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"Us, Forever Ago"| A Discussion with Filmmaker Irina Varina

EBRUARY 19, 2019EBRUARY 20, 2019



"I was influenced by many myths and stories. Like that you have to be a genius to be an artist, that your work has to be great right away otherwise you're a failure, that you have to know what you're doing at all times, or that you're visited by some muse..."

My friend invited me to an intimate viewing of Irina Varina's [film \(http://usforeverago.com/\)](http://usforeverago.com/) because, I was told, the film was about artistic process. I knew nothing else before arriving that night. Irina introduced the film and a bit about herself and said 'every time I show this film the environment creates a new experience.' Let me set the stage; it was a windy night (so windy it sounded like the inter covers on the skylight windows would blow down, there was a fire crackling with a small dog laid in front of its blaze, and mulled wine on the stove. Nothing could be more inviting and warming, I thought, until the movie started. Irina's film captures the stories of womxn artists alongside her own artistic adventure.

t the risk of sounding too gushy, I won't go into too many details about the film (but you should [watch it \(http://usforeverago.com/trailer/\)](http://usforeverago.com/trailer/)!). The imagery alone is inspiring, let alone the interviews and storyline. In fact, when reflecting on Irina's work for this piece, WordPress wasn't working and I was filled with so much inspiration that I worked on my own art. I chatted with Irina after the film which was a trippy dialogue of her film, my interest, and our shared curiosity about the artistic process. Below you'll find my interview with Irina with questions relating specifically this one piece of work. If you're interested in learning more about Irina visit her [electronically \(http://www.irinavarina.com/\)](http://www.irinavarina.com/) or better yet, checking her out in a play showing for 1 more week in Brooklyn called [Medusa Volution: An Unbelievable True Story of Sex, Power and Monsters \(https://www.artful.ly/store/events/16466\)](https://www.artful.ly/store/events/16466).

. What got you interested in the artistic process?

I come from a family of engineers. We didn't have any artist friends or personal contact with that world. So my understanding of being an actor, artist, filmmaker, writer, etc. was influenced by many myths and stories. Like that you have to be a genius to be an artist, that your work has to be great right away otherwise you're a failure, that you have to know what you're doing at all times, or that you're visited by some muse once in a while to make that work and there is no routine everyday practice. Plus all the stuff about success, "making money with your art" and who gets to be viewed as legit artist.

One of it seemed to be very helpful in my later real world artistic life.

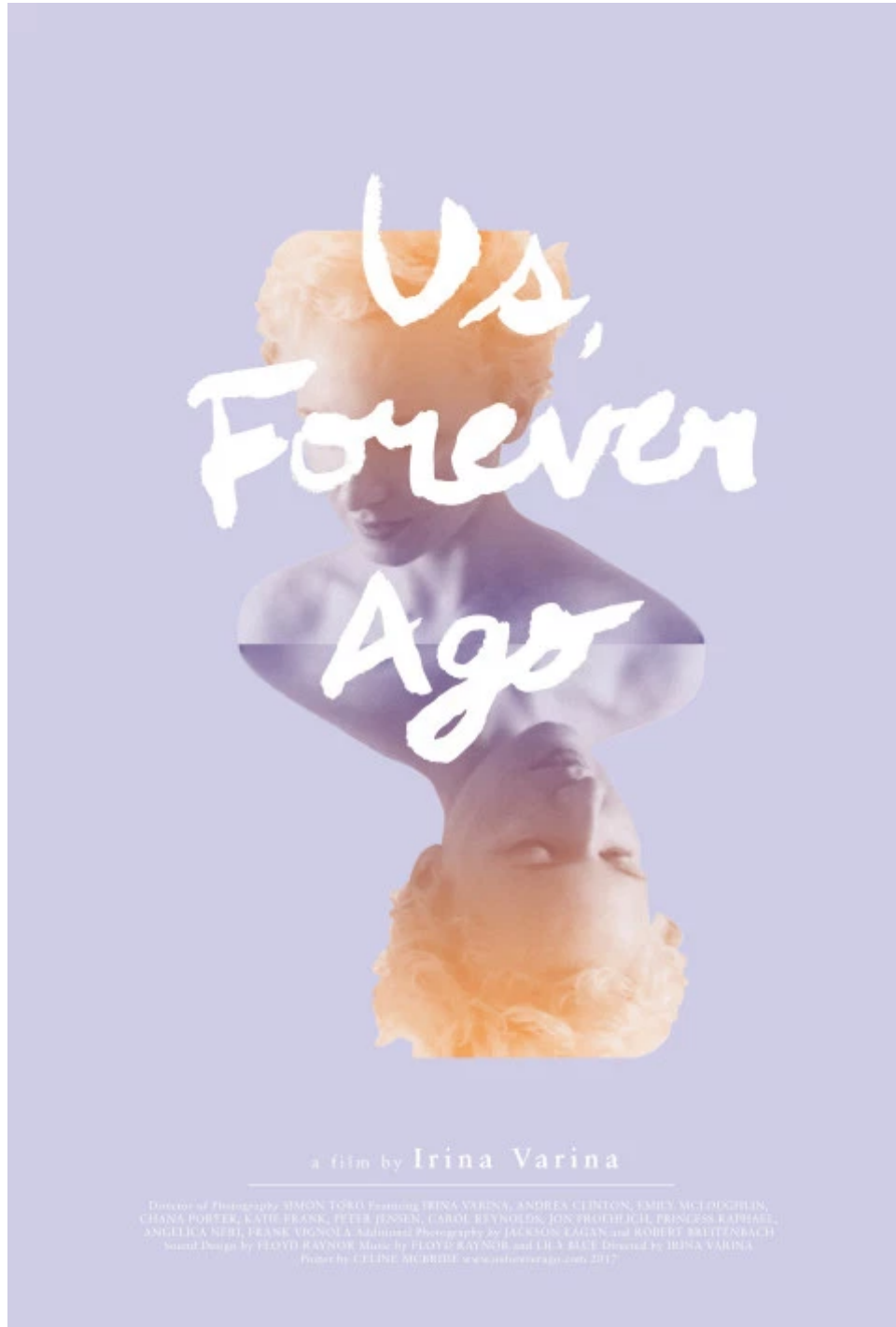
Luckily, as an adult, I got to be a part of communities that happily questioned those stories or plainly laughed at them. Mostly, in New York. But I've never experienced a deeper examination of an artistic process and "life as an artist" than in an experimental theater/dance community in Philadelphia. It's not that they've figured it all out or came to some consensus. Not at all. But the conversation is hot and alive here. It's reverent and irreverent at the same time. It's aware of the world in its diversity.



