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present

# MY WONDERFUL STRANGER

a film by JOHANNA PYYKKÖ

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# MY WONDERFUL STRANGER

by Johanna Pyykkö

RUNTIME : 107 MINUTES

▷ INTERNATIONAL SALES

**PYRAMIDE**

32 rue de l'Échiquier,  
75010 Paris

+33 1 42 96 02 20

[sales@pyramidefilms.com](mailto:sales@pyramidefilms.com)

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Ebba, a lonely 18-year-old woman, works in the harbor of Oslo. One night, she finds a beautiful man with a head injury on the ground and tries to help him. When she discovers that he has amnesia, she tricks him into believing they are lovers and builds a world for them based on lies. Little by little, Ebba finds out about his past life and that turns everything upside-down.

## Interview with JOHANNA PYYKKÖ

### **What was the starting point for *MY WONDERFUL STRANGER*?**

I don't tell stories about myself, I see myself more as an observer of society. I've been thinking a lot about the most manipulative and dangerous girls I've met in my life. Their mythomania fascinates me. I wondered about the dreams, goals and vulnerability of a young woman like that. You could also say that my heroine builds Julian's character a bit like a scriptwriter or filmmaker would, with a 'meta' side, but I think everyone tells stories in one way or another.

### **Does being of Finnish origin give you a unique perspective on Norwegian society?**

Yes, I have an outside perspective. And in a way, doubly so, because of my social background. In order to find work, my parents moved to Sweden, where there is a Finnish community constituted as a minority national group. So I grew up in Sweden, but as a second-generation immigrant, and I've been living in Norway for over ten years because I went to film school there. I stayed because I like working in this country where the people are friendly. But the truth is that I don't really feel at home anywhere. I observe Nordic identities with a certain voyeurism...

### **What were the different steps of writing?**

With my co-writer Jørgen Færøy Flasnes, we started out from real life and then gradually detached ourselves from it, trying to make the character a symbol of the social issues that interest us. We wanted to go as far as possible in symbolism by incorporating philosophical aspects. It took us quite a while. The project was selected for several script development labs, including the Next Step programme at Cannes Critic's week and the Toronto Festival. The discussions with Jørgen were fascinating, helping us to build the film like a house of cards, and he brought a male point of view to the table.

### **Do you have any moral judgement on Ebba's conduct?**

There was never any question of judging her. I wanted it to deal with issues of my time that I question and that intrigue me. At the beginning of the film's conception, I felt a lot of different emotions for the characters, but the story only became interesting for me when we moved beyond that aspect and tackled other issues.



**One of the strong visual clues that you sprinkle throughout your film are the little figurines that Ebba observes, before breaking one of them and receiving another as a gift at the end of the film. What do they mean?**

They are directly linked to the subject of the film, which is possession: the power to possess an object like this, which represents a body, to install it in your home. You can move it, you own it. It has a history: where did you buy it? When did you decide to collect it? It reflects the way society works. We almost own other people, depending on the geographical and socio-economic context. It's also an object that, for me, is very representative of the plot itself. The last figurine she received as a gift has a special meaning.

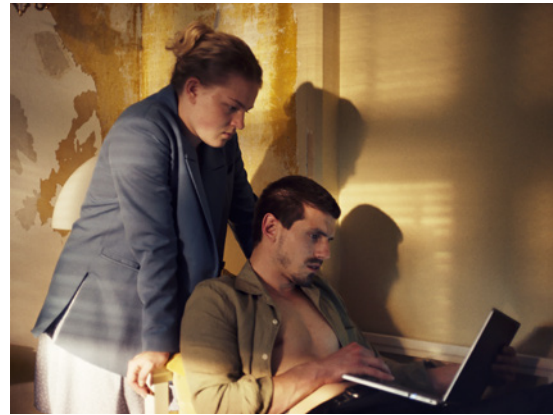
**Which one?**

It embodies the virtualities of the story: it can represent Julian as well as the possibility of a new encounter with a handsome and privileged man. It is white, but this white is encrusted with blue fragments: is it a decomposing body, like the corpse of a drowning man? Is Ebba guilty or innocent? I wanted her to have a figurine in her hand and to be like looking at a work of art and wondering about it. What emotion does it give me? What does it mean? What does it symbolize and in what context?

