

## **BASQUE.**

### **1 X 01. ESTIBALIZ URRESOLA: THE POWER OF UNCOMFORTABLE CINEMA**

OIER (OFF): Over recent years, many Basque films have come close to winning an Oscar, and the figures behind these success stories have several things in common: they are women, they practice committed, responsible filmmaking, and they make socially-engaged films. The film director we will be getting to know in this episode is a shining example of this generation.

OIER (OFF): She lives in the Ereñozu, close to the city of Donostia-San Sebastián, in the Basque province of Gipuzkoa.

OIER (OFF): She made her first fictional feature film in 2023. And much to her surprise, it was selected for the official competition at the Berlinale.

OIER (OFF): And as if that wasn't enough, it didn't come away empty-handed, with Sofia Otero winning the Silver Bear for the best performance.

OIER (OFF): Today, in 'BASQUE.': the film director Esti Urresola.

ESTI: Every project feels like balancing on the edge of a precipice. That's just the way it is and acknowledging it makes me feel better. To a certain extent, it takes the pressure off. But a film isn't something you make; it's a place you experience. So when you finish a film, it's not easy to leave that place, and it doesn't happen overnight either. As I often say: it's been under my skin for five years. Everything I read, everyone I meet, every interview or conversation I have is passed through the filter of the film. Through my skin. And everything becomes useful, valuable, you know? Significant.

OIER (OFF): My name is Oier Aranzabal and this is Basque, a podcast by the Etxepare Basque Institute that offers a glimpse into the contemporary Basque culture and creativity, in each episode we will visit the home or the workplace of the people who create and shape our culture, we seat down and talk with them about their creative inspirations and ideas.

OIER: I thought we could do a little exercise and go back to your childhood. Where would that journey take us? What memories do you have? What sounds, smells, places do you remember?

ESTI: Well, talking about the sounds that going back to my childhood brings to mind - I'd say that my house when I was a child was always full of noise and movement. I'm one of 6 siblings and there were always many different layers of sound going on in our house. The first layer was your own drama of course, but there were always undertones of what was going on with all your brothers and sisters too. So there was always something happening. I used to really enjoy those rare moments of silence; I would seek out a bit of solitude. It wasn't easy, as it was a small house and there were a lot of us.

ESTI: Perhaps that's why I love solitude so much. And silence, you know? It's something I value a lot in my life. I don't have much of it at the moment, but it has been something I've worked hard to achieve in my adult life. About colours... I've always had a very close relationship with nature. My parents often took us walking in the mountains at weekends, we were born in a valley, so we didn't have to go far. There were some amazing rivers within walking distance of the town, and I always loved riding my bicycle. Maybe that was why I spent a lot of my time hanging out with boys. I loved sport, riding my bike, being in nature, outdoor activities. And for many years that resulted in me spending a lot of time in the company of boys. That sort of environment was always more interesting to me.

ESTI: And if I had to choose a smell from my childhood, I'd say the smell of chlorine perhaps. I was a swimmer. For many, many years I'd go to the pool every day before school.

OIER: You say you love silence and being by yourself. Where do you find silence nowadays?

ESTI: It's not easy at the moment. I'm at a very noisy moment in my life, not only metaphorically but physically and literally too. I don't get much time to rest. I usually find silence at the cinema or watching a film or reading a book. But I don't have much time for that at the moment. What I try to do is go out for a walk in the mountains whenever I come home. And that's where I find the silence I love so much. Even if it's only a half an hour walk, I find it very restorative.

OIER (OFF): We started out by talking about memories. But we don't have to delve too deep to find Esti Urresola's first encounter with the world of cinema.

ESTI: We had a lot of VHS videos at home. But I'd say my very first contact with moving images was perhaps when we used to watch cartoons. I remember feeling, from a very young age, a powerful urge to tell stories. I'd write tales and illustrate them too. I love drawing and it was something I spent a huge amount of time doing as a child. I always used to draw pictures for the stories I wrote. But I wouldn't say that was linked at the time to the world of cinema. The urge to tell stories came first.

OIER: What cartoons did you watch?

ESTI: I guess the same ones as everyone else in my generation. Dragon Ball Z, Heidi...

