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AFI Alum Unjoo Moon on Directing the New Helen Reddy Biopic I AM WOMAN

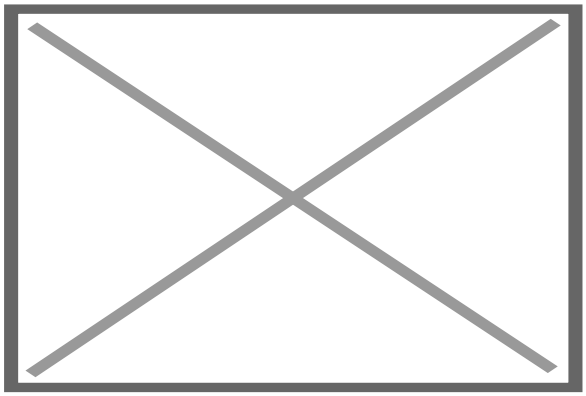
Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

It seems at every film festival, there is always the one that got away for a variety of sundry reasons. At AFI FEST 2019, that one film was I AM WOMAN. I fondly recalled in 1972, Mrs. Mary Newtonâ??s 7th Grade Class at Holy Angels Grade School in East St. Louis, having to not only listen to Helen Reddyâ??s feminist-leaning anthem of the same title but actually write about what the song meant! And probably just as memorable, my cousin, M Walsh Keeley, a burly and bearded redheaded Irishman, performed the song â??I Am Womanâ?• in karaoke at Hennesseyâ??s Pub located in the Soulard Neighborhood of St. Louis, Missouri to a raucous standing ovation! Without further ado, Iâ??m happy to share with you the AFI Interview with the filmmaker Unjoo Moon.

Premiering in the U.S. at AFI FEST in 2019, Unjoo Moonâ??s I AM WOMAN depicts the life of singer and feminist icon Helen Reddy who wrote and sang the song â??I Am Woman,â?• which became the anthem for the womenâ??s movement in the 1970s. The film marks the narrative feature directorial debut of Moon (AFI Class of 1998) whose previous credits include the feature documentary THE ZEN OF BENNETT and THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY, a PSA on gun violence which she collaborated on with spoken word artist In-Q. Moon was also the recipient of the prestigious Franklin J. Schaffner Directing Award during her time at the AFI Conservatory.

AFI spoke with her about her journey in developing I AM WOMAN, why she felt it was important to release the film in the current climate and what her experience was like as a Directing Fellow at the Conservatory.



AFI: How did you first become involved with the project and connect with screenwriter Emma Jensen?

Unjoo: I had just finished a documentary that Iâ??d made with Tony Bennett, and I had it in my mind that I was not going to do another music film. I attended the Gâ??Day Australia Ball â?? which is an annual event that celebrates Australia achievements in Los Angeles. I went to my table and I saw a woman sitting there. I thought â??I know who this woman is,â?• but I just couldnâ??t put my finger on it. When I realized it was Helen Reddy, I just remembered growing up on the Northshore of Sydney and the way her music had impacted my mother and her friends. I talked with Helen so I could understand and ask her how she felt about the impact sheâ??d had. By the end of our conversation, I was convinced her story was already a movie.

Later, I watched all her videos â?? from THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL, THE CAROL BURNETT SHOW, and THE HELEN REDDY SHOW to her concerts in Las Vegas. I couldnâ??t believe that no one had ever made a feature about her. I spent time with Helen to convince her that this could be a movie, and it was a year before I brought on a writer. It was hard to find someone when I already had a very clear vision for what the movie should be. In the end, I knew I needed someone who not only understood how to write a biopic â?? Emma had previously written 2017â??s MARY SHELLEY adaptation â?? but also was a great collaborator. I pitched Emma the story, read her material, and really felt like she was the right person to go on this journey with together.

AFI: How did you go about casting the lead role? What was it about Tilda Cobham-Hervey that you knew she was right for the part and had the capability to play Helen at various stages of her life?

Unjoo: As with any movie, thereâ??s always pressure to cast a star or someone who is marketable. I needed to know that the actor could fully embrace the role, but also that the person had some quality about them that would remind people of the real Helen Reddy. I started to realize casting a star in the role would mean that it wouldnâ??t be as easy for audiences to invest in the character, rather than just thinking of that person playing Helen Reddy.

