



**New Zealand Filmmakers' Masterclass
with SIMA URALE**

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An interview with Sima Urale on how she makes movies.
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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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Sima Urale

*In the first of Flicks.co.nz's Moviemaker Masterclass interviews, we talk to director Sima Urale on the eve of her debut feature release, **Apron Strings**. The film arrives in cinemas with much anticipation, being preceded by her award-winning and critically acclaimed short films (**O'Tamaiti, Velvet Dreams, Still Life, Coffee and Allah**). Last month, **APRON STRINGS** was chosen to open the 40th Auckland International Film Festival. Urale was born in Samoa, and is now based in Auckland.*

The following is a full transcript of the interview.

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

I would first ask what stories people want to tell, what messages and what issues they want to convey. Basically, what moves them to want to make films in the first place. I am not a film buff and, although a film school graduate myself, I always hated being made to watch films because I think it's a personal experience when and why I choose to watch a film. But if I had to screen any films, it would have to be films and filmmakers that have broken convention; Orsen Welles' **Citizen Kane**, for his innovativeness and vision in breaking out of narrative convention, also his technical brilliance and foresight for introducing new lenses to cinema. Kurosawa films for his beautiful cinematography and composition, and for being my main inspiration in giving me confidence that films in our own indigenous language can translate universally. I would also show **Once Were Warriors** as a great example of a powerful movie, not for its cinematography or anything else, but for its boldness and honesty, a truly powerful movie that affected audiences world wide and really did make a difference to people's lives. Children who saw it asked their mothers to leave their abusive fathers. To me, that's what makes it a powerful film.

There are many more films I admire but would really prefer to inspire people through their own experiences and emotional response to heartfelt issues that they want to express through the tool of filmmaking.

Milos Forman, who taught filmmaking, 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?

I don't think I belong to either, because I did not make films to compare my cinema skills to others, but merely as a tool to express the things that matter to me, and hopefully things that also matter or move others.

How did you learn filmmaking?

I applied and was accepted into the Swinburne Film & Television School (now known as VCA) in Melbourne. I have a theatre background and was acting in professional theatre when I felt that I

needed to be involved in a more accessible medium to create and make stories that mattered to me, and that's when I thought of film school because I knew absolutely nothing about filmmaking. Once I got in, I soon realised that it was very similar to how theatre productions are done, so it felt like a very natural progression for me.

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

The first short film went perfectly as planned, but when it came to my second short film, I was rather bowled over when things didn't go to plan. This made me realise that I needed to accept the fact that no matter how planned or organised you are, some things just don't go your way. Since then, I have learnt to relax, also never take things for granted and to communicate everything loud and clear. I've also learnt that team dynamics makes a big difference to the outcome of a project and that this industry is all about relationships. It's not about who you know, but how well you can take care of your team and how well can the team or producers take care of me.

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 think both these apply. I think I have a lot to say, but at the same time realise that these ideas need to be explored from different perspectives, and not always the perspective that is mine alone. A particular idea and what I want to say could almost be the same thing really because I have much to say about all sorts of things and ideas.

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

Personally, I hate surprises. Film is so manipulative and we spend so much time in pre-production preparing to shoot - basically preparing for the worst and how we can trouble shoot those problem areas from script right through shot listing. So to be surprised at what we have obtained is not ideal for me. There are so many aspects to filmmaking we have to pull together and make it work towards one vision, so that hopefully by the end, we have achieved and succeeded in that vision.

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?

First and foremost, I make it for myself and what moves me, as I find that most people will relate to those very same issues anyway, even in the most remote countries. If I made it for someone else or for the sake of an audience, I may as well direct commercials, which now and again I do. And because I do direct commercials and corporate videos, I think I do understand the need to direct for a particular audience and what's important to convey. However, in my own films, it's more important that I try and stay true to myself as much as possible, and very often people are as affected by those issues as much as me. For me, filmmaking is like any art form, a way to express our thoughts and ideas in the same way a painter chooses his subject matter. In saying that though, at a certain point it's also important to take into account how audiences overseas might view it as well.

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?

For me it's very hard to separate the artistic and economic reasons, as they impact on one another a great deal, and taking these different levels of decision making into account, usually equals COMPROMISE. We've all heard it and said it a thousand times like it's some dirty word, but sadly, it's a word we can't run away from, no matter how big a budget or crew. From experience, I can only hope that I know what to let go of and what to hold onto. For me and the sake of any producer I work with, I do try my best to consider the economics when making artistic decisions. Because if I didn't, this could have major implications for the project later on, like ensuring that there is enough budget to cover me in post production, and most of all, ensure the completion of a project. It also matters to me whether crew are getting paid a decent fee relative to the overall budget, because it's important to me to look after every aspect, including people. It also saves my producer and production a big headache if I can take the budget into account rather than being unrealistic and getting carried away with the fairies.

