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I live with my eyes and ears wide open

The vocation of the documentary filmmaker is to hear, see, and respond quickly



Film director Adela Peeva

PENKA MOMCHILOVA, BTA
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Penka Momchilova

Renowned documentary filmmaker Adela Peeva, also known as Madam Marco Polo of the Balkans, celebrated 45 years of filmmaking and her 70th birth anniversary with a screening of her emblematic documentary *Whose Is This Song* that had won acclaim from critics and audiences at a number of film festivals all over the world.

Adela Peeva's films *Whose Is This Song* and *Divorce Albanian Style* are the only Bulgarian and Balkan documentaries that have been nominated for Best European Documentary by the European Film Academy. *Whose Is This Song* (2003), a Bulgaria-Germany-Belgium-Finland-Denmark-the Netherlands coproduction, has been screened at more than 50 international film festivals, including at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York and IDFA in the Netherlands. *Divorce Albanian Style* (2007) has been no less successful, with screenings at more than 30 festivals

and a total of 12 distinctions.

Adela Peeva made her directorial debut in 1988 with the feature fiction film *The Neighbour*, which was one of the five most successful at the box office Bulgarian feature films that year. It was selected for the Film Festival of Women Filmmakers in Paris and the International Film Festival in Madrid.

Peeva was born on 23 January 1947 in Razgrad. She graduated in Film and TV Directing at the Academy of Theatre, Cinema, Radio and Television in Belgrade. She worked as director for several TV channels in former Yugoslavia.

Upon her return to Bulgaria she began work at the Documentary Film Studio in Sofia, and created more than 50 documentaries. The Bulgarian communist authorities banned her *Mothers* (1983) and *In the Name of Sport* (1983), which were not screened in Bulgaria and abroad until after the democratic changes in 1989.

In 1990, Adela Peeva became an independent producer and founded the Adela Media production company. She created more than 30 documentaries in cooperation with partners from Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Turkey and Serbia, and the ZDF/ARTE, RBB/ARTE, WDR, RTBF, YLE/TV1, SRI, TV-Facta, B92 TV channels. This led to the making of *House on Rock*, *House on Sand* (1998) and *The Unwanted* (1999), created with the financial support of the National Film Centre and foreign partners. *The Unwanted* won Best Documentary at the Film

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Festival in Minnesota, and a special mention from the Jan Karsky Film Competition in the US, Second Prize at the At home Film Festival in Krakow, Poland, and the Special Jury prize at the Golden Rhyton National Festival for Non-Fiction Films in Bulgaria.

In 2010, Adela Peeva made the documentary *The Mayor*, which became very popular and won the Sofia City Prize for Outstanding Achievement in Film, the Director's Prize at the Golden Rhyton Film Festival, and the Best Documentary Film Award from the Bulgarian Film Academy. In 2013, she made another documentary, *The Quest for Spisarevski*.

In 2011, Adela Peeva attended the Cannes Film Festival as special guest alongside 19 other renowned European film directors. She is a member of EFA and a member of the Executive Committee of the Federation of European Film Directors (FERA). She has been member of juries for documentary films at the international film festivals in Cannes, Berlin, Locarno, Sarajevo, Mumbai, and the European Film Academy.

Adela Peeva examines the nationalist phenomenon in her latest documentary *Long Live Bulgaria*, which will be completed in 2017. She began shooting the film in 2013, but had to make hiatuses, because she wanted to trace the development of her protagonists, and to follow the changes in their personal and professional lives.

"I have done this before, and *Long Live Bulgaria* is a consequence of sorts of my previous work, in this case the documentary *The Quest for Spisarevski*. When I was filming *Whose Is This Song*, the people I met in Albania did not need convincing to sing the song and to tell me more about it, but nevertheless they mentioned that they had far more important things to say, for example the families in which one spouse was a foreigner were forcefully separated by the Albanian communist authorities. And that led to the idea of making *Divorce Albanian Style*," Albena Peeva recalls.

While working on *The Mayor*, she found out about the pilot Dimitar Spisarevski. She became fascinated with his persona, and she started reflecting on the subject of heroism, which led to the making of the documentary *The Quest for Spisarevski*. And naturally, the film included the memorials held by nationalists at the site of his death. Intrigued by the nationalist feelings of many young people, Adela Peeva decided to look for their causes.

Currently, the subject is very much the talk of the day in Bulgaria and in Europe. The refugee problem acted as a catalyst of sorts, she argued. "I don't deal with public people expressing their opinions in front of Bulgarian society. I talk to ordinary people instead, and look for their motives. I guess, the young are so infatuated with nationalism because of the current situation in Bulgaria: crisis, poverty, lack of jobs and prospects, both for personal fulfillment and for the state's development. Young people need patriotism, they need to have something to believe in, and to give them hope that they can change the country and their way of life," Adela Peeva pointed out.

"Despite the fact that times are changing... I have worked under communism, during the transition period, and in the years of democracy... my credo, my signature did not change to serve a given authority or age. My younger fellow filmmakers now witness that the author's stand remains valid, and the director has to follow it, no matter what the times can offer in terms of creative and personal experience. I tell young filmmakers what truth in documentaries is: how it all begins with the idea, and then a period of serious research of the subject and the material follows that can last up to two or three months, but it is indispensable! I am a storyteller, I tell stories. So the screenplay is very important. Ideas can come unsolicited, but the screenplay remains the backbone," the documentary filmmaker explained.

"I live with my eyes and ears wide open. The vocation of the documentary filmmaker is to hear, see, and respond quickly. When something moves them, they have to try to understand why and whether that is their subject, their story. It is true of almost any film. I cannot work if I am not motivated. What counts is the depth, the sincerity and the dedication to the subject matter. People can feel that when they watch the film, they can tell whether the director really stood behind what he portrayed, whether he or she was frank, and that is why their response is relevant. If you do something simply because it is fashionable, but has not inherent bearing to the subject matter, people can sense that. Full concentration is essential to me. I can't do two things at a time. I research, I reflect in depth, and that takes time. One has to be very enduring and patient," Adela Peeva added.

"When I decided to make *Whose Is This Song*, after several people from Balkan countries sitting at dinner in Istanbul started fighting over the song, my husband, who is also my producer, was very sceptical. "How can you make a whole movie over one song?!" But I did not give up. When you feel the right direction, you have to keep moving if something pushes you to go that way," Adela Peeva said in conclusion.