

POUR THE WATER AS I LEAVE

by

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EXPANDED SYNOPSIS:

Pour the Water as I Leave is a feature length animated documentary about the exodus of Bosnian people during the Balkan Civil War. Structured as a poetic melange of fiction and fact, the narrative offers an insight into the civilian experience of a war zone. With a focus on shared trauma, the story transcends its Bosnian roots and becomes timeless. The war that took place in the 1990s was the catalyst for the Bosnian diaspora that currently constitutes 2 million people. Almost 25 years later, this event of loss, struggle and survival still shapes how Bosnians relate to the concept of home and community. Through intimate portraiture and interviews of Bosnian refugees, the narrative reveals the incredible resilience demonstrated by Bosnian people during the fallout of ex-Yugoslavia.

The story follows two fictional characters, *the woman* and *the man*, as they navigate through a besieged country. Their fantastical reality is enhanced by animation, intervals of choreographed dance, and visual abstraction. On their path, they encounter real people whose testimonies are tied into the fictional narrative, forming a seamless flow between experimental and documentary genre. This poetic structure allows the development of two parallel timelines that collide and form a unifying vision of the civilian experience of the war. The two main characters, *the woman* and *the man*, are the embodiment of collective struggle, while the interviews bring personalized and specific experiences. The Bosnian War was based on ethnic and religious conflicts. Bosnian ethnic and religious identities are signified in their names. To avoid the continuation of this unjust qualification of Bosnians and create a sense of a unified identity, the main characters are nameless. This is in contrast to the interviewed people in the film, whose identities reveal the intricate tapestry of Bosnian heritage.

As a poem depends on the rhythmic structure of a verse, the arc of the story relies on the balance between dance, prose and magical realism within animation. The chance meeting of the two main characters during a bombing of a city paves the way for the story to move through the city's landscape, Bosnian households, and military spaces. The mutual attraction between *the woman* and *the man* established in the first few scenes of the film becomes unattainable as the narrative unfolds and exodus is inevitable. The depth of their characters are established through their interaction with real people being interviewed about the war. These real individuals appear eight times throughout the film. Each of the interviewees are currently living outside of Bosnia and the interviews reveal their last days in

their homeland. The medium of animation allows these interviews to be placed within the invented reality of the fictional characters. This insertion of documentary into the narrative world of the film enables the fusion of past and present, offering the audience insights into the cause and effect of Bosnia's downfall. The film ends with all participants, real and fictional, occupying one single thread of existence.

Pour the Water as I Leave is as personal as it is a shared story. With its foundation in Bosnia, the story opens up to cultures beyond her borders. Its nucleus lies in human experiences that are shared, with an attempt to find empathy and connectedness rather than separation and otherness. The complexity of the film's subject is reflected through the moldable interaction of visual, emotive and auditory aspects of the film. Animation, dance and prose as chosen mediums to tell this story lay a foundation for a documentary that breaks genre boundaries and offers a striking and unique experience in storytelling.

TOPIC SUMMARY:

Pour the Water as I Leave is a story about individual and shared experiences of the Balkan civil war during the 1990s. The war is often described as Europe's deadliest conflict since World War II.

The understanding of what it takes to escape the warzone is one of the main inquiries/themes of the film. During the war, it was almost impossible to leave the country. However, an "exchange" of people started happening. Serbs would go to Serbian parts of Bosnia, while Muslims and Catholics would go to regions that were a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Towards the end of the war, the borders were less strict on their policies, but still widely inaccessible without forged documents or blackmarket deals. The goal is to offer an understanding of how one becomes a refugee and the choices that are made in that process: what is gained and what is lost, what is endured and what is broken? During this exodus, life still continued under shelling and sniper fire. The cities and villages existed as modified communities in order to adjust to war time rules of everyday life. Depicting these spaces of "common life" under dire circumstances provides insight into how life is carried on during war. It is often forgotten and misunderstood how these spaces operate, even in the time of social media, the internet, and abundant access to information. This civilian experience of a war zone is expressed through interviews of eight Bosnian people, currently living in diaspora. Their testimonies depict the events they witnessed during the war, as well as their escape from Bosnia. The narrative weaves these stories into a fictional timeline about escape from a country under siege. The questions that are included in the interviews span from specific personal reactions to the events that occurred during the war to more broad inquiries about loss, sense of home, and identity.

