibility to me as there is no way I can write from any philosophical/political position. The more in tune the director is with the writer's intentions, the better they will understand and create their vision for it. Meeting at regular intervals to talk through ideas, to feed off each other is good. Writing is such a solitary activity. A director needs to know how to read a script as well, so that they can make valuable contributions/suggestions, and a writer needs to know what is important to fight for and what is not – what they can let go of and what they can't.

Is there a grammar of film making, the same way there is a grammar in literature? Is there a set of rules that you can always rely on, and is that still true today, or is every shot an experiment in itself?

There is definitely a grammar of film making and like any grammar it has evolved historically so that films made in the early 1920's, 1930's etc are distinctly different to the ones made in the 70's and of the ones made today. We are more visually literate than any of our ancestors were in terms of the moving image. We can break rules more easily even in conventional films – jump cuts for instance have become more acceptable in certain situations. Having said that, some of the old rules still hold good and it is important to know why they exist. So if you break the rules, you are doing so consciously and always because it will aid the story telling and not because you just feel like it.

On a given scene, how do you decide where to set the camera? Is it more of an intellectual deci-

sion, or an intuitive decision?

A bit of both. It is intuitive but only because I know the script inside out, and it arises out of the staging on set. The actors will use the space well if they are in tune with their characters and what is going on in the scene. As the director, I will adjust the staging of the actors and then make a decision where the camera will go so that we see what we need to see in terms of action and subtext.

When you arrive on the set, do you set the camera first, then rehearse with the actors within the frame you've decided, or do you set the camera after you have blocked the actors?

I always allow the actors to move in the location freely and then begin to make decisions re the staging and only then do I decide where to place the camera. Of course, I have done extensive work on the text by myself and with the actors before the shoot takes place. I, therefore, come to set prepared with a shot list so that I know the coverage I need for a particular scene, both in terms of action and subtext.

Do you cover yourself a lot, or do you shoot just what you need?

I don't believe in quantity of shots – it just creates a mess in the edit. I prefer to shoot less and concentrate more on performance so that I have more confidence that I can cut the shots I have together in terms of subtext and the important beats in a scene. If you waste time doing many different shots to cover yourself you may still find it hard to cut it together because the nuances in the performances are not there.

Are you a director who likes a lot of takes or, on the contrary, very few? Is there an average? Can you recall the most takes you did on a given scene?

I usually do between 3-6 takes, as many as it takes to be satisfied I have the best performance I can get. Most actors I have worked with give you their best performance in the first couple of takes. We are not working with the likes of Warren Beatty who is just warming up after the 17th take.

How do you communicate with a Director of Photography? How much freedom do you leave him

or her?

In pre-production, it is more a discussion of style and visual references with the Director of Photography (DP) so that they understand the vision you have for the piece. When I rehearse/stage the scene on set the DP will usually observe and once I am ready to set the camera, a conversation ensues. Once the DP has heard my intentions he may offer suggestions or not as the case may be. I will decide on the shots and the DP executes the shots bringing his/her skill and creativity into the lighting, lens sizes, framing and composition.

How strict are you on following the script on set?

If something is tripping us up I am happy to change the script. Or if something better occurs on the day, that is easily accommodated, I will also change the scene. I am not talking about radical changes, more tweaks. One of the actors in **Jinx Sister**, William Wallace, came up with the idea of the father breaking down in the shed and I thought it was a great idea so we shot it. I like to incorporate any great idea my collaborators offer as long as it's in keeping with my vision.

From your experience, what would you say is the key to directing actors?

Being clear on the characterizations and doing the text analysis together so that any inconsistencies are ironed out in terms of relationships, motivations and subtext before you get on set. Honest, open communication is essential. Building trust is also important because the actor/director relationship is extremely important. An actor will give you everything if they feel secure that you know what you are doing and that you respect them as collaborators. Being emotionally literate is also very important otherwise how do you recognise the 'truth' in what the actor gives you?

How do you choose actors? Do you ask them to read or do you just talk with them? Do you choose them because they fit to the part, or do you choose them because they interest you, and then try to tailor the part for them?

