

BASQUE.

1 X 05. ITZIAR ITUÑO: BEYOND ‘MONEY HEIST’

OFF: We’re near Bilbao, in one of Basauri’s working class neighbourhoods. The microphone picks up the sound of building work, and near the entrance to a bar, some women are having a drink.

OFF: We’re here because this is where our guest today lives. And our guest is none other than the best-known Basque actor in the world.

ITUÑO: All art, cinema, theatre, photography, music, painting, everything has always been... They have always been precursors—precursors to change. Why do I like it? What prompts me to tell stories? What am I hoping to achieve? Change in society, in people.

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. Today, in Basque: Itziar Ituño.

Cut: ‘Money Heist’

OIER: Itziar!

ITUÑO: You got here before me!

OIER: I’ve been chatting to some of your neighbours.

ITUÑO: Really? Oh dear.

OIER: They said: she’ll be late...

ITUÑO: Only a little! Honestly!

OIER: Ha, ha, ha.

ITUÑO: I got a phone call... I’ll just throw this in the bin. What do you want to do?

OIER: Let’s go back to your place for a moment and don’t worry, don’t worry.

OFF: Itziar Ituño was well-known as an actor in the Basque Country, but then ‘Money Heist’ happened...

ITUÑO: It was a springboard. ‘Money Heist’ I mean. I was over 40 and you don’t think anything like that will happen in your lifetime. It’s like... Well, I’m comfortable here doing theatre in the Basque Country, making films in Basque. I’m happy. And then all of a sudden, the opportunity presented itself to go to that casting session. In Madrid. It was a bit of an effort. All the way to Madrid. And it was for a TV show too, so you can imagine. If I got cast, I’d have to go there for ages. Ugh!

ITUÑO: But they rang me and I didn’t want to be rude, so I went. I thought, I’ll just do the casting and there’ll probably be loads of other people they can choose from. So, I was very calm, because I didn’t really want to get chosen. And then, at the end, they chose me. And I got a right fright.

ITUÑO: It was going to turn my life upside down, so I asked for some time to think about it. Then they sent the first episode, and I read it. It was really well written. It got me hooked right away. But what was I going to do in Madrid? What am I doing changing my life at my age? Going to Madrid? I knew it would change everything, but I wasn’t sure if it would be for better or worse. In the end I accepted the role. We made the show, and it premièred on Spanish television. It had its moment in the sun and that was it. And you think, ok, that’s it. This chapter of my life is over. But no. They sold the show to Netflix and it became an international hit.

CUT

ITUÑO: I only have one Instagram account, and I only used to open it to upload photos. I like taking photos and I also like looking at other people’s photos. That was all. There was no chat, it was very simple, and it was the only social media platform I was on. And then it was like being hit by a tidal wave. I think that when the show was being broadcast on Antena 3, I had around 1,000 followers and even that seemed like a huge number! What could I possibly have to say to all those people? And then one day, I looked and wow! Suddenly there were 1,000 more. And after another hour, another 1,000, and then another. Thousands and thousands. Just three days later, I had over 3,000,000 followers. We got in touch with each other. What on earth is happening? And Ursula said: could someone please tell me why I suddenly have 200,000 comments under my photo? What’s going on? The cast has a WhatsApp group and people started writing. This is mad! What’s going on? The director and scriptwriters are in the group too, and they explained it. Apparently, the show had aired on Netflix and had been a real hit. And given the show’s success, Netflix decided to commission a third season, so they hired us. I thought it would just be for a little while, but in the end, I spent about five years away from my home. It was madness. It was a real experience, a real eye-opener.

OFF: At the beginning of the episode, we heard something that provides real insight into who exactly Itziar Ituño is. She lives in the neighbourhood where she grew up, surrounded by the people she grew up with, with friends. And despite her fame, she’s still there.

ITUÑO: Well here, in the Kalero neighbourhood. I've spent my whole life here. This is where I went to school, to the doctor's, everything. We used to go hiking up to Kurrustu, or Malmasin a little further back. And that's where we used to go out and party too. There's our local bakery, local shops, local bar and all our neighbours. This is where I grew up, in this fairly Spanish-speaking neighbourhood.

ITUÑO: There's a smell that's etched into my memory. It's not a good smell. Just behind this building is an old factory called 'Altos Hornos'. Every so often, I'm not sure how often, it used to let off this awful black smoke. We'd always know when because of the smell. It's hard to describe - it was a bit like burnt iron, like pollution. It was a classic smell of that period. I'd sometimes open a window and realise that the factory had already started churning out smoke ... and I also remember the smell of wet grass when it rained. And the sound, factory siren, I don't know how it is in Basque.

OIER: The bell.

ITUÑO: We could hear that clearly. And the bell that told us it was time to go to school could also be heard from my parents' house, along with the sound of kids playing in the street. I remember coming home from school and doing my homework, then mum would make me a sandwich. And I could hear that some of the other kids were already out playing and I couldn't wait to finish so I could go down too.

