

## **Q&A with Undertow Director Miranda Nation**

**Q. This is a film that combines disparate strands, including coping with miscarriage, psychological thriller, mental health and an element of 'me-too' in a footy culture context; what is the most important message you want audiences to take away from the film and why?**

*For me, the film is an exploration of female experience. It's a drama with psychological thriller tropes in that the story is told very subjectively from the protagonist Claire's point of view and plays with her growing struggle to grasp reality. Although the plot strands – miscarriage, a rape cover-up – may seem disparate, to my mind it all comes back to the female body, to female sexuality and psychology. Claire and Angie, seemingly so different on the surface, are linked by their respective experiences of trauma – trauma specific to the female body, that they are both repressing and eventually force each other to confront. It's a story that has evolved with me through my own experience of pregnancy, pregnancy loss and motherhood – I'm really passionate about representing the lives of women; the complex relationship with our bodies, our sexuality, and role as the bearers of life. I think it's so liberating in this time of the #MeToo movement for women to be speaking out and saying – this is our experience, this is what it's like to be in our bodies, these are the stories we want to tell and share and hear.*

**Q. The lead character, Claire (Laura Gordon, *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, MIFF 2016) often uses her camera as a storytelling device for audiences to see into her world and follow her thought process. Why do you feel it was important to have Claire's occupation as a photojournalist as part of the narrative?**

*To be honest, Claire's work as photojournalist was more present in the scripted story than in the finished film but it remains an important element. The storytelling is very intimate and subjective; Cinematographer Bonnie Elliott and I tried to create a sort of visual poem representing Claire's inner world, and her photography is one part of that. Claire's tendency to look from a distance, to observe and document, helps to explain her attitude to her loss – the way she deals with her intense grief by internalising rather than expressing – and her attitude to Angie, whom she objectifies, distancing herself from her emotional response. The photos and the 'shrine' Claire creates in her studio provide a glimpse into her subconscious, into her growing fixation with Angie, and her obsession with the decay in nature that she sees everywhere she looks.*

**Q. Gordon gives a bold and brave performance - what was important and unique about Gordon that led you to placing her as a lead actor?**

*When I saw Laura's audition I had a rush of adrenaline, it was so thrilling, because she delivered the lines just as I'd always heard them. That wasn't something I expected, because the character always evolves to meet the actor, and there were other wonderful auditions, other intriguing portrayals of Claire. But the fact that Laura seemed to tap into the rhythms and emotions I had written as if she was inside my head and body was magic – it just seemed like it was meant to be. Laura is a fearless actor, utterly committed; she has a sort of quicksilver connection to her emotions. We actually played a lot with stillness – Claire is detached from her emotions and held back from life – but it was also really important to me that the character was empathetic. Laura has a warmth and honesty that I think makes Claire's journey, however difficult, feel truthful and accessible.*

**Q. In a film like this focusing on two strong and complex female characters - what is the role of the male characters in the film and how do you think it will be perceived by a male audience?**

*I'm thinking of a quote by Krzysztof Kieslowski about creating one film at screenplay stage and then finding another story in the edit. In the screenplay the four lead characters were more evenly weighted but in the edit the story stripped back to revolve more closely around the two women, the relationship that was always at the heart of the story. The danger then was that the men become less dimensional, but I think that Rob's and Josh's strong performances give the male characters the nuance and complexity that I intended. Of course, I could point to the number of films where the female supports lack complexity! But I really tried to invest the male characters with just as much depth as the female – all four characters are flawed and fallible, doing the best they can to get by. The reaction to date from male audience members has been that they find much to relate to in the story. Some have related more strongly to the pregnancy storyline – it's surprising how many men have suffered deeply from the loss of a baby in a relationship. Others have related to Brett's experience, of being in a position where you know you should stand up and say something but instead bow to peer pressure. I think it's a good time to be talking about these issues from male as well as from a female perspective. The film doesn't set out to point the finger at individual men but it is making a comment more broadly about society and attitudes towards women.*

**Q. Rob Collins (*Glitch*) plays one of the two key male characters in the film - what was important and unique about Collins that led you to placing him as a lead actor?**

*I was aware of Rob's work from *Cleverman*, he has such an engaging screen presence! He brought a combination of dignity and defensive vulnerability to his audition that was very intriguing. It was really important to me that the actor playing Dan be empathetic, that he not be played as a bad guy, that we see he's just a regular guy making decisions to get by. They may be bad decisions but they're not coming from a bad place; he's trying to protect his wife, his mate, this vulnerable young woman – he's pulling the wool over his own eyes. I'm really interested in this moral grey area, where things are not black and white. Rob has this innate integrity, and he brought to the character a compelling combination of strength and tenderness.*

**Q. You recruited for cast and crew for the film in Geelong where the film is set, gaining a lot of local attention. How did you find the recruitment process? Why was it important to film *Undertow* in your home town in Geelong and the significance of those final scenes along the surf coast?**

*It's funny, growing up in Geelong I hated the place and couldn't wait to get out! But as an adult I've found myself falling in love with my hometown. The coastline has always been close to my heart, it's the place I go to get back to myself. Geelong and the coast always seemed like the right setting for the film – it's a very cinematic landscape. I love all the old industry too, I find something really beautiful in all those stark shapes against the skyline. The contrasts in the landscape seemed to perfectly capture the contrasts between Claire and Angie's worlds. Once producer Lyn Norfor, Bonnie and I started scouting and recruiting down that way, we experienced such a surge of goodwill and excitement for the project. Local crew members brought invaluable local knowledge – tidal patterns, surf conditions, hidden location gems! We also cast all the supporting roles out of Geelong – there's a great pool of talent down that way.*

**Q. What does it mean to you to have your feature film debut world premiere at MIFF through the Premiere Fund? And can you tell us a little more about your connection to the festival as a MIFF Accelerator Lab alumnus?**

*It's wonderful! I've been going to MIFF for so many years, first as a young actor and cinephile with stars in my eyes, then as an emerging filmmaker with my shorts. Being invited to be part of the Accelerator Lab was invaluable, it can be a lonely business being a writer-director so these opportunities that connect you with peers and mentors are so important. To have my debut feature opening at MIFF is really a dream come true after so many years of hard work.*