

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2012

Alexandra Dahlström (Rodeo, 2006)

I managed to persuade Rodeo to send me to Rome where I hung out with my friend Alexandra for a few days. Alexandra is the world's most promising interview subject. All the quotes in this text are correct, coherent quotes that I just transcribed. Today Alexandra is back in Stockholm (for the most part) and directs films.

- You know, that's why I moved here, because everyone here is so short. Even the men are shorter than me, it's crazy.

Alexandra Dahlström and I are the only guests left at a restaurant in Balduina, Rome – except for an upset old woman and a sleepy man sitting and eating dinner at the next table. The old woman is upset because a relative of hers, a girl of fifteen, won't stop growing. "She's a monster! She is almost as tall as you are!" She mutters to a man who is about 153 centimeters tall. Alexandra (154 centimeters) eavesdrops and translates while I nibble on my newfound swordfish. Her day has been something like this: She has been dashing around among the film company offices and coffee bars, dialogue coaches and fruit markets, talking to people and observing things. I have followed suit, listening and eating non-stop.

After a year in Rome, Alexandra's love for the city has no limits.

- I can tell you what I first noticed in Rome. The street lights. They are very shimmering, golden and beautiful here. In Stockholm, they are white. I like the air here too, there is lots of air in Rome. In Sweden, we are farmers, we like to look at the earth, because that is what feeds us. Here people look at the sky more.

I do not feel like talking as much as Alexandra. She has been one of my dearest friends ever since she played a small supporting role in a theater set that was my special assignment in high school. (The play, *Skelettmusik*, was written by one of Hungary's most well-known writers who unfortunately also happens to be my father.) I met Alexandra for the first time in **Riche** a few weeks before the premiere of *Skelettmusik*. A minute after we introduced ourselves, she forced me to have an expensive drink with her. Three minutes later she was in the play, the rest of the evening she went around and introduced me as the "Hungarian director." The day after, to my surprise, she showed up at rehearsal.

This was the summer of 2004, when she had just filmed her latest feature film, *Miss Sweden*, and emerged from what she refers to as her "life crisis." Later, Alexandra got into quite a lot of trouble when she openly declared that *Miss Sweden* is the world's worst film.

- I probably shouldn't talk much about that. But when I see the movie today, I am filled with pride. I really made the most of the script. I am extremely glad I did *Miss Sweden*. The period before filming was depressing, eighteen was a horrible age. It felt so tough to be an adult, I had always been that pure teenager. I was sitting at home and crying to *Deep Cuts* when a casting agent called and asked me to audition for *Miss Sweden*.

When I met you, you were always happy and went out and partied all the time.

- Yes, well, it took a few years of vagrancy so I could end up here. Where I come from most people choose to read bad ABF courses and go on embarrassing trips to Asia before letting seriousness begin. I clubbed instead. In the end, I decided that I had to follow my heart, and it simply did not want to be at Riche.

How did you know your heart wanted to be in Rome?

- It started when I was seventeen and my parents went on a honeymoon to Terracina. By then I had already studied Latin, French and Spanish. You could barely get a "ciao" out of me in Italian. After two weeks, I spoke nearly fluent Italian. That same autumn my Latin class had gone to Rome. I had just made my French short film (*La Carpe*) and felt that my future was in either Paris or Rome.
- Then when I was 18, I came here all by myself. The first thing I did was go to the Silvio d'Amico, theater school. It is a large, strange house with marble stairs and bored little receptionist with large blow-dried hair. They hadn't even let me in but I got to meet the director of studies directly. It was the first time I said "I'm an actress" to anyone. I stood there, in the midst of the world's most beautiful, most frenzied and magnificent city and it just felt right. Then I was pleasantly surprised when it turned out that the director of studies has seen *Show Me Love*.

Another person who has seen the wayward love story that gave Alexandra an acting career at the age of fourteen is Rome-based director **Massimo Guglielmi**. He was overjoyed when he ran into Alexandra earlier this year, during a casting for a Russian-Italian co-production.

- It was a very emotional meeting for me, says Massimo when we visit his office a few blocks from Alexandra's residence. I had seen *Show Me Love* several times and really loved Alexandra and the other girl. Before I met Alexandra, I was very curious to see how she has changed since the movie. It was nice to see she hasn't changed at all.

She didn't?

- No, not in appearance, anyway.

Massimo's upcoming film *Seven & Seven* is about seven women in different European capitals, each representing one of the seven deadly sins. The women have one thing in common – that their lives are somehow going in the wrong direction – ending up at the wrong place at the wrong time: the London Underground on July 7, 2005. The same day of the London bombings. Alexandra plays a Swedish woman with the sloth sin.

