



Conversation with
Dunja Gry Jensen
NORSKOV

Dear Dunja we are very happy to have you with us and this talk is to introduce you to Italian audience before Nordic Film Fest. So at first can you give me a brief bio, how do you get into the writing?

I studied at the National Danish Film School from 1994-96 and graduated at the time of the Dogme Wave. My teachers was legendary Mogens Rukow and Lars Kjeldgaard, great inspirators, who both passed away now. A couple of years after graduating, I began writing episodes for the popular tv-series Taxa, a milestone in danish tv-drama. I've been writing feature length scripts, shorts, documentaries as well as radio drama. But I love writing in the tv-series format.

Can you tell me about your series Norskov, what is about?

Norskov is about a rough provincial harbour town in the north of Denmark. The series depicts the people of Norskov, high and low, their relationships, their struggles and their crimes. In the first season we follow police officer Tom Noack, who returns to Norskov after many years, in order to fight the drug crimes in the streets. Noack soon gets personally involved on many levels. Central to the story is old friends and family of Tom, and a young hockey-player, who is wrongly accused of dealing cocaine.

What is the moral theme underneath Norskov?

I wouldn't call it a moral theme. But there's an overall premise, that we're all connected, and whatever you do, it affects yourself as well as the society around you.

How was the writing and production process for Norskov? The idea came from you or there was a commission from the network or producer?

The network invited me to come up with an idea for a police series. They had three keywords: crime, province and a male police officer. I wanted to make the series more drama than crime, and more about the structure of a small town society and the police as a part of this society, than strictly *who-dunnit*. During my research I fell in love with a real town in the north of Denmark, Frederikshavn. The reality of this place inspired my work a lot. And we ended up shooting the entire series on location, - for the first time in the history of danish prime time series.

How was the project funded and where you involved in this phase of production?

Norskov ended up being a co-production with both some international investment and fundings from the Danish Film Institute. I was not very involved in the financing. But of course, I wrote some material, to go with the applications, and I participated in a few meetings. Especially the DFI is very keen on speaking with the creatives, and I realised, that a lot of the international investors are very interested in meeting the creators too. I kind of enjoyed that part of it, more than I'd expected.

Did you have to make any changes in the writing due to financial issues?

No. I didn't have to change anything due to economics. But since we ended up shooting the entire series on location in Frederikshavn, I did have to do some changes due to practicalities. Like what kind of private housing were we able to get into, stuff like that. Most changes were for the better, since the production design team did a great job at getting most out of the possibilities.

How many episodes are the series and what is its structure?

First season is ten episodes of 42 minutes. We work with a four act structure in each episode. And also a four act structure of the season, following the four blocks of the production. (2, 3, 3, 2).

What was your role (creator, show runner) and how did you manage the writing (there was a writers' room) ?

My role is creator and head writer. I am also a showrunner in the sense, that it's my job to connect with the directors and other creatives and protect the overall vision of the show. I am not present at the shootings, but I am present during the editing, and part of the dialogue with directors, producers and broadcasters till the final closing.

I work with a writers room of typically two episode-writers and a researcher/writers-room-assistant and myself. The episode-writers are engaged in outlining each others episodes, since we work in a block of perhaps three episodes at a time. Previously, on the series Sommer, I had a story-editor present too, that worked very well also.

What is the audience target of Norskov and where did it aired in Denmark? Can you give us a picture of TV market in your country? How many public networks, how many free and how many pay channels, and what kind of series productions do they have?

Basically we have two major broadcasters, who are involved with series production. DR1, wich is also a studio, producing, and up until recently was the only major series broadcaster in DK. DR1 made series like Borgen, The Killing, Unit One, and many others and co-produced The Bridge. Recently TV2, wich started out being public, but is now a commercial station, have begun challenging the "monopoly" of DR1 on the series market. TV2 does not produce, but collaborate with production companies. Norskov was TV2's first attempt in serious drama. But they previously had succes with comedies and crime shows. A few minor channels have done a few minor series. And I've heard it, that perhaps Netflix and/or HBO will get involved with scandinavian series production also.

Did Norskov was a success? How are the audience numbers for Denmark? Was it sold in other countries and was meant to be appealing for an international audience too?