I like to do all my own casting which is just as well because I can't afford to pay a casting agent! I will often be on the look out for the main actors in any film I am going to make well in advance. Someone may catch my eye, like Sara Wiseman in **Mercy Peak**, because they have displayed a quality that I need for a potential character. Then I will audition actors whom I have identified or

who have been recommended by others. I will audition actors in pairs rather than having a reader. We do a cold read or, if a scene has been provided I see what the actors have come with, I give feedback, and then we do another read. If I like what I am seeing and the actors have taken on board my suggestions, then we move into improvisation. I particularly look for a spark or dynamic that brings a particular pairing alive. Do they have screen presence?

I will often have a vision in my mind of the character but I am open to what an actor shows me. Jodie Rimmer was not exactly what I initially had in mind for **I'll Make You Happy** but I like to be surprised, pleasantly of course!

Do you see the editing process as being potentially a complete rewrite of the film, or is it just a confirmation of what has been shot?

The first stage of an edit is to cut the story together according to the script. But then, you usually throw away the script and work with what you've got to shape the story. What you try and keep are the writer's intentions rather than every scene and line of dialogue. This is because you are taking the written word and transforming it into pictures and we all know that images can be more powerful and/or economical than words. One image may do the work of many words on the page.

And, filmmaking is essentially an organic process. You can try and control it as much as you can and you may have a large enough budget to be able to do so, but by its very nature, there will always be a final rewrite in the edit. What you don't want to do is to have to re-write the script because you've made huge mistakes on set and haven't got the coverage, or quality of coverage in terms of performance or technical, to do the script justice. I've learnt more from the edit process about writing and directing than any other single process.

What do you think is the biggest mistake a beginning director must try to avoid?

Trying to do it too fast. Beginning directors need to recognise that learning to be a director is a path that you negotiate over a period of time and that you do not become a director overnight by making one short film. Take your time and create new challenges for yourself with each project, try and work with the best collaborators you can, hone your observational and listening skills, and learn to trust your intuition.

What filmmakers do you admire?

I admire women directors because there are so few of them and it is harder for them to get their films up (Alison Maclean, Merata Mita, Suzanne Bier). I admire Michael Winterbottom because he is so prolific, Scorsese for managing to make a good number of masterpieces over the years, Ang Lee because he doesn't stick to one genre and executes everything he does with great skill, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu for his epic films about real people, Emir Kusturica for the joy and music in his films, and Ken Loach for making films about the powerless.

However, it is not so much what filmmakers I admire but more individual films. When a filmmaker gets it right – for me, as viewing is very much a personal experience – when I am genuinely touched as opposed to being manipulated, surprised or delighted by the freshness of the story, I get very excited.

When all the elements are working in harmony to aid the storytelling, I get excited. Small films with a big impact like **The Celebration**, **Lantana**, **The Squid and the Whale** or many of Almodovar's films, **La Ville est Tranquille** by Robert Guédiguian just to name a few. I've been watching films since I was about five years old, so it is hard to single anyone or any film as being the most admirable. There has been a large number that have had an impact on me at different stages of my life. In general, I would say that I like the early works of directors. For example, the early work of Bertolucci is far more interesting than that in his latter years; ditto Marlene Gorris, Coppola, Scorsese, and Wenders etc.

What filmmakers working today do you think will be remembered as the most influential?

Couldn't say. History is fickle and many good people get written out of history for no good reason.

There is much attention given to the need for local filmmakers to tell New Zealand stories. What do you think makes a 'New Zealand story', and do you believe this sentiment to be valuable?

I'm always baffled by this point of view as I keep being told my stories feel European rather than Kiwi – well I happen to be a Greek woman living in NZ and have been for the past 26 years. When do my stories become New Zealand stories?

Much has been discussed on the issue of the 'cinema of unease', which has characterized a lot of New Zealand cinema so far. Do you think these themes are prevalent in your work? Do you see NZ cinema evolving into something different? [Ed's note: the term 'cinema of unease' refers to the idea of New Zealand films as characterised with a sense of disquiet, or of having a dark and brooding nature.]

I am not clear on what it means but I get a sense that it refers to films that come out of emotional repression or an emotional landscape I am not familiar with. I do not do these 'dark' types of films. The more diversity we have in terms of who gets to make films in NZ, means we may lose the 'cinema of unease' tag.

Many thanks to Athina, and to Laurent Tirard for his generous co-operation.

This interview is published at www.flicks.co.nz/nzfilm_athinatsoulis.php

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Contact: ed@flicks.co.nz | Flicks.co.nz Ltd.