

BLACK
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BERRY

QUINZAINÉ
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2023

A FILM BY
ELENE NAVERIANI

LOGLINE

Etero, a 48-year-old Georgian woman, never wanted a husband. But a passionate affair makes her question everything she imagined her life could be...



SYNOPSIS

Etero, a 48-year-old woman living in a small village in Georgia, never wanted a husband. She cherishes her freedom as much as her cakes. But her choice to live alone is the cause of much gossip among her fellow villagers. Unexpectedly, she finds herself passionately falling for a man, and is suddenly faced with the decision to pursue a relationship or continue a life of independence. Etero must grapple with her feelings and decide how to find her own path to happiness.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

THE CONTEXT

I was born in Georgia and brought up to value a position of social withdrawal. As a woman, this meant I had to stand back, listen passively and make myself invisible. And – above all – I had to be content with this place I was assigned.

After leaving Georgia at the age of 23, I discovered new personal and artistic spaces where I could develop my voice. At first, I struggled to free myself from my past. I needed to rebuild as a new person, one that would hear her own voice, one that would be defined by herself. It was, and still is, an arduous process to unlearn this education that haunts me. One thing that always helped me is cinema and storytelling. This is where I look to find or create role models that I am missing in life.

In my films, I try to make invisible stories visible, to make unheard voices heard and to create a space for marginalised lives. My practice is above all a language of resistance in the face of denial and oblivion.

THE NOVEL

In the spring of 2021, I read Tamta Melashvili's newly published novel BLACKBIRD BLACKBIRD BLACKBERRY. She is a well-known Georgian feminist author and activist that I respect. Her work often focuses on women and relentlessly challenges the heteronormative patriarchal structure of society. With her elegant approach to storytelling, Tamta masterfully contextualises her characters' psycho-socio-political realities. She writes powerfully subversive stories while portraying them with all their delicate nuances. BLACKBIRD BLACKBIRD BLACKBERRY had a very strong effect on me. Within the main character of Etero, entire worlds were captured: full of contradiction and revolutions. I was seduced by the universality that blossomed from her. The novel speaks to me personally and politically; and it fits my filmmaking practice.

THE STORY

The main character of the story, Etero, is a feminist in her own way – without even realising it. She struggles in her present with painful experiences that she has endured in her past. She was always invisible, but since the death of her brother and her father she has somehow rebuilt herself. She has guided her life away from men. She runs a household supply store with products she knows only women would buy. She leads a simple but fiercely independent life. Every day she wins a small revolution by confronting the role people try to assign to her. Her aim isn't to revolutionise the world, she only looks forward to her retirement when, with her hard-earned money, she will not need to serve anyone. She is happy with a humble life of routine.

The novel is written in the first person singular. The reader can follow Etero's everyday life and have access to her mind. I wanted to keep this intimacy with the character in my adaptation, because Etero's humble life carries a truly universal dimension. Etero embodies the voice in every one of us, whatever our gender, that wishes to emancipate from a sexist society and culture. She strives for her own freedom and has to fight against social construct from within herself as well as from people around her. This universality is also echoed in other characters like Etero's lover, who is himself trapped within the social construct of patriarchy, where he needs to perform his role but at the same time suffers from it.

Etero is a rich and complex character. She is full of contradictions: what she does and what she says in public, she refuses and hates inside her home. She lives a double life. On the one hand she fears judgement but on the other hand she doesn't care about what others think. She keeps out of the gossip of her village by maintaining a 'clean' public image. Her relationships with her neighbours are therefore very shallow. When she tries to connect, she is often bored by their tales of misery that remind her of her past. Etero is as an instinctive feminist, through many years of experience that gave her a strong intuition of how to behave to be able to be independent.

All of Etero's careful world order crashes with the arrival of Murman. At the age of 49, she has her first sexual relationship. She has been single all her life and he is a married man. If this forbidden love was to become public Etero would become the pariah of the town. Despite the risks, Etero's instinct tells her to move onward, as this relationship makes her experience emotion and sensations she has never felt before. The discovery of sexuality in old age is also something that attracted me to this story. Body and sexuality are an important part of Etero's character. I see her as carrying a natural sensuality within her. She jumps headfirst into the pleasures of sexuality, without any shame or limit. She does something other women would never dare and she knows it.

Thus, body, politics and sexuality also play a big part in this film. Culturally and socially, as women age, their bodies are considered 'out of date' in contrast to younger bodies that are commodified by heteronormative patriarchal culture. Etero carries her slightly overweight and curvy body with confidence. She doesn't let herself be affected by conventional beauty standards. She likes herself, she loves her full body, her breasts, her hips. She feels attractive. Her conviction is first and foremost personal, but her stance is truly revolutionary. Etero's every movement saturated with sexual tension. Her everyday life, charged with eroticism. I wanted to portray her just so, because Etero's sexuality and body are what is missing from the screen.

FILMING

The DOP Agnesh Pakozdi and I share a precise visual language that is a key ingredient to my films. We have worked together on all my previous fiction films, short and long. I wanted our cinematography to reveal the story in a cautious and sensitive way. The camera takes a step back from the characters. The body and its gestures are very important to me: postures, little movements and gazes are the keys to a character's soul. I believe in a film language that gives space to the spectator's reflection. I would like the emotions of my films to be experienced and not dictated.

For BLACKBIRD BLACKBIRD BLACKBERRY we needed to film the shapes and volumes of bodies that are usually absent from the screen. We paid great attention to show them with sympathy, tenderness and to emphasize their textures in order to create the necessary intimacy and erotic tension needed for the narrative.