Norskov was very well received by the press and business and have a great fanbase. It is considered very high quality, and I think it will have a long life. It had an audience share of about 30, a great share, compared to international numbers, but a little dissapointing in Denmark. In Denmark, with a small population, we need a very large audience share for this type of budget. Basically our prime time shows are expected to gather the "entire nation", young and old.

Norskov is co-financed by Norway and Sweden, and sold to a few countries. Arté and Lumiere and more to come. It only aired in Norway yet. It was well recieved but also a little disappointing in audience numbers. Perhaps it's ambivalence between crime and drama is a problem in hooking the media attention? Or perhaps the market just moves too fast. But I hope it will get a great audience, once it is shown around Europe.

In the last years many Nordic series have gathered a large international attention, with remakes both in the US and in Europe. What originates this success? What are the strengths of the Nordic storytelling and production?

As I mentioned before, due to the small population, our series need to reach a wide audience of almost everybody. Therefore we've invented a very broad genre, that combines serious subjects with relationship issues. Secondly there's a scandinavian tradition of authenticity and relevance, our storys are almost always grounded in some realism, and with a kind of social touch. Last but not least, the writer/creator have a lot of authourity in most series. DR1 calls it the concept of "One vision" method. The networks base a lot of trust in the creatives. We also have a famous national film school with a strong artistic profile.

Do you think there's a specific European sensibility that is different from American perspective?

I don't know about that. The Americans obviously have strong genre-shows, like Game of Thrones or Deadwood. But some of the popular American shows have a great sensibility too. Like Mad Men for example or Six feet Under, and many others. How do you make your work go under the skin of the audience? How do you create something, that people do not forget easily? Something you take with you? I guess most filmmakers probably ask themselves these questions. I know, I do.

What is for you the key element of screenwriting: characters, action, conflict, structure, genre or... ?

All those are key elements. But if I should point out one element, it is the scene. Understanding the scene is the core of screenwriting. If you can write great scenes for the actors to play, you can't go wrong. Trouble is, you need both the genre, the structure, the conflict and the characters to be in place, to create the scene.

From a Guild point of view how is the role of scriptwriter in Denmark? Are they well considered and involved in the production decision-making? You are a female creator of a series and also our other guests from Norway are women. Is that normal? How is the position of women in the movie business in your country? In Italy unfortunately only one third of writers are female.

You have to distinguish between the screenwriter in cinema, and in television. As a creator/headwriter in tv, you have the major creative say. In the feature films it is very much the directors call, and your influence depends on your relationship with the director.

We are maybe 15 people in Denmark, doing the job that I do (headwriting tv-series) and about a third are women. That is pretty good, I think, considering it is a job of creative leadership, and thus combining two areas that up until recently was completely dominated by men. I do not think of gender a lot, except when I am asked about it. I think this is a major difference: Women are often asked about gender issues. Men are not.

Can you give a concrete idea of the job? About timing, job organization, budget and wages?

Showrunning is a job of at least two people, and it is a big challenge to keep healthy, and find time for family- and social life while you're running a series. I know this is a problem we all share. The salary is good, yes. But I'm not sure it is good enough. I think we need to really look out for ourselves, and make sure, our salaries make way for long vacations and recreations between jobs.

Can you give as a brief spoiler free preview on the master-class you will give in Roma about how characters mirror social theme?

Characters mirror everything. Your characters mirror the tone of the film/series, the rythm, the genre, the type of conflict. And it mirrors the theme/s too. Working with Norskov, I was working not with a single main character (even if the returning policeman is the dominant character of the first season), but with an ensemble, mirroring the society as a whole, from the major to the drug addict. A strong inspiration is David Simon, who is always curious about the structure of society in his shows.

In the masterclass I will fokus on my work with Norskov. I will talk about my inspirations, and I will talk about the way, I use characters and their relations, reflecting society. I will speak about how my themes are more about questions than answers, and I will try to explain, how I work against plot, in order to create a less efficient storyline, and a slower pace.

I am looking very much forward to meeting the italian colleagues.

Interview by Fosca Gallesio

April, 11 - 2016