OIER (OFF): Moving on. Life is full of decisions. One day, Esti Urresola decided to quit her job and go off to Barcelona to study filmmaking.

ESTI: Yes. You often arrive at a crossroads in your life. There's nothing you can do about it. In my case, some important things were happening in my personal life at the time. For example, my father died in 2009, and the inner earthquake provoked by his passing led to a process of reflection that in turn led to my decision in 2011 to follow my dream. I'd just broken up with my partner too and I thought: 'I have to put myself first now. There's no one else. I have to be on my own side, I have to focus on me.' And I thought, why not? Why not follow that inner urge and see what happens?

OIER (OFF): In her film 'Cuerdas', Esti Urresola explored a number of social issues, including pollution and its effects on workers' health, on families. In contrast, in the film '20.000 Species of Bees', she focuses on how transphobia is present at all levels of society.

ESTI: I feel drawn to those who trigger all these processes of reflection within me. I find them interesting. So, I got to know this person and they introduced me to some others, and I started to research the issue. And before long I was well and truly caught up in that spider web.

OIER: No way out, right?

ESTI: Right. I couldn't get all those stories out of my head and I think it's important to denounce certain things. Because I think that's the power of cinema, right? It has the power to change society and render situations or people who are usually invisible visible.

OIER: Art is politics, or else it isn't art.

ESTI: Life is politics. I mean, everything we do, every decision we make, has an impact. Because at the end of the day, politics is about the conditions under which we live, or at least it should be. It should strive to manage those conditions. Through action. So that you have the power to determine the conditions of your own life. This is something we've all heard time and time again. Private issues are political too, because you can't really distinguish between them. So, art is a political act. Even if your goal is not political. Even art designed purely for entertainment is political.

OIER: Let me rephrase: art is uncomfortable, or else it isn't art.

ESTI: That opens up a whole new ontological debate. But the type of art I enjoy most, or need most, and would ideally like to make, is precisely that kind of art. The kind of art that provokes unease, that makes us squirm in our seats, that makes us think. The kind of art I love is the kind that helps us get to know ourselves better, get to know humanity better, find a way of living together.

ESTI: It's like what happened in my family. They got to know the world of cinema and its industry because I make films. And it can happen to anyone. It's surprising to learn how many people are needed to make a film. Take scriptwriting, for example. It's a very painful process because you have to embrace the unease while you are writing and because, especially in the first film you make, people often question you. With your first film you have no idea. I mean, when you write the script, you also have to start the laboratory process, or you have to start applying it, because the dossiers have to be applied, and you have to start materialising your film somehow, explaining it, finding references, thinking about the budget - and all while writing the script. You also have to start finding the money, because applying for grants often seems simple, just a case of raising your hand and saying 'yes please, I'd like one'. But it's not simple at all to get funding in the first place, or to justify it once you have it. It's a huge amount of work. You have to specify exactly where you've invested every cent. With one thing and another, a film can take 5 years to make.

OIER (OFF): And then it got to the Berlinale. Your first feature: praise, awards...

ESTI: It was amazing; scary too, because we had a short time in which to finish the film. No time for a holiday. But it was a fantastic experience. It was all very solemn. Not just the screening, but the press conference too. And what happened there, when everyone stood up... The press conference was held a day before the première. So the press were the first to see it, and they were our ultimate judge and jury. Because at the end of the day, the critical response you get at a festival has a major impact on the success of the film. So in we went, well, we were ushered in from a corridor, we came out onto the stage and all of a sudden the press started clapping. I still get goose bumps thinking about it.

OIER: I can see.

ESTI: We started exchanging looks. I remember I was sitting next to Patricia Lopez Arnaiz and we looked at each other. We both had tears in our eyes. Neither of us wanted to start crying just at that moment, we never should have looked at one another... But something just clicked. The

press conference was a very moving experience. And then the screening as well. It was amazing. That 10-minute ovation that we received at the end of the film is something I will carry with me, deep inside, my whole life.

OIER: Very powerful, right?

ESTI: Incredibly. And being able to share it with the whole team. It was a really special moment. And Sofia's award.