When I read the novel BLACKBIRD BLACKBIRD BLACKBERRY it was clear to me that Eka Chavleishvili was an actress who could play the character of Etero. I worked with Eka on my last film, "Wet Sand". Her rigor, her sensitivity and her approach to acting fascinated me. When I imagined that we would watch Etero for 90 minutes, having Eka play the role, with her charisma and captivating presence, it seemed an obvious choice to me. With Eka and her professionalism, I couldn't imagine putting a less subtle, sensitive and powerful personality next to her.



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Elene Naveriani is a Georgian director now living in Switzerland. They graduated from the Tbilisi State Academy of Art in monumental painting in 2003. After a Master in Critical Curatorial Cybermedia at the HEAD – Geneva (Geneva School of Art and Design), they start their studies in Cinema. Their graduation short film *GOSPEL OF ANASYRMA* (2014) was acclaimed for their distinctive signature and stance. Elene's work is one that makes invisible stories visible, that makes unheard voices heard and creates a space for marginalised lives. Elene practises a cinema of resistance.

Their first feature *I AM TRULY A DROP OF SUN ON EARTH* (2017) premiered in Rotterdam and was awarded numerous prizes (Seoul, Xining, Valladolid, Porto). Elene also directed two further short films that received a lot of acclaim. *RED ANTS BITE* (2019) was nominated for best Swiss short film award and *LANTSKY PAPA'S STOLEN OX* (2018), a short documentary, premiered in Entrevues Belfort and won the Grand Prix Best Short. The film was also awarded in Tbilisi and Documenta Madrid.

In 2021, their second feature film *WET SAND* made its World Premiere in Locarno in August 2021 and earned the Best Actor's Prize. Elene is currently developing two further feature projects.

FILMOGRAPHY

WET SAND, fiction, 115min (2021). 74° Locarno Film Festival – Pardo for Best Actor (Concorso Cineasti del presente), Viennale – Vienna International Film Festival 2021, Santiago de Compostela, Cineuropa 35, 28th Sarajevo Film Festival, San Francisco, 65th San Francisco International Film Festival, Solothurner Filmtage – Best Feature Film

RED ANTS BITE, fiction, 22min (2019). 23. International Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, 49th International Film Festival Rotterdam, Saguenay 24ème REGARD – Festival international du court-métrage, 26th Palm Springs International ShortFest, 34th Leeds International Film Festival, 18th Bogota Short Film Festival, Encounters Bristol – Special Mention 2020, Brest European short film festival – Departmental Council Award 2020

LANTSKY PAPA'S STOLEN OX, documentary, 29min (2018). Entrevues Belfort, Grand Prix Best Short, Tbilisi International Film Festival – Best Documentary, Documenta Madrid – Jury Mention in International Short Film Competition

I AM TRULY A DROP OF SUN ON EARTH, fiction, 61min (2017). 52. Solothurner Filmtage, 46th International Film Festival Rotterdam, 41a Mostra Internacional del Cinema de Sao Paulo, Tbilisi International Film Festival, Valladolid / Seminci, Best Photography Award, 32e Entrevues Belfort, Special Mention Prix du Long métrage Janine Bazin, 30ème Festival Premiers Plans d'Angers

GOSPEL OF ANASYRMA, fiction, 29min (2014). Festival Tous Ecrans – Festival international du film de Genève, 27e Festival Premiers Plans d'Angers, Kyiv International Short Film Festival KISFF 2015, Lisbon, 12th International Independent Film Festival Lisboa, Tel Aviv, 17th International Student Film Festival, Prix du public – XPosed Berlin

CAST



ETERO EKA CHAVLEISHVILI

Eka graduated from Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film Georgia State University majoring in acting. Since 1995 she is an actor at the Batumi Drama Theatre. She has been cast in around 13 theatre plays and has received the Adjara Theatre Society Award as the best actress in the play "Nugzar & the Mephistopheles".

She has played memorable characters in about seven films and TV series.

CINEMA & TV

2021 **WET SAND** by Elene Naveriani

2021 **OTAR'S DEATH** by Ioseb Bliadze

2018 **PARADE** by Nino Jvania

2000 **BALALAIKA** by Ali Özgentürk

1996 **STARRY NIGHT** by Andro Enukidze

1991 **BOY FROM THE HAPPY VILLAGE** by Gogi Levashov Tumanishvili



MURMAN TEMIKO CHINCHINADZE

Teimuraz Chichinadze was born in 1966. He graduated from Shota Rustaveli State University of Theatre and Film Acting Faculty. Since 1986 he has been Rustaveli National Theatre artist. He has received The Best Ensemble Award for Acting Excellence at Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2010 for the spectacle "Do We Look Like Refugees?!"

CINEMA & TV

2022 **THE CHOICE**

2019 **GOLDEN THREAD**

2018 **OKROS DZAPI**

2018 **NEIGHBORS**

2017 **FAMILY**

2013 **IN BLOOM**

2009 **CLINIC**

1991 **SAKHLI**



ETERO
MURMAN
NENO
TSISANA
LONDA
NATELA

Eka Chavleishvili
Temiko Chinchinadze
Pikria Nikabadze
Anka Khurtsidze
Tamar Mdinaradze
Lia Abuladze

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ADAPTED FOR SCREEN BY

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INTERNATIONAL PRESS

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Agnesh Pakozdi

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Aurora Franco Vögeli

SWITZERLAND / GEORGIA

PRODUCTION SOUND MIXER

Marc Von Stürler

(FLAT 1:85) (5.1, AND STEREO)

SOUND DESIGNER AND MIXER

Philippe Ciompi

2023 - 110 MIN - (GEORGIAN)

PRODUCTION DESIGN

Teo Baramidze

COSTUME DESIGNER

Nino Injia

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HAIR & MAKEUP

Julia Nietlispach

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