



ANIMAL

SHELLAC presents
a HOMEMADE FILMS production

A FILM BY SOFIA EXARCHOU

SHELLAC PRESENTS

A HOMEMADE FILMS
PRODUCTION

IN COPRODUCTION WITH NABIS FILMGROUP,
DIGITAL CUBE, FELONY, ARS OOD, ERT S.A.,
ARCTOS FILMS S.A., SOFIA EXARCHOU

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
WILD AT HEART

ANIMAL

A FILM BY SOFIA EXARCHOU

GREECE, AUSTRIA,
ROMANIA, CYPRUS,
BULGARIA

1H56
1:1.85 - COLOR
SOUND 5.1

ORIGINAL GREEK,
ENGLISH AND GERMAN VERSION
WITH SUBTITLES

SALES & FESTIVALS

Shellac
Egle Cepaite
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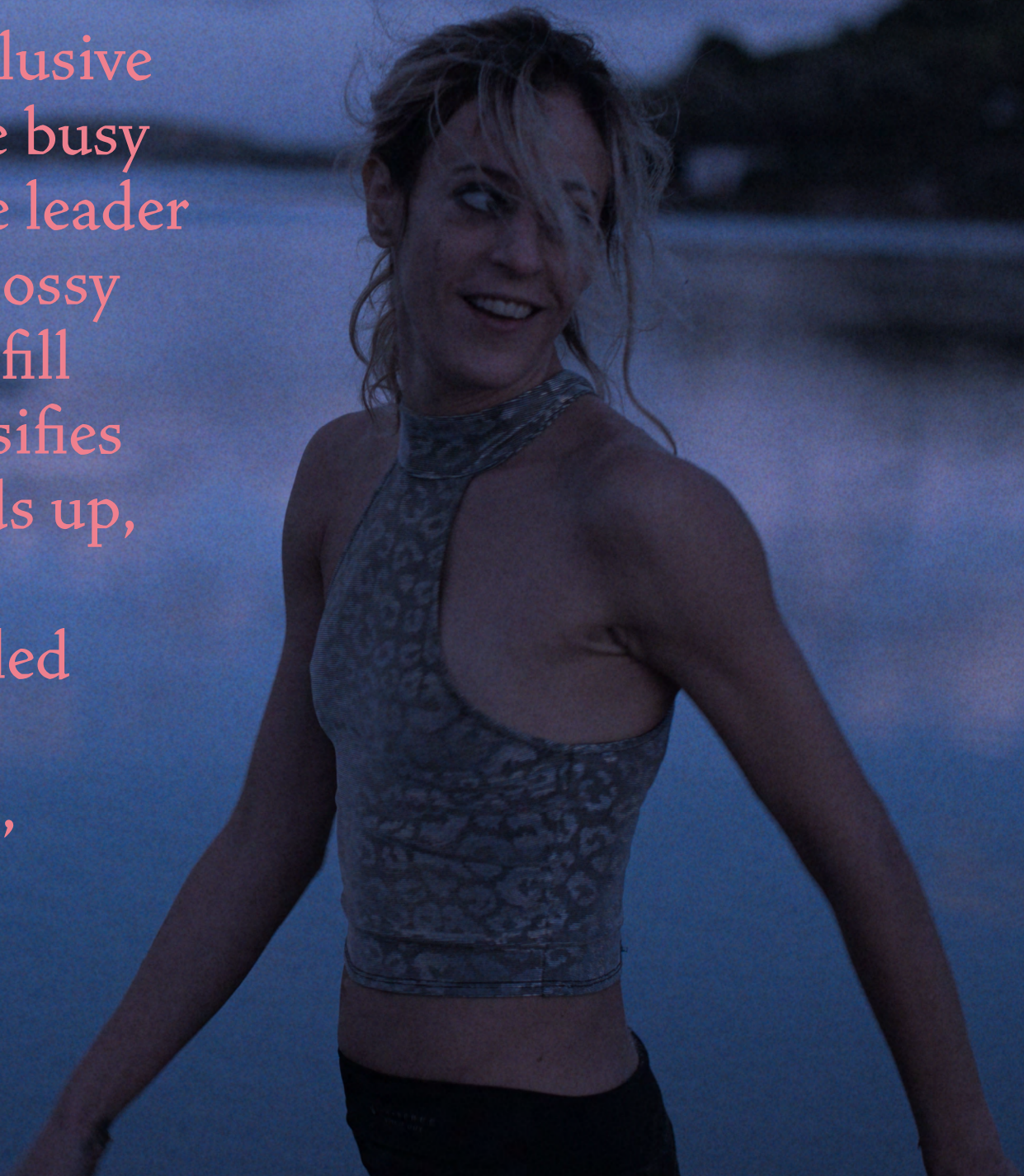
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Under the hot Greek sun, the animateurs at an all-inclusive island resort prepare for the busy touristic season. Kalia is the leader of the pack. Paper decors, glossy costumes and dance shows fill the stage. As summer intensifies and the work pressure builds up, their nights become violent and Kalia's struggle is revealed in the darkness. But when the spotlights turn on again, the show must go on.