OIER: You mentioned spider webs earlier. With 'Cuerdas', you got tangled up in one of them. And then the same thing happened with '20,000 Species of Bees'. I'm guessing you're already caught up in another one now.

ESTI: I remember someone once asked Vigalondo, the Spanish director, the same question, and he said: "A film isn't something you make! A film is a place you experience. So, when you finish a film, it's not easy to leave that place, and it doesn't happen overnight either". As I often say, it's been under my skin for five years. Everything I read, everyone I meet, every interview or conversation I have is passed through the filter of the film. Through my skin. And everything becomes useful, valuable, you know? Significant. So, the film's been under my skin for five years and now I have to shed that skin. And that takes time. Especially now, because I'm constantly talking about the film, and films in general, and helping to promote it at festivals. So, the process hasn't really started yet.

OIER: You mentioned that going to the Berlinale felt like being on the edge of a precipice. But a second film is also like walking up to the edge, isn't it? So much success - because the film was a resounding success. Selected for the official competition at the Berlinale, then a 10 minute ovation, awards. It's often said that a second film or a second album is the hardest.

ESTI: Yes. And it's true - it really takes you to the edge. But to tell the truth, and in an attempt to be honest with myself, which is something I've been trying to do lately, no matter what project I'm involved in, I always feel like I'm on the edge of a precipice. That's just the way it is and acknowledging it makes me feel better. To a certain extent it takes the pressure off. I often remember something I once said to a friend from Laudio: the first film I made was a fictional short, then I did a bit of a hybrid, because although there was a script, with 'Nor Nori Nork' I worked with children and non-professional actors. Then suddenly I started with my first feature film, and a documentary to boot. I'd never made a documentary before. And it was for television. Then I made a video clip. In all those projects it felt like I was doing everything for the first time,

and it always felt like balancing on the edge of a precipice, a question of life or death. So, I think that's just...

OIER: But some processes must be easier now. I mean, people know who you are now. That must open some doors.

ESTI: Maybe. But other difficulties are bound to crop up, because they always do. I mean, once you've had a child, having a second one isn't necessarily going to be any easier. It's totally different. Each one has their own needs and their own experiences. I don't know; that's how I've always felt anyway. That's been my experience. But it's true that it helped to think, ok, when the next precipice arrives, it'll be scary, but the image of a precipice can also be transformational, right? You have to launch yourself into the unknown and get to know it. And that's a sign of growth or development.

OIER: To round off the interview, I'm going to ask Esti Urresola a very simple question. What concerns you at this moment in time?

ESTI: It concerns me to see how our society is becoming increasingly intolerant. We seem to be fostering anger and rage. I'm not sure to what extent, I feel the transformational power of art. But then I look at where the world is heading, and I wonder whether the power of art will be enough. We also need the power of governance and politics. So, I don't know. But it worries me. I think that, following the pandemic, we've all isolated ourselves much more and social movements have lost momentum. Our perception of our problems is wrong. We tend to think that our problems are individual ones, but I'm sure all of us here have more or less the same ones. So, we need to work together to find a systemic solution. But since we've been tricked into believing in the mirage of individualism...

ESTI: They've deactivated us. They've deactivated the only capacity we have to fight against it. I'm also concerned about the health of our world and nature.

ESTI: I want to think there is something we can do about that, right? Something we can achieve. But I think that we are at a crucial moment in our history. Things will go either one way or another on the geopolitical stage, and it's scary, because many of us feel powerless, we don't know what to do.

OIER: Make films.

ESTI: For example. Films that change our life, as far as possible, of course. But as we said earlier, politics is a private affair also. So, we need to start bringing about the change we want to see in our private sphere, in our immediate environment.

OIER: Esti, thanks for the interview

ESTI: No, thank you.

BASQUE. is a podcast produced by Ulu Media for the Etxepare Basque Institute.

Oier Aranzabal is the director and sound designer. Translations by Diana Draper. Voice over by Diana Lindsay. Cristina Tapia Huici is the producer. If you like BASQUE., please share and follow us wherever you get to your podcasts. You can also explore more stories about the basque culture and creativity on our websites, at [basqueculture.eus](http://basqueculture.eus) and [etxepare.eus](http://etxepare.eus).

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