OIER: Did you already know back then that you wanted to be an actor?

ITUÑO: Um... Goodness... That's a good question! I'm not sure when I realised but I always liked acting and dressing up ... and playing... 'Let's act the TV show Un, Dos, Tres! Together'. And I'd always say, 'I'm a dancer!' I always loved dancing and being in the thick of things. But I was always really shy too. I had no confidence. I was super shy. It was a real contradiction. In my dreams I would often see myself making a film, mounted on the back of a horse. Or in Star Wars. I thought Princess Leia was the bee's knees! She was my heroine! So yes, I would imagine myself doing that. And once, in class, I just came out with it. The teacher asked: 'what about you, Itziar?' What do you want to be when you grow up? And I said: 'an actor'. And the whole class burst out laughing. I went bright red. How on earth are you ever going to be an actor when you blush so much? And I just sat there, bright red. I still see them sometimes here in the neighbourhood...

OIER: What, that same person?

ITUÑO: I've often said to them, remember what you said to me? How you said I was crazy to want to be an actor: 'ha ha ha! You? An actor?'. It's amazing how people change.

OIER: How has becoming famous changed you?

ITUÑO: I've always tried hard not to change too much, but I probably have. I think I may be less trusting now, less than before at least. I never used to judge or analyse anyone. I never stopped to wonder... I don't know... What kind of person they were, you know? I just got to know them and then formed an opinion. And now...

OIER: You're more careful.

ITUÑO: Yes, my defences are activated earlier. Because I've met some really great people, and some total nut jobs too!

OFF: Itziar has her feet firmly on the ground and her roots run deep. Even though she has thousands of followers on social media she still posts in Basque and continues to participate in a number of different projects here in the Basque Country.

OIER: Many people in your broad-ranging and diverse fan base will probably only have heard about the Basque Country thanks to you.

ITUÑO: Yes, and many have come to visit as well. Let me give you an example: 'Franzi' is a German guy from Frankfurt. He's learning Basque and is totally in love with the Basque Country. He always says: 'This is my place!' In Argentina too there are some Basque enthusiasts who went and put their name down at a Basque Cultural Centre because they wanted to learn Basque. And since then, they've been in contact with me, in Basque!

ITUÑO: Things like that are great. There's an Indian girl called Banshika who always writes to me in Basque. And she's really good too! It's amazing how young people pick up languages! It's just amazing.

OIER: What can cinema offer a cultural community? A collective identity? A country?

ITUÑO: Cinema? Audiovisual production? Emotional shake up! Because stories that move us, hard-hitting stories, when they move us, something changes inside, and this often spurs us into action. So, it can be a really powerful tool for changing people's awareness. For making people think and feel... And for making them laugh too, because everyone needs a good laugh. It's a powerful tool, and they know it. So, depending on what story you want to tell, and what perspective you want to tell it from... The road will be smoother or rougher and full of obstacles.

OIER: When I was chatting to Esti Urresola, two things came up. The first: art must be political or else it isn't art. But then we turned it around and said: Art must be unsettling, it must be uncomfortable, or else it isn't art.

ITUÑO: Umm... There are lots of kinds of art. Some art is just meant to help you pass the time. But the kind of art that inspires me is the kind that unsettles you. The kind that generates unease

or the kind that moves you. And usually, that kind of art is full of love. You know? Like when we want to change something for everyone's good. Well, if that isn't love I don't know what it is.

OIER: You've travelled all around the world? Is Basque cinema, something people know about outside the Basque Country?

ITUÑO: Not really, to tell you the truth. Not really. Some people have started to discover it, but not many. Some of my followers, for example, have started to discover some of the things I've done. And have then started to explore a bit more. They find some publication or some song or something; maybe an Italian discovers something and says 'wow, that's amazing. I love Zetak!'. Or 'Zea Mays is fantastic!'

OIER: Or Fermin Muguruza.

ITUÑO: Or Fermin Muguruza! Well, he's actually quite well-known outside the Basque Country, more than me and for longer! But yes. I've met some people in some parts of the world who know an awful lot about cinema. 'I saw Loreak (Flowers) and thought it was incredible! What a film!' And Handia (Giant) too. But we still have a long way to go.

ITUÑO: Maybe one day we'll get there ... I don't know what exactly it is that we need... You know, to really get things going. And here we are today, because of an amazing production. And the whole world was like: Who are these guys? Wow! They're Basques! What's a Basque? Are they like the Irish? Or the Scots? I don't know. Sort of like the Sioux but in Europe. We still have a long way to go.

OIER: It will come.

ITUÑO: I hope so!

OIER: Thank you, Itziar

ITUÑO: My pleasure.

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 and etxepare.eus.

Thanks for listening. Until the next episode!