And I wanted her to feel that confusion. Because when a relationship ends, you sometimes wonder if it was ever real...

**What do you mean?**

There are many relationships that are not true love. In many contexts, human beings have the impression that they are living a love story, but on closer



observation, everyone, including themselves, would agree that it's not a real relationship. And then there are real relationships. I wanted the relationship in the film to represent both.

**What does the presence of the birds mean, particularly the dead seagull?**

Seagulls are seen as parasites. This does not prevent them from having access to all human areas. They can easily migrate into an upper-class district where wealthy people live, and then the inhabitants try to chase their nests off their roofs and destroy their eggs. There are sometimes debates in Norway about whether it's OK to shoot at seagulls. That's exactly how the main characters feel, especially Julian in the second half of the film: they fear being seen as parasites on society. They're not wrong, since they're judged in a very negative light.



### **How did you prepare the film with your cinematographer, Torbjørn Sundal Holen?**

We painstakingly put together a document of visual references. It was 90 pages long! There were reproductions of paintings, quotes from philosophers and lots of images from films, such as Bela Tarr's or Iranian films. These aren't influences, they're references that allow us to communicate visually, and by understanding each other we were able to create a film that was 100% original. We also drew shots of the film, sometimes by hand, sometimes using applications that simulate a precise focal point and animate the storyboarded sequences.

### **How did you find the young Camilla Godø Krohn who plays Ebba?**

Through a lengthy casting process: we saw over 700 candidates. Camilla studied drama at secondary

school, so she doesn't have much experience, and this is her first film. In real life, she's very different from the character. She had to work hard on both her body language and her state of mind. I carefully explained to her my vision of the character: for some scenes she needed a bit of time, for others it went very quickly because she's a very intelligent young woman. The scenes were written in great detail, sometimes mentioning what Ebba was thinking, and she knew how to use all that. Like me, she also drew inspiration from the women she met. I'm all the more pleased that the character, often captured in close-up, has to remain impenetrable.

### **And Radoslav Vladimirov, who plays the man with amnesia?**

Finding a Bulgarian actor during the COVID crisis was not easy. Finally, two days before the scheduled rehearsals with the actors, I chose Radoslav. I already had a lot of videos of him as I asked him to film himself so that I could really see him from all angles. I'd also worked with him by Skype, giving him the lines for certain scenes.

### **His character, too, is impenetrable, even if the discovery of his former life leads him to change...**

He's become someone else and he has to learn to deal with it. It's a question that fascinates me: what do you do if your brain has changed your identity? That's what happens when you have dementia. I've also seen people close to me suffer brain damage and see their personality change. What's left of your old identity? And how do other people see you now that you've changed? Julian is reborn in a society where poverty is not as great as in Bulgaria. And



what is even more disturbing is that he has access to snippets of his old life.

**Ebba joins the gallery of strange, strong female characters that Norwegian filmmakers have been offering us over the last few years, such as Joachim Trier in *The Worst Person in the World* or Kristoffer Borgli in *Sick of Myself*...**

We developed our projects at the same time, and I didn't know at the time that Joachim and Kristoffer were working on these female characters. I had never thought of comparing these women, but I think that

we are filmmakers who observe society, and more broadly human relationships in the Nordic countries. I have the feeling that in our three films it is society that is responsible for the behavior of the characters.

**You were keen to discuss your project with two great directors, Jane Campion and Claire Denis. What did they bring to you?**

I wanted to ask them what their methods were for developing a script while remaining true to oneself, to one's own intuition. I told them about the story. Jane Campion had seen my short film *The Manila Lover*. She insisted on the need to go for symbolism while advising me to follow my instincts. Claire Denis gave me advice that helped me a lot later on, particularly on how to show off the props and on very specific editing choices.