- I contacted her before we even started writing the different stories, says Massimo. The role was written specifically for her. In the beginning, her mortal sin was greed, I thought it felt typically Swedish. But she did not like the story so we had to redo everything.
- Massimo is in Rome grieving for my cultural upbringing, says Alexandra. He lends me a lot of **Gabriele Muccino** movies and books by Czech writers I never bothered to read, but I am polite enough to take them home with me anyway. We talk a lot with each other too. He really tries to warp every story I tell, so it becomes an **Ibsen** or **Bergman** adaptation. I'm Scandinavian.

Alexandra has managed to accomplish a lot this year in Rome. She has filmed her first Italian film, *La Coda Del Serpenei* about two couples who deceive one another over and over until they die. Her Italian agent has sent her to a handful of auditions for everything from commercials for the chocolate brand **Tronky** and **RAI** sitcoms, to

feature film projects with people like Vincent Gallo and *Lords of Dogtown* director Katherine Hardwicke. The roles Alexandra is offered in Italy are markedly different than those she gets in Sweden.

- I auditioned for a movie that is about kitesurfing, and the casting agent gave me a kind of backwards compliment: "If you are as talented as you are good looking, you should see that this is the way." At first I was pissed off, then I thought about that angry girl with black crap around her eyes that the Swedes still usually want me to play. Then I became happy instead. Here I audition for the role of the thoughtless, exotic foreigner. It's a very different variety.

I know you are a big fan of Vincent Gallo, how did the audition go?

- Well, I got the role. But now it seems that the production has stopped. It is not Vincent Gallo directing, but he will play one of the leads. It's a horror film about a group of young people who one by one get shot to death in an abandoned factory. I met Vincent Gallo at a dinner party with the whole cast and crew, but he didn't seem like me at all. He didn't actually seem like anyone there. He had on white tube socks with Fendi sandals, what the hell! It's always better not to meet people you admire, you become so disappointed when they just talk about blowjobs and SUVs.

With the hope of becoming cast for roles other than the exotic Scandinavian, Alexandra has recently started taking lessons with Marina Benedetto, a dialogue coach who in recent years has worked with a large number of foreign actors who want to try their luck in Italy. Every week Alexandra takes the Metro to Marina's apartment in Rome's Asian neighborhood, in between training her by mimicking recordings where Marina reads Stanislavsky quotes about the voice and the pronunciation of the actor. The goal is to completely eliminate Alexandra's Swedish accent from her Italian.

I get to attend a lesson which is more reminiscent of an aerobics class than anything else.

- Italian uses a lot of body language, so it's important to integrate the body while learning the language. Not having the body language is simply not Italian, says Marina after class.
- I have only had Alexandra for three weeks, so it's difficult to assess how long it will take to get rid of her accent. But I understand that she is hard-working and serious, it shows that she knows what she wants to do.

Still, it seems Marina is moderately hopeful about Alexandra's future in the Italian film industry.

- **Berlusconi** was completely uninterested in investing in film. Now the entire industry is wondering how the new government will invest. Currently, there are actually a handful of Italian films in its repertoire which are just as good as Hollywood blockbusters, but I think that's pure coincidence. Investment is consistently very low. It's incredibly difficult to find jobs for actresses who speak perfect Italian, and of course it's even more difficult for those who speak with an accent.

Alexandra seems almost a little fond of the idea of a long and hard road to Italian success.

- In Sweden, I never needed to make a single phone call, I got roles anyway. I won the Guldbagge award even though I didn't want to. My greatest asset in acting is that it's natural to me – characters come straight from the heart without passing through my brain along the way. It's probably thanks in particular to indifference. If you are struggling for 200 years and then get a small supporting role, it bursts out of you even though you may only have a small role.

- At the same time I secretly always envied the passion of those girls with henna-coloured hair, slamming doors and making dramatic scenes that they have obviously been born to become actresses, that they would rather throw themselves from the seventeenth floor than return to the ICA checkout. Now I'm in that club after all! Less henna-colour and suicidal thoughts though.

After dinner we walk all the way to the apartment Alexandra shares with an upscale Sicilian couple. On the walls of the living room the young couple hung portraits of **Mussolini** and Berlusconi. "They're a little fascist, but they are very kind," avers Alexandra. The apartment has a huge balcony, the view is so beautiful that you want to die. St. Peter's dome looming in the distance, and the entire city is lit up by streetlamps. They can really only be described as gold shimmer.

When will you come home then?

- Soon. I'll be filming a short film in Umeå this summer, *De missälskande*. It's about two people who are madly trying to get their relationship to work while becoming more and more unbearable. Think *Scenes from a Marriage*, but younger and in the North. I like the North.
- Right now I'm in the midst of a long and tender farewell from Sweden that I won't be finished for a long time. At the same time, it can be a pain in Stockholm with everyone coming to the **Spy Bar** and asking "how's it going?" It was partly that scene that I wanted to get away from. The main thing is that I finally realized what I want to do with my life. It has taken me nine years, but now I seriously understand it. I love to act.

POSTED BY KORNEL KOVACS AT 3:03PM

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