



35MM OF HAPPINESS



An unexpected flash of youth and delightful energy encompasses this issue's young Hollywood up-and-comer. Acclaimed indy writer/director of "Happiness," Sophie Barthes, is not chasing fame, or conformity. Instead, Ms. Barthes is the kind of old soul that could probably teach a thing or two to the spotlight chasers of the red carpet. An honest and unapologetic artist, Sophie has a beautiful career ahead of her.

INTERVIEW BY MAX MCCURDY

OB- Could you briefly explain what "Happiness" is about for our readers?

SB- It's about a woman who buys a box of happiness and does not know what to do with happiness because the simple idea of being happy [is] overwhelming to her, so she returns the box. She has this ongoing war with her supervisor, who has this very fancy, very Russian pair of shoes. And when she returns the box, she buys the same kind of shoes as her supervisor. But when she arrives, her supervisor has even fancier red shoes.

OB- What led you to use the Pandora's box metaphor?

SB- I've been trying to do a trilogy on "Happiness," three shorts, and three portraits of women dealing with happiness in different ways. And the first one was the idea of the Slavic soul. In a lot of Russian literature there is this constant resignation to be unhappy. In Chekov or Gogol, the characters always talk about happiness, and it's like something so overwhelming that they resign themselves of the chance to reach happiness. It's a film about resignation. If you were given happiness, what would you do with it? Would you decide to be happy, or is it something that is so intense and inaccessible that you would run away from it? And the character is scared of being happy because it's too far away from what she knows; what she knows is this melancholy, very solitary, gloomy life, and the moment she can have something else, it's almost like freedom.

OB- Is the transformation between the metaphorical and the literal a theme you are interested in pursuing further?

SB- Yes. I'm very interested in surrealism, it's my favorite movement in literature and painting, and I think what is funny is that especially in America, when you try to deal with an abstract concept, people can't deal with it. The film has been to maybe thirty festivals, and at the Q&A they always ask as the first question, "What is in the box?" because they can't deal with the fact that it's abstract, that it's Happiness. When [David Lynch] showed *Eraserhead*, in the beginning, people couldn't deal with it. They asked, "What does it say? What does it symbolize? What is this monster?" And he said, "I can't give answers. Just let your imagination play."

OB- It's reminiscent of the suitcase from *Pulp Fiction*.

SB- Exactly. It's funny because you play with the audience and you mess with them. And some love it, and they enjoy the dialogue, and some people are very reluctant to play, they want to have answers. And I think it's part of a larger attitude toward cinema. Some people go to see movies to get answers that are predigested, and some people go to play with their minds. The feature I'm writing now [*Cold Souls*] is very surreal. It deals with people trading their souls and freezing their souls and being soulless... just playing with that concept.

OB- When did you decide you were ready to start selling your screenplays?

SB- I think you have to go through several drafts before you feel in shape because if it is something that is too premature, you'll kill yourself. You can think it's more or less ready, but something in your stomach tells you you've been rushing to finish it. You have one chance to make a good impression. The thing with the [Sundance] program is that they don't ask for a full screenplay, they ask for about ten pages. So you can write an impressive opening. You know you're not going to go with a completely polished and perfect screenplay because that's not the objective of the program.

OB- You started out doing documentaries, but you're moving away from that style now. Do you feel you've kept something from that approach to filmmaking?



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOPHIE BARTHES

WRITER/DIRECTOR SOPHIE BARTHES

SB- I would love to do documentaries again, but I feel my brain can only concentrate on one area at a time. If you really want to develop the craft, I think it takes about 10 years. I don't consider myself to be a screenwriter yet. I'm learning, maybe I'll be a good screenwriter in ten years, maybe not. But I think it's so consuming that right now I can't do

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documentaries. But I love the format of documentaries. I love the immediacy and the contact with people. I did one in Yemen on the condition of women there. It was a beautiful experience. I loved it, talking with the women about

their emotional experience and how they are living, and it's beautiful because with fiction you're so removed from life. You're living in your head; you're not living in your flesh. And with documentary, you feel it in your stomach; you're with real people.

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OB- You've had a lot of international experience; how have you found the independent film scene in New York?

SB- I think that New York is the best compromise when you travel a lot. I had a nomadic childhood: we would move every three years. So going back to France for me is sort of claustrophobic. The French state is very claustrophobic. And New York is amazing, I have friends from South America, from Russia, and we're all trying to make documentaries or movies. The people here interest me much more than in Paris. New York is more open, it's more flexible; you're not judged all the time. There are a lot of very conservative aspects to France. Even the cinema system is government funded; you have to do all the politics, and it takes a lot of time to get anything done. It's a different approach to making movies. But [I] have to wade through a lot of bullshit here, too. It pays to be humble because there is a big machine here, and it moves very fast. And suddenly you have a success and everyone calls you and you become a screenwriter and a filmmaker, but it's not true cause you don't have the experience. And then the people get burned out, because they had momentum but they didn't have the craft developed inside of them; they were not solid enough, and sometimes they never do a second movie. They get completely terrified by their success; it can come so fast here. I think it's dangerous. It's all about ego, and if you don't look inside of you and you're always looking for recognition, you're killing yourself. You're killing your soul.

OB- You seem very calm in your approach.

SB- [laughs] Well, I say that, but I'm freaking out too. But if you develop it, knowing that what you are trying to do is good inside, in the most honest way that resonates with you, you are on a good path. You can take ten years - it doesn't matter - as long as you can survive more or less doing your art in a honest way. The new thing this year when I was at Sundance was "Little Miss Sunshine." You would walk into an interview with any studio executive



and they would ask, “Can you write the new ‘Little Miss Sunshine?’” Every one. I’m not going to rewrite something that’s been done; that’s how Hollywood works: they look at what has been successful and they want to repeat it until its exhausted. But you never know, maybe it’s a drama that will make 60 million dollars next year, not a comedy. It’s like gambling. And if you’ve read the gambling stories in, say, Gogol, all the gamblers are unhappy people because they are perpetually in the hope of something, and it’s like every hope is there to match this illusion. There is no way out. You can’t be hoping all the time; you have to be maybe a little bit

New York, and when I was a kid in France, I saw New York and Manhattan first through his movies. It’s the poetry of the city that he captured so beautifully. And I know in the US he’s not that popular, but in France they have an obsession with Woody Allen. And although I write mostly comedies, in Bergman there is something, even though it is always very dark; he masters the language of cinema completely, and the drama is so natural and accessible. I love the aesthetic of the 60’s, of European Cinema, the French New Wave. And at Columbia, I took a class with David Sterritt on the French New Wave that gave me the fire to try to

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hopeless, I think it’s nice to have a kind of resignation that you don’t need the external gaze always.

OB- You mentioned David Lynch earlier. What other filmmakers have you found particularly influential?

SB- My three favorites of all time are Fellini, Bergman, and Woody Allen. I could watch their movies again and again. I think I’ve seen “8 1/2” 20 times. And I love Woody Allen because his movies have the soul of

make movies. And something happened, and I think everyone has a moment of consideration from others, like you read a book or see a movie that moves you so much that you’d like to try it yourself. Maybe you’ll never achieve anything close to that, but you have to try. Because once you have this feeling, everything seems boring compared to that. If Bergman can make “Persona” or if Woody Allen can make “Annie Hall” or “Manhattan,” all the rest is boring; I don’t want to be an accountant!