INTERVIEW WITH SOFIA EXARCHOU

BY MARIA GIOVANNA VAGENAS

ANIMAL IS SET IN GREECE AND TAKES A CLOSER LOOK AT THE DOWNSIDE OF ALL-INCLUSIVE TOURIST HOTELS. HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THIS SPECIFIC SUBJECT?

After my first film, *Park* (2016), I knew that I wanted to make a film about work and working conditions in the western capitalist world, exploring harsh labor conditions. I wanted to talk about people in these structures and the precarity, darkness, and exhaustion they experience. For me, *Animal* is an allegory for any kind of labor and work. This was my starting point. The next step was to choose the setting that would best illustrate this. The tourist industry appeared to be the best option because as a Greek person, it's a world I'm intimately familiar with, as tourism is Greece's largest «industry,» generating the majority of the country's income. Since I was a child, I had stayed in hotels during the summer and was familiar with the tourist season on the islands and how all these places drastically change during this time of year. It was in the '80s and '90s, when mass tourism literally exploded. Inside this touristic machine, the animateurs are the employees who provide entertainment. Their unique characteristic gave me the opportunity to explore, parallel to labor, the role and power of entertainment in Europe and the Western world as a critical component for capitalism's survival. I began my research on this initial idea of labor and tourism. I learned how well-organized this system is, providing entertainment all day long: adult entertainment, kid-friendly entertainment, poolside, bar-side, and beachside entertainment are all available. As tools of the entertainment

machinery that have been established in these capitalist structures, the work of animateurs piqued my interest.

KALIA, EVA AND MARY, THE HEROINES OF ANIMAL ARE THREE INTRIGUING FEMALE CHARACTERS. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THEM?

I wanted to structure the film around three female characters of three different ages, because I found that the way women inhabit this universe is very interesting. I wanted to explore the spectacle itself - which should bring joy and pleasure - and how women relate to it, the stereotypes they are confronted with, the roles they have to play, the jokes they have to take on every night and all about the exploitation of their own bodies. The little one, Mary, is six years old. Kalia is in her mid-thirties, and has been an animateur for many years. There are no boundaries between her job and her life. On the other side, there's Eva, almost 18. It's her first job as an animateur, and she is very keen to be part of this world. Her story is a kind of coming-of-age. These two women have almost opposite journeys. The audience follows their journeys, while at the same time, testing the idea of the two younger ones (Eva and Mary) serving as a sort of flashback to Kalia's story. These three women could also be seen as the same character at different moments of her life.

THE THREE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS ARE PART OF A LARGER GROUP OF ANIMATEURS. THE IDEA OF A GROUP WAS ALSO IMPORTANT IN YOUR PREVIOUS FILM PARK. HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE GROUP ASPECT IN ANIMAL?

Although the focus is on Kalia and Eva, there is a whole group of animateurs surrounding them, some younger, some older, some struggling with their job, and others completely absorbed by it. All these people are trapped in the same environment; besides working together, they live in the same housing situated in the very end of this touristic universe. Their shared desire to form a sort of family defines their relationship with one another. The older ones protect the younger ones; in fact, they need each other and the well-being of each of them is critical for the entire group. I liked this idea of them forming an odd and unconventional family.

I WAS SURPRISED BY THE BENEVOLENT BEHAVIOR OF THE ANIMATEURS TOWARD ONE ANOTHER. UNDER SUCH STRESSFUL WORKING CONDITIONS, WE COULD HAVE EXPECTED ANTAGONISM, CONFLICTS, AND EVEN VIOLENCE. ON THE CONTRARY, YOU CHOSE TO DEPICT A LOVING, CARING ATTITUDE. WHY?

Of course, there are problems within the group as well, but my intention was never to build the story through antagonistic relationships within the group. The real antagonist in the film is the socio-economical system itself, a huge faceless entity. I wasn't interested in showing a specific adversary, who could be the hotel manager or someone else. The problem is much bigger. Through my characters' stories, I wanted the viewer to experience what it's like to live and work in such working conditions similar to many others, and how this everyday struggle and exhaustion affects people over the years. When you are trapped in this line of work, you don't know where



it's going to go. This is why the story is a sort of rollercoaster. We follow the animateurs day by day and eventually end up identifying with them on an existential level as well. Despite frequently being surrounded by others, they all struggle with loneliness, which is essentially the loneliness of their background stories.

