



CA+T Interview with Olaf de Fleur Johannesson
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Olaf de Fleur Johannesson, Artist

CA+T: How did you first get started in filmmaking (e.g., in school)?

Olaf de Fleur Johannesson (OFJ): [When] I was twenty years old, I called a TV station and asked a cameraman to teach me to operate a camera. I was fortunate to meet the right person who taught me the basics. The hardest thing about my career was to make that call. After that, it always felt like a calling somehow.

CA+T: How did you become interested in making a film on the experiences and aspirations of a transgender woman in the Philippines?

OFJ: I've always trusted in a 'gut' feeling I get from time to time in my life. Especially in filmmaking I just chase a 'wave' inside me and see where it leads me. There was no A to B in this case in terms of the idea coming together. It just pulled me like gravity, I felt that this should be materialized and was extremely fortunate to find the right people to work with on the project. I feel this project is a blessing in so many ways, I'm so proud of everyone who worked on it. I just wanted to tell a simple story of a girl who's looking for love. But it turned out to be much bigger than just that. It's about impossible dreams, dreamers who pretend that their impossible dream will come true. It's about globalization, how our Western world values impose themselves upon poor cultures through media. It's about how we try and keep third world countries in place (difficulty for locals getting a VISA), how the Western world is greedy and selfish in its supposed wondered nature. And in the arms of all these things, it's about a pure human dream and how naturally clumsy life can be when handling our hopes. The goal is always to try to increase fellow-human understanding of each other. That's a lofty goal but I always try.

CA+T: How did you meet Raquela Rios, the central subject of your film?

OFJ: We interviewed several girls in Cebu, in the Philippines, and Raquela stood out for her creativity and clever mind. Through her and others I met, I was allowed to see into their world. Many scenes are authentic "docu moments," and some are fiction and some are even improv. We were always amazed by her talent of being able to improvise and deliver lines when needed. I take little credit, and she is a natural.

CA+T: When watching the film, one of its most striking features is what appears to be a blurring of fact and fiction, with elements of both documentary and narrative filmmaking. Could you speak about this?

OFJ: At the beginning I set out to do a documentary, but early on during development I realized that many of the subjects would have had to have been shot as talking heads, with blurred faces and distorted voices even and I found that unappealing. I soon found the angle to this hybrid approach: getting real transgender girls and their friends and family to convey the stories of many and add actors in between. Some scenes were reenactments, some were fiction, some were real moments, and some were improvised. I was mainly going with my gut instincts, which may sound kind of crazy. I strove to blur the lines between facts and fiction somehow, I guess, but it was mainly because I wanted a cinematic experience to do the work. I wanted the feel of a narrative, but the emotional reality of a documentary. For me it's neither fiction nor documentary, and I don't think about it too much. When you make a film, you think you're making it, but the film is making you, so you start to listen to the story and obey it and that's what happened in this one.

CA+T: In the film Raquela travels to Iceland with the help of another Filipina transgender woman, Valerie. In making the film, did you find that there are many Filipinos, LGBTQ Filipinos in particular, who go to Iceland to work?

OFJ: There is a vibrant Filipino community in Iceland, but transgenders coming over in numbers to work is not the case.

CA+T: Part of the film explores Raquela's work for a "ladyboy" website. What are your thoughts on the sex-type internet work performed by some transgender women in the Philippines and elsewhere in Southeast Asia?

OFJ: That's a huge question, but I'm careful as a storyteller not to judge or overproduce my opinions. It mostly bothers me that transgenders don't have a "place" in society in general. In the case of the internet, and the world for that matter, transgender women don't have full access to society (schools, career, work etc) because of prejudices. Therefore, the internet porn industry is one of the gates that is open for them to make a living, but of course they should simply be accepted for who they are.

CA+T: What was your most memorable experience while making this film?

OFJ: Working with everybody on the film. It was an amazing experience I can honestly say.

CA+T: Have you followed up with Raquela since completing the film?

OFJ: Yes, we've stayed in touch. She came over to Berlin for the Berlinale premiere [Berlin International Film Festival] in 2008, which was about eighteen months after we stopped shooting. Since then we catch up from time to time online. She likes changing names and appearances, is extremely creative and loving, and has many friends and an active social life.

CA+T: Would you ever consider doing another film in the Philippines?

OFJ: I loved my time in Cebu. The people are so friendly, the country is so beautiful and the local filmmakers are so good to work with, so yes I'd love to go back one day with the right project.

CA+T: What films inspire you?

OFJ: Films used to inspire me. They don't anymore. It's more that I like depth of characters and structure here and there in film work. But it's so random and scattered that I can't give an example. I'm not sure how my inspiration works, but I can feel it partly in film work, TV work. Nowadays I mainly get inspired by people around me, small human moments here and there.