As the story navigates through this event of Bosnian collective trauma, the topics of the inquiry are set up to relate to the current global refugee crisis. The *cause and effect* of the war is not explored as a phenomenon unique only to Bosnia but a recurring historical theme of humanity. The relevance of this story echoes through the current political, social and humanitarian crises of the world. Living in Portland, Oregon I have witnessed unrest resembling the days ahead of the war in Bosnia. Fueled by the physical separation due to COVID-19 restriction, political tension, and protests for racial justice, the last year has brought familiar

anxiety amongst my family and friends that have experienced war in their respective countries. The feeling of being trapped in a situation beyond our control mirrored the days of war from our past. Fear of being prosecuted because of forced categorization based on nationality, race, identity and culture became amplified even in most liberal communities. The subject of escape became frequent in our conversations, only to fall flat since there is really nowhere to run. People of all walks of life started to question the concept of home and community. As our current social and political conditions demand greater adaptability for collective survival, this story illuminates the parallel struggles with the Balkan Civil War in the spirit of inquiry for hope and potential solutions. Is it possible to both celebrate the uniqueness of a culture and give access to participation beyond its framework? The approach to storytelling through a poetic narrative will allow these kinds of inquiries to find their responses in flexibility between factual and emotive aspects of the story. While the cinematic experience of a foreign language may be prohibitive in a sense, the focus on the body and gestures through dance allows the audience to experience something beyond words; peer into the humanity within. As we are navigating through current collective separation due to wars, COVID-19, poverty, racial inequity, this film aspires to give hope and awareness of our togetherness in these trying times. It challenges the past for the sake of the present and points to our interconnectedness for our survival.

CONNECTION TO THE STORY:

Pour the Water as I Leave is a story that has its foundation in my personal experiences of war, refugee life and living in diaspora for the last 20 years. I was ten when the war in Bosnia started and fifteen when I became a refugee. Subsequently, I experienced a decade of moving through countries, refugee camps, and bureaucracies. The access to the Bosnian community starts with my family and friends. They helped me with my first show created in the refugee camp in Geneva, they watched me grow as an artist and witnessed my homage to Bosnia and her people in my work. Their trust is evident in their support of my endeavors and their participation in the film is a profound blessing in my culture.

In 2020 I reached a pivotal point of exactly half of my life spent in Europe and half in the USA. My connection to Bosnia persisted through multiple family visits over the years, as well as a couple of projects filmed in my hometown. For the past two years I have been studying the concepts of home, loss, Bosnian identity and the socio-political impact of the refugee crisis within the western world. My studies resulted in a short animated documentary where I filmed my grandparents as they live their life in Bosnia, separate from the rest of the family.

A unique contribution to this project is the background of the current team members. The screenwriter and my story co-creator, Vu Pham is a filmmaker that draws inspiration from his own personal experiences as a Vietnamese refugee. Our cultures, while vastly different, were fused with nearly identical childhood circumstances. The result was a story that already constituted inclusion as opposed to separation and otherness. Rena Butler, the film's dance choreographer, relates to the story as a young Black woman in celebration of her own identity and culture. Her understanding of war, struggle and perseverance is rooted in her personal experiences of growing up as a Black woman in the USA. My sister, Ivana Repas, as an official poet for most of my visual work, will write the prose for the film. Our family connection allows us to create material that is often unattainable in other circumstances. John Summerson, as a lead animator, contributes with his unique approach to animated documentaries. His skills in technique and creative thinking contributes to the poetic narrative structure.

ARTISTIC APPROACH:

The artistic vision for this project fluctuates between aesthetics of cinema, animation and drawing. This overlap allows the narrative to flex and move between what is real and what is imagined.

