

# TER in Conversation with Chiara D'Anna – the star of the Duke of Burgundy



Last week, box office records were shattered with the release of the turgid *Fifty Shades of Grey* – a nonsensical cinematic depiction of dominance within sexual relationships. Just a week later, there is a film with just as much of a nonsensical approach to sexual dominance. The difference? This one's *really* bloody good.

The latest work from director Peter Strickland, *The Duke of Burgundy* follows a lepidopterist (*a professional butterfly collector*) and her submissive partner living together in a Gothic European manor, as they discover the limits of their own relationships. It's both beautiful and bizarre – an absolute feast for the eyes and slick in its humour and scriptural style.

Ahead of its release in the United Kingdom, we spoke to the wonderfully intelligent **Chiara D'Anna**. Having previously starred in Strickland's sublime *Berberian Sound Studio*, this is her cinematic followup. She plays Evelyn – a woman always living under the foot and stringent hand of her partner. Her character is delicate, polite and everything her partner fails to be. A talented actress on both stage and screen, she discussed her time on the hypnotising set of **The Duke of Burgundy**.

**You've worked with Peter Strickland before on *Berberian Sound Studio* – did you have to audition this time around?**

No. I didn't have an audition. Peter asked me if I was interested in working with him on his new project quite soon after the shooting of *Berberian Sound Studio*. At that point

there wasn't a script yet just an idea that he had discussed with Andy Starke from Rook Films. I was pretty flattered. I guessed I had the right look for what he had in mind and probably my foreign accent played an important role too!

**The film has this beautiful mystique surrounding it. Before I saw it, I had no idea about the plot but was overcome by the film's beauty, humour and intelligence. What was the process of filming like, and where was it shot?**

The film was shot in Hungary- mostly Budapest. We spent just a few days outside the city for the outdoor scenes. The beauty of the locations and the superb work of the Art Department created a space that was indeed extremely inspiring for me. The beauty and sensual quality of the film is the result of the uncompromised attention to details that everyone put into it. Set, costumes and the outstanding work by Nick Knowland on camera provided the luxurious and rich texture that –I believe- is the strength of this film. Enhanced by Cat's Eyes ethereal and hypnotic soundtrack.

For me the process of filming was an exercise in trust. I felt that I just needed to let others to guide me...by listening (in the wide-sense: not only listen to their words!). Peter, Nick and Sidse are incredibly talented and I just had to follow...a bit like allowing an expert dancer to lead you in the dance.

I have to say that the script already provided all I needed to know to build my character and her world: the atmospheres and moods...the tone –if you wish- of the film came out straight from Peter's writing. When I arrived on set everything was exactly as I had imagined it.

**Could you describe the film in three words?**

Hypnotic, Sensual and Ironic

**Films about sexual deviancy have become a lot more prevalent nowadays, and Strickland has managed to have crafted something altogether a lot more unique. As an actress, did you have any**

### **doubts before starting on the film?**

No. I didn't have any doubts. I trusted Peter and knew it would have been something unique and beautiful like Berberian Sound Studio.

Also I don't think The Duke of Burgundy can be labelled: it's not erotica, it's not drama...it's a film by Peter Strickland! I love that! And for me this film isn't about sadomasochism, it's about a couple's inability to meet each other's needs. The S&M choice –for me – is only a clever way to put under a 'magnified lens' something that we all experience in relationship: power games and manipulation.

Love can be interpreted and expressed in so many different ways and nobody can judge what is right or what is wrong. What we can ask ourselves however is: how far can we go to accommodate our lover's needs? We certainly don't want to hurt or change a person we really love. But can we compromise ourselves to the point of sacrificing our own needs? Maybe for someone this IS love; for others might be self-sacrifice; for others pure madness...

**You've got a huge amount of stage acting experience – is there a notable difference between cinema and stage in terms of performance? Do you like having the opportunity to try things more than once?**

I mainly work in devised and ensemble theatre. A huge amount of time is spent in rehearsal with the cast and the production team figuring out things and finding out new things all the time- even on stage during the actual performance. I feel you are never alone throughout the whole process.

In film it's still an ensemble work but of a completely different kind. It's very compartmentalised. As actor you're not greatly involved in pre or postproduction. You don't even meet all the people involved in the making of the film! Before the shooting begins you work alone for months on your character. There is no rehearsal and no much time to

experiment with many different ideas. Each take has to be exactly like the previous one for continuity. This is very technical. Theatre feels more organic: the pace, the physical actions, the interactions between performers and with the audience is different every night.

In theatre you serve your audience, in cinema you serve the camera. Your character won't naturally move at a certain speed in real life; she won't sit in a certain way, etc...there is a lot of 'cheating' for the camera. Not to mention 'to hit the mark' (the tape on the floor indicating where you are supposed to stop, turn, stand etc..). I found it extremely technical and artificial.

In theatre the piece unfolds organically from the beginning till the end. It's a 'complete' journey. In cinema the shooting is not chronological. The performance is very fragmented and repetitive (scene by scene with different takes). In theatre you have an immediate response from the audience while you are performing. In cinema you have to wait for at least a year before seeing the results of your work and get some feedback.

Paradoxically in cinema everything seems more 'realistic' - from an audience perspective- while from an actor perspective I found cinema far more artificial than theatre.

Another paradox is that in cinema actors are given so much importance as if they were the most important part of the puzzle but I don't think they are considering the immense amount of people involved in pre and postproduction.

On the contrary theatre doesn't necessarily need anything else but the actors. You could have a performance just with an actor on stage. Cinema requires a lot of other people and expertise.

Regarding "trying things more than once": yes I like the idea. However in this film we didn't have much time (4 weeks) to do so. I regret I couldn't experiment a bit more because I often

had an idea just a minute too late and I had to surrender to the cruel 'law of continuity'!

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**The Duke of Burgundy opens at Filmhouse, Lothian Road on 20 February 2015.**