YOUR FILM'S ACCURACY IS ALMOST DOCUMENTARY-LIKE. THE WAY YOU DESCRIBE ANIMATEURS WHO ARE IMMIGRANTS FROM EASTERN EUROPE IS VERY REALISTIC. HAVE YOU DONE ANY SPECIFIC RESEARCH IN THIS FIELD?

I wanted to create a sort of modern circus incorporating my fantasy and my own ideas while using reality as a basis. During my field research, I recorded numerous animated programs

I watched in various hotels. I also kept up with events on cruise ships or hotels in other Mediterranean countries by watching YouTube. I tried to explore everything related to the topic, getting as much information as I could. I always do that because I trust reality, but I always like to take things a step further. Some hotels in Greece employ only French animateurs who travel there directly, while hotels working with Russian tourists hire Russian and Greek animateurs. In *Animal* I mainly showed tourists traveling from Eastern Europe and I didn't want to focus on posh, all-inclusive club hotels but rather B or C class accommodations.

BETWEEN REALISM AND VISUAL ELEMENTS, DID YOU WORK WITH ANY REFERENCES ?

Regarding film references, I could say that I had Cassavetes in mind, because of his realism and his ability to explore the complexity and struggle of the human soul. Although his characters are very different from mine, the grace in how he attempts to convey the complexity of human existence really moves me.

Perhaps a distant inspiration, *Beau Travail* by Claire Denis, was very beneficial to the film as well. Of course, it's a different universe, but there is still a group of a few soldiers in a desolate area; and the body element is crucial.

But most of my references for *Animal* didn't come from cinema, since I don't know any film that this particular universe was ever represented in. So most of my references come from other art forms such as dance, theater, street performance

etc. Along with our choreographer Christos Papadopoulos, we watched a lot of circus material together, studied different dance groups, and anything else that we felt was relevant to our universe. In all these references, we worked together trying to add the Greek element (e.x. the ancient Greek dance show) plus elements that we thought that would serve the themes of the film and the emotional journeys of our characters. After that we started rehearsing and our music composer Wolfgang Frisch entered the process: we were constantly sending him videos of our rehearsals along with music references for each show. The music had to feel modern and popular, similar to the music that mainly is used in these places. At the same time, our costume designer and our hair and makeup artists also started working with us, and we shared with them all the material of our research.

MONICA LENCZEWSKA'S HAND HELD CAMERA WORK EMBRACES THE BODIES AND THEIR MOVEMENTS WITH VIGOR, WHILE SENSITIVELY CAPTURING THE LIGHT CHANGES. CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR COLLABORATION?

The 'glossy' surface of this environment, along with the gap between this hotel world and the animators' housing, was a completely new aspect. This is why the camerawork should convey a documentary-like, realistic and intense feeling. Of course, the body is at the core of it all, because the animators' work is very physical. It was vital to use camera movements to stress all this bodywork. That's why the camera is always handheld. Setting up the intricate choreography between



actors and the camera was extremely challenging to plan and while rehearsing, I always kept the camera in mind. Monica attended most of the final rehearsals and observed how powerful and energizing the movements of the characters inside the frame would be, both in the choreographies and real-world scenes.

HOW DID YOU CAST YOUR ACTORS AND DANCERS? HOW DID YOU WORK WITH THEM?

From the early stages of auditions, I knew that the group of animateurs would be consisted by actors as well as dancers, performers. The rehearsals actually benefited both parties, bringing the dancers closer to the acting process

and teaching the actors how to work with their bodies. But finding someone to play Kalia turned out to be tricky because she is a very skilled and experienced animateur in the film. Dimitra Vlagopoulou, was perfect for the role. She has mostly worked as an actress for the past 15 years, but she also has a serious dance background. In the end, the animateur team was made up of one musician-actor who also sings in the film, six dancers-performers, and three actors, and we went into months-long rehearsals: I was aware that the notion of a 'family' cannot simply be created during filming and that it would require such extensive preparation.

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE PRE-SHOOT PREPARATION PHASE?

I wanted my cast to truly render the body element. Although actors and dancers are accustomed to performing in front of an audience, animateurs have a completely different relationship with their audience. We spent about three months going through this process before returning to the acting rehearsals and incorporating the bodywork, choreography, and the idea of a group working and living together. By the time we arrived on set, they all were perfectly at ease with one another and able to perform on a very tight shooting schedule. To complete the screenplay, I used improvisation as well. It all had to look natural but, at the same time, to be absolutely precise. When we went on set, we knew exactly what the actors were going to say, do or how they would interact with each other.

ALTHOUGH THERE ARE MANY LIVELY, HECTIC SCENES, THE GENERAL FEEL OF THE MOVIE'S PACE IS NOT HURRIED. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THE EDITING PROCESS?