The animation style envisioned for *Pour the Water as I Leave* is a combination of rotoscoping technique and drawing frame by frame animation. The source material for all the visual elements will be filmed as live action and then translated into animation and drawings. As the story unfolds, the two methods of animation will bleed into one another and at times collide in a multi-layered composition. The presence of the artist's hand is achieved through the finesse of the line and mark making. The color palette is inspired by works of renaissance painters, chiaroscuro treatment of light, and the cinematic lens of Andrei Tarkovsky. Through innovation and experiment, the animation style chosen for this film will mirror the poetic structure of the narrative.

As an additional element to the poetic narrative approach, the fictional characters are performed by dancers. The decision to cast dancers rather than actors is grounded in my desire to specify and highlight gestures of the human body. Through choreography of subtle movements, these fictional characters are a visual opposition to the real people interviewed for the film. Although they occupy shared spaces at times, the fictional and real characters differ in their movements and interactions with the space they are in. The performative nature of dance brings the visual poetry "front and center" and allows the narrative to highlight the emotive nature of the story. The visual elements are in consistent dance with the soundscape of the film, achieved through carefully edited intervals of raw sound and composed music. The soundtrack itself will be rooted in traditional Balkan music, consisting of brass and string instruments.

Pour the Water as I Leave is an animation film that challenges the genre of documentary and non-fiction storytelling. The artistic vision at the core of this project relies as much on innovation as it does on mastery of the mediums.

COVID-19 CONSIDERATIONS:

This project, as many across the world, has been impacted by the restrictions imposed by COVID-19. However, as an animated feature, this film has many advantages in overcoming COVID-19 obstacles.

Currently in the development stage, the project has been impacted by the closures of daycares, limited access to public gatherings and closures of previously expected funding. As a mother of a four year old child, it has been incredibly challenging to balance parenting and professional practice. Needless to say, the timeline of the project shifted and suffered as a consequence of homeschooling. However, as through many other unpredictable events that occurred throughout my life, I have adapted to the new workflow and increased productivity with a revised approach and timeline. The closure of the Princess Grace Foundation grant opportunities throughout 2020 has affected the chances for early development funding (as an alumna of the foundation, I have access to grants and opportunities that are closed to the public). The Princess Grace Foundation has opened up for the 2021 cycle and I am planning to apply to their Special Project Grant in May 2021. Additional obstacles during development was the closures of film festivals where physical attendance contributed greatly in networking and collaboration.

Despite all this, the future of the project appears to be bright and achievable. As an animated film, the production can be broken up in many stages and divided in single cell studios. Animators and illustrators can work from their home studios and share their work digitally. *Zoom* as a means of communication is sufficient to convey ideas, create space for collaboration and problem solve. Since the interviews do not require a specific location, they can be filmed at any location with a crew of only three people. The dance choreography is scheduled in late fall, with hope that by then we will be able to gather indoors in small groups. If not, these will be divided into smaller groups of three or four people. All this can be filmed outdoors where the risk factor is significantly lower. Dancers can be filmed individually for certain scenes and then composited in post production. As the filmed material accumulates, the illustrators and animators will be able to work regardless of their geographic position or time zones.

Animation is a very forgiving medium. It allows the creative process to shift and flow as needed. Being an animator myself, I am fully aware of the flexibility of the medium. It is a driving force behind this project and I am confident in its potential to thrive in these uncertain times.

INTENDED AUDIENCE:

This film is intended for audiences that are interested in conversations about socio-political themes, innovation in storytelling and revolution of animated documentary.

The socio-political theme of the film is intended to spark new conversations about concepts of home, displacements, equity, and war and its consequences. I believe that today's global audience is not only interested in these subjects but are actively pursuing solutions for them.

The artistry and technique of animation is intended to shine a light on the possibilities an animated documentary offers. In recent years the animated documentary has gained interest amongst filmmakers and academics equally, creating a new type of audience that looks for invention in storytelling. This film speaks directly to this audience.

The strategy to reach the above mentioned audiences will be devised through careful national and international film festival pursuits, online streamings services and screenings in art institutions.