Tilda wasnâ??t on any of the casting lists Iâ??d seen. I just happened to see a photo of her standing in the street, and her posture made me think of Helen. I found out she was Australian and that sheâ??d already had an amazing film career at her young age. I realized Tilda had a lot of qualities that she could draw on that would help her embrace this character. Helen grew up in a Vaudeville family and had a very unconventional life. So did Tilda â?? her mother was a ballet dancer, her dad was a theater

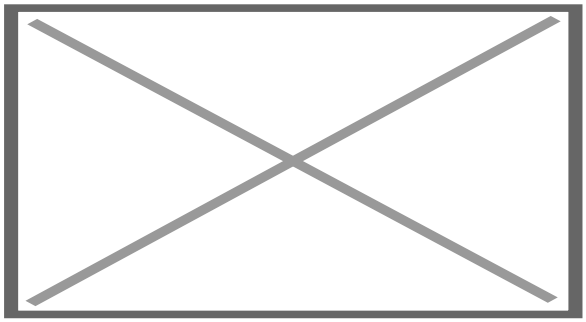
lighting director. Sheâ??d traveled all around the world â?? putting on shows from a young age â?? and she had just moved to the U.S. and was starting her American career at that stage. There were a lot of parallels.

Once Tilda was cast, we did aging tests to see if she could pull that off since she was 22 at the time. The makeup and clothes certainly helped, but so much of it is about her performance and the way youâ??re telling the story to get people invested in the characterâ??s emotional journey.

AFI: You shot most of the film in Sydney. Can you talk about the challenges you faced during a short production shoot to transform Sydney into New York City and LA and how you managed to create the specific time periods?

Unjoo: The whole movie was shot in Sydney except two and a half days that we shot in Los Angeles for exteriors. What really helped to create that authenticity was that Dion [I AM WOMAN cinematographer and Moonâ??s husband] and I have lived in America for so long now that we knew exactly what we were recreating. We know New York really well too, and I also went to the Womenâ??s March in D.C. I stood there and looked at all those people in the same place that Helen did at the Lincoln Memorial.

Our production designer, Michael Turner, actually has a background as an architect. We knew that in Sydney we didnâ??t have the budget to be rebuilding a lot of places. It just meant that a lot of the architectural choices we were making on location had to really reflect the cities we were replicating. I think between Michael, Dion, and I, we had a very clear idea of how each of those cities needed to look.



AFI: You use the Equal Rights Amendment as a significant backdrop throughout the film. With the 2020 election approaching in November, what do you hope viewers take away from the film?

Unjoo: That was a very important part of the message of this movie. We were all set to roll out this spring, but then, of course, the pandemic hit, and we had to shut down cinemas. Everybody kept waiting thinking that cinemas would reopen, and then it reached the stage where we thought â??ok, weâ??ll put the film out next year.â?• But I just felt really strongly that, considering the message of the movie and that itâ??s an uplifting story, we should release it now. I hope itâ??s a movie that inspires peoples, especially women, to want to make a change â?? maybe for themselves, or something bigger than themselves.

Right now, there are so many important decisions being made about the world and, especially with the upcoming election, I was really happy that all my distributors agreed that this was a film that should come out now. The movie was made for the big screen â?? we used these incredible 6K cameras that

were designed for creating beautiful images in a cinema â?? but if it meant people had to watch it safely at home, at least they get to see it in this moment.

AFI: What did you learn at AFI that you still carry with you in your career?

Unjoo: I had such a great two years at AFI, and that time was really dear in my life. I learned how to live and work in LA going to AFI. The way the program is structured, you just really learn to understand the city and the industry. When I was there, there was no handholding, and it was really about motivating yourself and relying on your instincts and what you need to do to make something. I found that incredibly invaluable because, moving to Los Angeles, I realized that you are the driver, you are the person creating your destiny. On a more specific scale, the storytelling exercises gave me the freedom to explore and really look for the kind of stories I wanted to tell. It allowed me the space to try different things and thatâ??s a real gift as a filmmaker.

I was so glad to screen I AM WOMAN at AFI FEST last year. I have such good memories at AFI and, the fact that I could celebrate the movie there, it was just so special. Helen has a big fan base of people who remember her so clearly, but thereâ??s a whole new generation who hasnâ??t heard of her. Iâ??m really glad not only that I was able to tell her story, and also tell what happened with the womenâ??s movement and the Equal Rights Amendment. I am excited that we were able to give Helen a legacy for her career.

I AM WOMAN is available to watch on VOD and in virtual theaters currently.

*From AFI News

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1. television

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