In this frantic environment, with all these characters, my editor Dragos Apetri and I wanted to be very precise and focus every time on the character or the moment that was essential in each scene. It was genuinely challenging because the film is vast, with a lot of characters and in some complex scenes to create this precision while realist, to build a clear, consistent storyline out of all this frenzy was quite complex. Dragos is Romanian, and it was very interesting not to have a Greek editor who would know exactly what we are talking about.

TO CONCLUDE, COULD YOU SAY WHAT DOES THE TITLE OF THE FILM, ANIMAL, MEAN TO YOU?

Anima without the "L" comes from Latin and means the soul. The word animateur also derives from anima - the occupation whose goal is to animate - to cheer up other people, to make them feel happy and alive. I also liked the idea that anima can have a completely different meaning by simply adding the letter L to the end of it, bringing up all the violence and aggression, as well as the intensity and energy of this working environment, the inner struggle of those who work in it, and the significance of their own bodies.

SOFIA EXARCHOU

Sofia Exarchou was born in Athens. She studied electrical engineering at the National Technical University of Athens, film direction at the Stavrakos Film School and theater at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York. She pursued post-graduate film studies at Esav in Toulouse, France. In 2014, she was selected for the Sundance Screenwriter's & Director's Lab. *Park*, her first feature film, premiered at Toronto IFF and San Sebastian IFF, where it won the New Directors Award. Since then, it has participated and won awards in numerous international film festivals (Rotterdam IFF, BFI, Thessaloniki IFF - Best Actress & Best Greek Film, European Film Festival Palic-Best European Film, Greek Film Academy - Best First Feature & Best Sound Award etc). *Animal* is Sofia's sophomore feature film.

2016 *Park*

2009 *Mesecina* (short film)

2006 *Apostasi* (short film)

DIMITRA VLAGOPOULOU

Born in 1985, Dimitra Vlagoupoulou graduated from the National Theatre Drama School and the Drama School of the Athens Conservatoire. She collaborated with many prominent stage directors of the Greek contemporary scene which led her, in 2020 to be distinguished by the Melina Mercouri Award for best performance to a young actress.

In film, Dimitra has appeared in Sofia Exarchou's debut feature, *Park*, for which she won awards for Best Female Performance both at the Thessaloniki Film Festival and the Athens Film Festival, in Nikos Labot's *Her Job* (2017), and in Claudia Roraius' *Touched* (2021).

In addition to pursuing her stage and film career, Dimitra also frequently takes part in dance performances.

CAST LIST

Kalia DIMITRA VLAGOPOULOU
Eva FLOMARIA PAPADAKI
Simos AHILLEAS HARISKOS
Thomas CHRONIS BARBARIAN
Vladimir ILIAS HATZIGEORGIOU
Mary DANAI PETROPOULEA
Sergey KRISTOF

Fani ELPIDA ORFANIDOU
Jo JOANNA TOUMPAKARI
Sonia FAY TZOUMA
Dimos NONTAS DAMOPOULOS
Jonas VOODOO JÜRGENS
Argyris VAGELIS EVANGELINOS

CREW

written and directed by

SOFIA EXARCHOU

cinematography

MONIKA LENCZEWSKA (PSC)

production design

JORIEN SONT

costume design

VASSILIA ROZANA

hair & make-up

IOANNA LYGIZOU
& CHRONIS TZIMOS

sound

ODO GRÖTSCHNIG
SEBASTIAN WATZINGER
RUDOLF GOTTSBERGER
& THOMAS PÖTZ KAVA

music

WOLFGANG FRISCH

editing

DRAGOS APERTI
NIKOS VAVOURIS

produced by

MARIA DRANDAKI
& MARIA KONTOGIANNI
(Homemade Films)

associate producer

KYVELI SHORT

co-produced by

LUKAS VALENTA RINNER
(Nabis Filmgroup)
LAURA STERIAN (Digital Cube)
STELIOS KAMMITSIS
& VICKY MIHA (Felony)
IVAN TONEV (Ars Digital)
& SOFIA EXARCHOU

international sales and festivals

SHELLAC

coproduced with ERT, ARCTOS SA with support from EURIMAGES, MEDIA CREATIVE EUROPE, the GREEK FILM CENTRE, the AUSTRIAN FILM INSTITUTE, the VIENNA FILM FUND, the SALZBURG CITY FILM FUND, the CENTRAL NATIONAL CINEMATOGRAFIEI, MEDIACOM, the BULGARIAN FILM CENTER, the CYPRUS DEPUTY MINISTRY OF CULTURE, EKOME – NATIONAL CENTRE OF AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, the PREFECTURE OF CRETE



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