. How did you choose film as your medium for exploring this topic?

I didn't really set out to make this film as an exploration of artistic process. But it happened to become one. Which is no surprise because I am very interested in the topic. What I started with in 2015 was a feeling that it was time for me to make a feature film (even though I didn't have all my ducks in a row), a desire to interview women artists in my NYC community (for the first time in my life there were so many and they were doing things, figuring shit out, succeeding, failing, living), a want to capture a moment of time I was in (that felt like a big-change moment that I couldn't quite articulate then) and a need to write a script about a woman looking for validation through love, work, appearances, etc.

ended up doing some of all of the above. We shot the film along a 7-month period at times when I had spare money from day jobs or modeling/acting gigs. A year after I finished the first edit but it didn't feel right. Most people, who saw that version, had the same feeling. The truth was, I changed a lot a year right after I'd shot the film but I tried to treat the film as that older version of myself. That was when, after one particular conversation with one of my feedbackers, Mark Lord, I decided to incorporate other layers in the film. Of present me (character based on me) and future 2030 me. That added layer of self-reflection in addition to the narrative part and documentary interviews, I think, that made the film what it is.



"my interests and serves the film. It's not a pure documentary. Even if it was, actually, – it would still have been subjective"

. We spoke briefly about community and what that means in the artistic world, tell me more about how you built or found community with this film.

mm. It was actually on my "vision board" related to the film – "build community." Whatever I meant by that then. Now it's manifested like this; I still can be shy about my work but with this particular film I decided to consciously face fears of visibility, of being judged, of possibly not being liked (which resulted in my doing like five different meditations/visualizations before every screening) and be present for every screening and Q&A, be available to people afterwards, invite people to screenings, seek out interviews and conversations. It felt very empowering, actually, to lead from that place. To openly say: "I care about this and I will be present (even though people might not come, I might get hurt, I might not know what to say)."

*Side note {Reading this and reflecting on our conversation that night, was an ah-ha moment for me as an artist, Irina's composure, curiosity and attentiveness came through so clearly. I had imagined she was naturally poised, I now feel even deeper her love for this work hearing how much attention she put into this part of the presentation}

t, obviously, had a lot of rewards too. Audiences have been very vulnerable in sharing their own stuff around artistic process and well ... just being-a-human process. Some of the things I remember the most are a 70-year old woman thanking one of my artist friends from the film for "validating fun" and, what seemed like, a 17-year old catching me out on a street after one screening to ask "what do you do when you want to start reaching out to possible collaborators but have doubts if your project is good enough at all?"

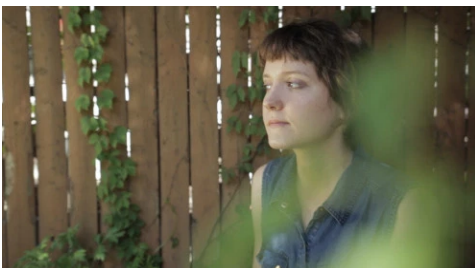
. Did you have a sense of what you wanted people to gain from participating in or viewing the film?

From participating ... hard to say, it's been a while ago. I remember that I had an intention for myself, when interviewing my women artist friends, – to follow my curiosities about them and what they say in the moment, in addition to a prepared set of questions. I wanted them to feel seen, I guess. Yes.



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rom viewing ... I think, this film could be a great container for reflecting on your own past and resent. On what you value in life and how you define success and failure. On where you are going now and why.

. Do you feel the way you pursued your vision of collecting people’s artistic process through an artistic medium (film for an audience) impacted how their stories were told?

es, I do. I have a note in the film credits how “If you are curious about these artists, google them! he interviews were shot in 2015 and edited in 2016. They might be totally different people now. Or ot.”

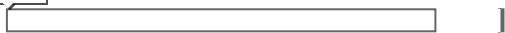
think the same could be said about the fact that the way they are presented in the film highlights, in a bigger or smaller way, my interests and serves the film. It’s not a pure documentary. Even if it was, actually, – it would still have been subjective. I had a great conversation about similar topic with a friend recently. How a person behind a book of history, for example, would influence what the book comes with their interests, biases, blind spots. We all have those. I think it’s good to be aware of the person behind the work so we unconsciously don’t make their point of view or their version of the story the universally correct one.



"Us, Forever Ago" trailer

from [irina v](#)

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