

WOMEN IN FILM SERIES: INTERVIEW WITH FILMMAKER LEAH MEYERHOFF

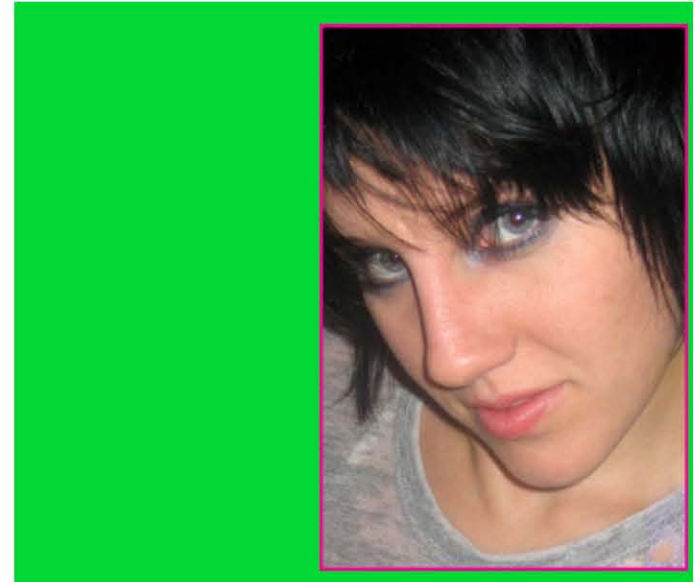
By Rebekah Frimpong

Rebekah: What was the first film you saw that moved you?

Leah: The first one that comes to mind is Boy's Don't Cry. The heartfelt and raw performances in that film were incredibly moving, imbuing the story with real humanity and emotional resonance. I was lucky enough to speak with Kimberly Peirce a few months ago and her advice about my new project Unicorns has been quite helpful. Although, if you are asking me about the very first film that moved me, then I remember E.T., making me cry.

R: How was it working with your mom in Twitch?

L: The story for Twitch was inspired by events from my childhood. My mother was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis shortly before I was born and I grew up taking care of her. I have always been interested in making a film exploring this mother-daughter role reversal and felt like my life experiences gave me a unique opportunity to tell a story I had not seen before. Since it was such a personal film, casting my real mother made a lot of sense. Of course this brought its own set of challenges. In addition to the regular travails of working with a non-actor, we had our own personal baggage to contend with as well. However, in the end she gave such an honest and brave performance that it was completely worth it. Thus, although the experience of working together was challenging, ultimately it was even more rewarding and the film is that much stronger for it.



R: How pivotal was Twitch for you?

L: On a personal level, the making of Twitch helped me explore parts of my past I had previously avoided and brought my mother and I closer together in real life as well. On a professional level, Twitch really launched my career as a filmmaker. Beyond being profiled on IFC, it was a Slamdance Grand Jury Prize winner, a Student Academy Award finalist, and had incredible success on the film festival circuit. Through the process of traveling around with Twitch, I was able to raise most of the financing towards my first feature Unicorns, and have made some incredibly connections along the way.

R: Do you ever feel pressure to exceed expectations as a female director/filmmaker?

L: The film world, like much of our society, remains a male-dominated industry and in that regard female directors often have to work harder to prove themselves. However, I think the problem is less that female directors aren't taken seriously and more that producers and film studios tend to work with who they already know - and those directors are primarily male. I think this helps explain why there are plenty of male coming of age stories but realistic female protagonists are few and far between. At the same time, I do think that the world is changing. Even though a female director has yet to win an Oscar, in the Independent world a lot more women are getting out there and making films. I like to consider myself a part of that movement, and hope to inspire younger female filmmakers to let their voices be heard as well.



R: Can you tell us more about your feature film you are working on now?

L: A Sundance Lab finalist, *Unicorns* tells the story of an awkward teenage girl who escapes to a fantasy world when her first romantic relationship turns increasingly abusive. I am interested in giving voice to a perspective that often goes unheard, particularly in relation to the grey areas of domestic violence. Since coming of age films help shape the way teenage girls come of age in real life, this film has great potential to affect social change, albeit in a subtly narrative way. I hope to reach people on an emotional level through gritty, gut-wrenchingly raw performances that combine social realism with an element of fantasy in pursuit of something beautiful and honest and real. We have already begun to compile a strong production team, including Executive Producer Allison Anders (*GAS FOOD LODGING*, *THINGS BEHIND THE SUN*) and Producers Alexis Fish (*SHORTBUS*) and Heather Rae (*FROZEN RIVER*, *IBID*). Judy Henderson (*LIE, BEFORE SUNRISE*) recently signed on as Casting Director and we are scheduled to begin auditions later this month.

R: What was your inspiration for the music video Team Queen?

L: I collaborated with the band, Triple Crème, from the very beginning. They are a queer band and a lot of the lyrics address what it was like to grow up feeling like outsiders. We decided to flip the classic coming-out story on its head and instead explore what high school could have been like if the misfits and outcasts ran the school. From there, it was only a small leap to adding drag queens, fire breathing punk rockers, and a six-foot tall man in a bright blue bunny suit!

R: How has the film festivals been for you this year so far, what has been your most memorable moment?

L: Twitch has screened in over 200 film festivals so far and Team Queen is approaching the 100 mark, but this year I have only personally attended around five. I was on the Slamdance narrative jury, which was a lot of fun and included a cross-country road trip, dozens of parties, endless screenings, and the invention of a new contact sport I like to call “hot tub sledding.” I also have fond memories of a SXSW festival party in the middle of a community art space called “The Enchanted Forest.” They even had giant rocking horses in the shape of unicorns!

R: Everyone probably ask you this, but what is next?

L: www.unicornsthemovie.com



Filmmaker Bio:

Leah Meyerhoff is a Slamdance Grand Jury Prize winner and Student Academy Award finalist currently pursuing an MFA at NYU. Her short film Twitch has screened in over 200 film festivals, won a dozen international awards and was picked up for distribution by IFC, Reelport and Skandinavia TV. Leah has since completed several music videos, including Team Queen, a Planet Out finalist airing on LOGO, and Eternal Flame, which was picked up by MTV Europe. Leah has received press coverage from The New York Times, The Hollywood Reporter, Film Threat, The San Francisco Chronicle and numerous other publications. She is also profiled in the docudrama series “Film School” which continues to air on IFC. Leah was recently a member of the Slamdance jury and is currently teaching a master class at NYU. She holds a BA in Art-Semiotics from Brown University. A Sundance Lab Finalist, Unicorns will be her first feature film.