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?

I have to say after directing a short film and then **Apron Strings**, films that are written by other writers, that there is definitely a huge difference when I write and direct my own films. Writing is extremely hard for me, so I can appreciate what these writers have achieved. With directing some-

one else's, I am always aware that it's their 'baby', something that took them years to think on and write, so what they think matters to me a lot. In contrast, when I direct my own material, I have dreamt and thought about it so much that I am much more sure of myself in every aspect of the film.

Although a lot of fun, the difficulty with directing someone else's script is often trying to grapple and understand their perspective and intentions, down to every single scene and every bit of dialogue. Sometimes their intentions aren't as clear as they think, and it's my job to work on making those clearer, sometimes asking the writers to please re-write and clarify. Because if I don't understand it, then how can the audience? It often works the other way around too, and some things are overstated, so often I will ask if we can drop exposition or unnecessary scenes that don't add to story.

Not sure about the second question, but I can say after directing someone else's scripts to film, I can definitely say that it is truly collaborative and that not one person is the author of the film. That's because much of the film's personal issues and stories came directly from the writers and there is no way that any director can claim ownership of something like that. As for my own material, it's enough for me to get the credit of writer and director, but that is merely giving credit where it's due.

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

Not sure really, but being really good talkative friends would be a good start. I think there is a process that we could do more often here, but it takes money and time, and that is the process which involves the actors work shopping the script along with director and writer/s. And I don't mean just a one day read through, but a few weeks of acting the scenes out, even improvising to see what depth we can take the characters to. It's a process that often happens in theatre, where scripts are pulled apart and put together again, and usually there is a dramaturg that sits with the writer and mediates all the feedback. This process can help everyone involved and can bring out any loopholes that can be discussed and worked out for the writer and director's sake. That would be really helpful because then the writers can see some of the problems that arise when their action and dialogue is played out by actors, and exposition and so forth will be more evident to everyone.

Is there a grammar of filmmaking, the same way there is a grammar in literature? Is there a set of rules that you can always rely on, or is every shot an experiment in itself?

Yes, I think there is a grammar in filmmaking, and yes there are many conventional rules which drives me batty - especially when people get too stuck on them like a scratched record! It's great to know the basic rules, but I believe that rules are made to be broken, and some simply should be broken to keep us all awake from getting too used to TV soap. However, it's great to have the rules to fall back onto when I cannot think of anything imaginative to do - that's when I know I am getting really boring. Films are like books, I mean who wants to read the same style of writing from book to book?

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

It's a bit of both, because my intellect tells me to look at the subject matter and content to dictate my shots, which makes total sense to me and feels intuitive - confusing you? I am confused too. I do think a lot on my shots beforehand, about what kind of emotion and tension I want from a scene, which character is really driving the scene, whose perspective should it be from etc, but at times I need to think fast on my feet and then rely a lot on intuition as well. Seriously though, I have to say that 95 percent of the shots are intentional and are usually well thought out well in advance, which I guess makes me more of an intellectual type of decision maker, but then again a lot of it is based on intuitive ideas that are inspired through the story and subject I happen to be working on.

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 usually prefer to rehearse the actors before setting camera, just to get a flow of the scene and let all the crew see the scene in its entirety. Also to be fair on the poor actors who have probably never had the chance yet to move around in the new set. Then we block through with actors as we discuss what angles we're going to shoot. This not only prepares the crew, but also the actors as to what shots to mentally prepare for. So for me, the actors are the first to get the freedom to move, but then I will often explain a particular movement or blocking that I like and the reasons why, especially if I want something more stylistic.

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

I've learnt to cover myself for extra shots whenever I get the chance - which is hardly ever due to tight budgets and schedules. It's merely time and budget that constrains me, otherwise I would happily overshoot till the cows come home. Actually, I do go on set with a wish list of shots, all prioritised beforehand, so that we can work our way down, and it's a wonderful thing when I can slip in those extra shots at the bottom of my list. Quite often though, it's shooting mainly what I really need, but it's funny when it comes to shooting commercials because it's the complete opposite, but then who wants to shoot twenty different angles of a loaf of bread or yoghurt?

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?

It all depends on what and who I'm filming. Some actors only get worse as you shoot more takes, this is the case for most non-actors and children, they simply get bored and glaze over. So I watch them closely for that glazed look when I know I've lost them for good, so I tend not to over shoot them. But then there are actors that I know can give me more and will keep at them till they drop. Not because I want to prove a point, but because I know they have it in them to give me more, so it all depends on what types of personalities I am dealing with. Average takes could be 3 to 4 I think, and much of that is because I know we have to simply move on, so the logistics and economics also come into play. For documentary, it seems to be the opposite and you can never shoot enough. Again, completely different for commercial work, where I can do as many as forty takes on 35mm if I wanted to, although crew will start giving me funny looks.

