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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Itonje Guttormsen on Cinema, Doubt & Transformation

Monaco, 21.08.2026 [ENA]

Nearly two decades passed between Itonje Sømmer Guttormsen's first idea for Butterfly and its eventual completion, a long and often uncertain creative journey shaped by shifting circumstances, evolving perspectives, and the slow, patient unfolding of a single artistic vision over time.

"The details changed enormously, actors, locations, textures, conversations, but the emotional core survived almost untouched," she says. "The early versions of the film were more like sketches or abstract paintings. The characters existed as feelings, colors, and movements rather than concrete people." Some scenes, she adds, including the film's closing conversation, were already there in her earliest drafts.

What did shift, dramatically, was the scale around her. Guttormsen built her reputation working with unfamiliar faces, letting fiction emerge out of years spent observing real people and real places rather than the other way around.

Casting Renate Reinsve, one of Norwegian cinema's most recognizable exports since "The Worst Person in the World," initially gave her pause. "There was initially some hesitation about casting someone so recognizable, given my tendency to work with unfamiliar faces," Guttormsen says, "but those concerns quickly disappeared once we started exploring Lily together." Reinsve, she says, committed to the character's physical and emotional unraveling without resistance, "the pale appearance, damaged skin, altered hair, and overall deterioration were all things she approached with enthusiasm rather than resistance."

What mattered most to Guttormsen wasn't the deterioration itself but what sat underneath it. "What interested me most was revealing the vitality hidden underneath Lily's suffering, allowing the character to gradually rediscover a more youthful and hopeful self as the story progressed."

The worry that Reinsve's fame might eclipse the character never fully went away, even after production wrapped. "I worried that audiences would see Renate rather than Lily," Guttormsen admits. "However, once she and Helena were together in character, the fiction took over completely. They simply became Lily and Diana."

The concern still surfaces in conversations about the film, she says, but creatively it dissolved on set, where an unplanned dynamic took hold. "Real world status differences reinforced the fictional relationship," she says, describing how Reinsve's recognizability and her costar Helena's relative anonymity

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unintentionally mirrored the admiration, resentment, and longing written into Lily and Diana's sisterhood. "Instead of becoming a problem, it added authenticity to the sisters' relationship. It strengthened the emotional tension I had imagined between them and gave the film something that would have been impossible to fully design in advance."

Asked if she'd work with Reinsve again, Guttormsen doesn't hesitate, though she notes a complication specific to how she builds her films. "Characters often continue existing across different projects, so if she returned, it would most likely be as Lily again."

That commitment to character over career calculus runs through what Guttormsen calls her Lilith Method, a process she developed specifically as a rebellion against how most productions are run. "Conventional film production tends to prioritize speed, efficiency, and control," she says. "My experience has often been the opposite. I believe creativity requires time, intuition, vulnerability, and flexibility."

Protecting that approach on a production with the scale of "Butterfly" wasn't always possible. "Despite maintaining many elements of the method, the scale of the production sometimes pushed the process toward a pace that felt too intense," she says. The experience has already changed how she plans to work going forward. "In future projects I will likely seek smaller frameworks that allow for more space and slowness."

That patience extends back to how the film itself came together. Guttormsen spent three years in Gran Canaria, the setting eventually woven into the story, before she had anything resembling a finished script. What began as location scouting slowly turned into something with real stakes attached. "I never entered those relationships promising anyone a place in the film," she says. "Eventually the responsibility became very real because these were no longer subjects but people I cared about. That changes the ethical dimension of filmmaking."

The obligation didn't end with the shoot. "I felt obligated to show them the finished film, to ensure they felt respected, and to make sure they recognized themselves in a way that felt honest rather than exploitative." It was years into that process, long after the project began, that Guttormsen landed on the structure that gives the film its title. "The duality wasn't present in the earliest version of the project, but it emerged as I returned to the material years later," she says.

The film splits cleanly into two movements, "the first half behaves almost like a satirical mystery or crime story, building momentum and narrative expectations," while the second deliberately slows into something more observational, tracking healing as it actually happens rather than how cinema usually compresses it. "Healing unfolds gradually and often without clear resolutions," she says. "Once I recognized that division, I started thinking of the film as having two wings."

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Guttormsen is unapologetic about resisting tidy resolution, even as she acknowledges that instinct runs against the cultural current. "We live in a time where people increasingly seek certainty, quick conclusions, and simplified narratives," she says. "For me, art should do the opposite. It should invite people into complexity rather than reduce it." She doesn't see ambiguity as a failure to commit. "Ambiguity is not a weakness. It is one of cinema's greatest strengths."

Nor does she think a hopeful film, which "Butterfly" ultimately became, has to function as comfort or escape. "My previous work was much darker, and future projects may be darker still," she says. "What matters is honesty. If a film genuinely engages with reality rather than avoiding it, hope does not become escapism. It becomes another way of facing the world."

She's similarly optimistic, with the same careful hedging, about the film culture she's working within. Norwegian cinema, she says, has spent decades in the shadow of its Scandinavian neighbors, but that's beginning to shift.

"There is greater space for personal and unconventional voices," she says. "Many talented Norwegian filmmakers are emerging, including some who have not yet reached international attention. I think Norwegian cinema is currently experiencing a particularly creative period."

Bericht online lesen:

https://redaktionkeller.en-a.de/kunst_kultur_und_musik/itonje_guttormsen_on_cinema_doubt_transformati-on-94030/

Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:

V.i.S.d.P. und gem. § 6 MDStV: Soffi Popescu

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