**Is it complicated to become a filmmaker in Norway when you're a woman?**

That used to be the case, but now I don't think so. What's more, along the way I came across other young women on the verge of making their first film, like the Swede Ninja Thyberg with *Pleasure* or Nathalie Álvarez Mesén, born in Sweden but originally from Costa Rica, where she made *Clara Sola*. I remember that some male directors told us that a woman could not be an artistic leader. These are words that hit you even harder when you come from the working class. They affected me, but fortunately the culture has changed.





**JOHANNA PYYKKÖ** is a Swedish-Finnish director and screenwriter, based in Oslo, Norway.

Johanna Pyykkö has a bachelor's degree in fine arts - film directing from the Norwegian Film School and a screenwriting diploma from Alma Script Academy in Sweden. She's been an episode-director on the drama-series "Nach" (ep7, for Discovery) and been an episode-writer on the critically acclaimed drama-series "Homegrown" (NRK). She's also been headhunted as a screenwriter to several Nordic TV-series and feature films in development.

She has directed a number of commercial films and she has made over ten short films, which have been spread to TV and film festivals around the world. Her latest short film, *THE MANILA LOVER*, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival at the Semaine de la Critique (2019), won several international awards and also an Amanda (the Norwegian Academy Award) for Best Short Film (2020). Johanna enjoys portraying characters we seldom see in film and tv, creating stories that surprise, entertain and challenge the viewer. Her films are often about identity and the struggle to belong.

In 2024, her first fiction feature film "*MY WONDERFUL STRANGER*", will be released. The film received the "Arte Kino Award" at MIA Rome (2020) and was nominated for the "Next Step Award" at the Cannes Film Festival.

# CAST

EBBA	CAMILLA GODØ KROHN
JULIAN/IVAYLO	RADOSLAV VLADIMIROV
ANDREA, THE SISTER	MAYA AMINA MOUSTACHE THUV
IVETA, THE COLLEAGUE	RENATA ALEKSEJUNAITE CHRISTENSEN
NEIGHBORHOOD WOMAN	LAILA GOODY
MIDDLE-AGED MAN	CHRISTIAN SKOLMEN
THE DOCTOR	SVEJEN MLADENOV
THE BROTHER	HRISTO PETKOV
VINCENT, THE NEIGHBOR	PATRICK MAKOSIR
HOUSE OWNERS	LIV BERNHOFT OSA, PER GØRVELL
EBBA'S MOTHER	HILDE VERNLI HANSEN
NEIGHBORHOOD WOMAN'S HUSBAND	JEPPE CHRISTOFFERSEN
ANDREA'S BOYFRIEND	HELGE BUSCH GLØTTA
PARAMEDIC	BENJAMIN BLATCH

# CREW

DIRECTOR	JOHANNA PYYKKÖ
SCREENPLAY	JOHANNA PYYKKÖ, JØRGEN FÆRØY FLASNES
MUSIC	DELPHINE MALAUSSENA, JAKOB LINDHAGEN
PRODUCERS	DYVEKE BJØRKLY GRAVER, RENÉE HANSEN MLODYSZEWSKI
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS	ANDREA BERENTSEN OTTMAR, TOM KJESETH
CO-PRODUCERS	MAUD BERBILLE, NICOLAS ANTHOMÉ, ANTOINE STEHLÉ, MIMMI SPÅNG, LEIF HOLST JENSEN
LINE PRODUCER	VITTORIA RØKKE PASSALACQUA
PRODUCTION MANAGER	ANNIE FELDSOTT
IMAGE EDITING	TORBJØRN SUNDAL HOLEN MARGRETHE VINNEM, BRWA VAHABPOUR, GEIR ØRNHOLT, JOHANNA PYYKKÖ
SOUND	JOHAN PRAM, INGER ELISE HOLM
COLORIST	GADIEL BENDELAC
1 <sup>ST</sup> ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	BEN LUCAS
CASTING	LUISE NES, YOANA ILIEVA
SETS	KRISTIAN LAHN VESTBY
COSTUMES	ANDREA MARIE SKEID
MAKE-UP	CECILIE HILSEN

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