How do you communicate with a DP? How much freedom do you leave him or her?

I am very expressive with the Director of Photography (DP). I will use any gesture, any number of words to express my intentions. From experience, I can never take communication for granted and will do anything to ensure that everyone understands me - could be the control freak in me, but it ensures that everyone is on the same page. Much of the time I like to have a good laugh with them as we discuss the best options and what looks best. I love to discuss with them colour, composition and even what film stock and speed. I have to say though, if any of the DP's were anything like me and my personality, I would most likely strangle them. They're very nice and patient people. My most preferred DP is a wonderful man Rewa Harre, who has the patience and peaceful nature of the Dalai Lama, also an awesome humour which helps us get along a great deal. Rewa also has so much experience with me, that he knows that I have most likely dreamt and had nightmares about the entire project for 3 to 6 months before he even comes on board, so he respects much of

my ideas and creative decisions, but also knows that he can disagree with me too. In many ways, we chat and discuss like siblings would, which is great because we can talk honestly without taking each other's comments personally. Rewa has done so much beautiful work for me, that although I may have many of the ideas, he is the one who brings it about and creates for me.

How strict are you on following the script on set?

I like to know what I'm going into and try my best to go to plan, but not all things go your way, so I keep a bit of myself open to being spontaneous and am also open to the script changing if it makes sense and improves the story, plot, or character. Sometimes all the planning in the world is not necessarily going to be the best for the project or story, particularly when the actors take ownership of their characters, and sometimes they really do know the characters more than myself or the writers. Also, if a scene is not working, I do not want to waste precious film and money on flogging a dead horse, so the next best thing to do is to re-look at the scene and see how we can all make it work, even if it means re-writing and re-blocking the scene.

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

I am a graduate of Toi Whakaari (NZ Drama School), and acted in professional theatre for two years before going to film school, so I have seen and felt all the insecurities and struggles that actors experience, and each and every one of them is different. Recognising, what type of personality and actor they are, really helps me to read them and decide on what way to approach them, some don't like being over directed and prefer to be left alone to mull things over, some love the attention from directors, and many are just simply nervous or too eager to please the director. So often I have to change tack from person to person, as some prefer little notes at a time, and others want to literally talk through their actions every step of the way. So I guess the key for me is being malleable and changeable for their sakes, so that they can feel comfortable and confident in front of the camera.

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 choose the actor after seeing them audition, because some people may be amazing and

charismatic in person, but stick them in front of a camera and they freeze like a popsicle. Then there are those that may bore me to death and even look dull, and yet when you stick them in front of the camera, they suddenly light up and surprise you with a huge screen presence. So I like to test them all in front of a camera, just to make sure that they don't fall apart on 'action'. Casting them depends on what kind of project and the process that is most appropriate for that particular project. One day though, I would dearly love to tailor roles for some of the fantastic talent that I know are out there.

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?

I like to think that editing is a confirmation of what has been shot, but more than often it is potentially a new phase to the storytelling, so letting go of what has gone before, I often discover new and better ways to improve the story and structure even. I like to keep myself open to the possibilities that the story can be strengthened and improved through playing in the edit.

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

Not to be afraid of making decisions, everyone will blame you for the end result anyway, so you may as well take that responsibility onboard right from the start. But when you do make a mistake, and like a good leader or chief should - be strong and admit to your mistakes and ask for help - get counseling!

What filmmakers do you admire?

There are too many to mention, but mostly those that have something powerful and moving to say. Documentary makers always amaze me with their stamina and determination to see projects through, particularly those that make their projects over many years with no money. I would've given up long ago! But I will say documentary makers John Pilger, Mereta Mita, to name a few.

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

As I mentioned, I am not a film buff, so I don't know many films or directors. As far as NZ, I would

have to say Mereta Mita for documentaries that are historical, political, and educational. It's stuff like that, that will probably continue to be influential for many years to come.

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?

Anything told or filmed in New Zealand must be a New Zealand story, even if the cast were aliens. I think it's too limiting and dangerous to confine creative people. We don't tell novelists what to write about, and we don't tell artists what to paint on canvas, so the same should apply to the screen. Some stories are simply too good to overlook, and anyway, what if a kiwi wrote a film set on Mars and it was better than all the scripts set in rural NZ? Yes, it's a valuable sentiment to hold onto that 'kiwiness', but at the same time we are so global and too many things about us are changing.

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?

Would you believe it? After 3 years at a film school and years of directing, I still don't know the meaning of 'cinema of unease'. I know I had an entire lecture on it, but for the life of me cannot remember what it is. Is it something about a personal journey and mood...? Depressing and sad films? Tried Googling but too lazy to read! So guess what? I am not saying another word.

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

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

Cover photo: Sima Urale on the set of **Apron Strings** (2007).

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