

Imagination is a Clean Sheet of Paper

By Laura Lee

Through the Door, by writer/director Yelena Demikovsky, which received the "Award of Excellence" in 2010, is a 17-minute piece on the lives of a Russian immigrant couple as seen through the eyes of their two young daughters. It is the second in a series of shorts about children's formative experiences and the role that adults play in them. The first in the series, *Shell*, also received an Accolade. Demikovsky plans to direct five short films, which will eventually become a feature, *Apples and Seeds*.

Russian-born Demikovsky is intimately familiar with the subject matter. She has lived in the United States since 1995. Her documentaries paint portraits of gifted individuals who are driven by a passion to create – there is always a little dash of her Russian connection. Her shorts explore relationships between people and those moments in life that can occur unexpectedly and turn it around.

Demikovsky says about her film, *Through The Door*: "This is a fairly typical Russian immigrant story, but it's also universal. Highly educated people relocate to a new country and are dissatisfied because their expectations are thwarted."

The mother of the family is wonderfully played by Irina Byakova, a well-known Moscow theater actress, who holds the title, "Honored Artist of Russia." Her role is that of a frustrated actress, prevented by a new culture from finding an audience in America. However, her husband, played by Dmitry Huhlaev, is a successful doctor who provides well for the family. But she cannot be satisfied simply as a housewife, because she has been deprived of her art.

Byakova lives in Moscow. The plight of the immigrant is not familiar to her. In Demikovsky's words, "I had to tell her stories about the life of the Russian immigrants. We talked and talked about it – she had to imagine the story of an actress who breaks down from being trapped, understand it, immerse herself in it and make it her own."

Demikovsky drew heavily on her theater background, and focused her energies on character development. Prior to shooting, she spent about three weeks with the whole cast including Alisa Korkhin and Veronica Kelegian, the young actresses who played the daughters, doing improvisations.

"I do believe a theater background really helps in a film when you work on building character. Working with children is also a special thing. We spent three weeks just playing the family," Demikovsky remembers. "I don't want actors to memorize their

lines until we almost finished rehearsing. The kids never even read the script, they just were having fun playing sisters. And when I threw them the lines right before the shoot, they felt comfortable remembering them, because they were already living their roles. So it just came naturally."

Working with children was one of the biggest challenges of the production. Demikovsky jokes, "In the end you want to kill yourself." There was a bit of drama on the set when someone on the crew revealed a bit too soon to Veronica Kelegian, who played the youngest sister, that she was going to be in a wheelchair. "Veronica became hysterical," Demikovsky said. "She didn't want to play the girl in the wheelchair. My intention was to create a story for her about why she was in the wheelchair – her leg was hurting etc. So this problem had to be resolved. The producer, Kit Bland, got everyone together and said that only Yelena talks to the actors, no one else. I told Veronica she didn't have to be in the wheelchair if she didn't want to. I asked the crew to hide the wheelchair somewhere and never mention it."

Demikovsky solved the impasse with what might be called the "Tom Sawyer" technique. She played a little trick here making the wheelchair a fun prop everyone wanted to have. She asked Byakova and the script supervisor, Fatima Benbrahim, to fight over the chance to ride in the wheelchair so Veronica could see it. "And I pretended that I wanted to ride it too," Demikovsky said. "And all three of us started fighting over it and riding it and pushing each other off it, etc. Then Veronica saw it, started laughing, ran up and joined the fight. And of course, she won! She was so happy with the wheelchair after that. It's always difficult with the kids. You have to win them over. They are the most honest people. And you also have to be honest with them, believing in what you tell them, otherwise they wouldn't trust you. Plus, you have to discipline them. And it's hard work."

Her second greatest challenge was a problem common to most independent filmmakers: dealing with a small budget. One scene required the presence of an ambulance. She was not in a position to rent an actual ambulance, so they tried to create the impression of an ambulance using only flashing lights. But it didn't look right when she viewed the footage. "So we had to go for a real one," Demikovsky said. In the end, she downloaded a video clip of an ambulance from the Internet. "In editing we placed the clip behind the curtain and it looked real in the film. So the ambulance cost me \$12."

The story also required the director to create a scene to project the younger sister's imagination. "That's a very important image," Demikovsky said. "How Natalie sees her parents as happy, while in reality they argue behind the door. And since Natalie likes to paint, her imagination is expressed mostly on paper. We thought a lot about how to create this image. And we really used a roll of paper to create that white background. It worked."

She was, however, able to have a score composed specifically for the film. She worked with the well-known, Moscow-based composer, Iraida Yusupova, largely through e-mail. Demikovsky said. "I told (Yusupova) what mood I needed for a

scene — whether it's Natalie's Imagination or Heaven, etc. She'd make all the arrangements on the computer, and I'd email her scenes so she could actually look at them and adjust the pace."

For Demikovsky, the greatest challenge of being a filmmaker in America is the need to constantly market your product. In her words, "The hardest thing for me as for a lot of people, is promoting my own product. I'm not good at it at all. I always doubt myself, thinking, 'I'm not Fellini.' It's probably my main problem, because a lot of people simply say to themselves, 'Yes. I am Fellini.' I come from a country where they tell you, 'You haven't grown into a Fellini yet, so keep your mouth shut.' Here, in America, I see people at film festival receptions, handing out flyers of their own film. 'Come see this film!' Once this guy came up to me with a flyer and said, 'This is a great film. It is incredibly directed, acted and produced. You must see it tomorrow.' I asked, 'Really? Who's the director?' He said modestly, 'Me.' Funny, isn't it? Well — in America it's all about marketing. When someone is just born they hear, 'You're the best.' Before they even start talking, they already think they're the best. In the Soviet Union it was the opposite — you were never the best. Both are extreme. It wouldn't be a bad idea to take the good things from many sources to create a good mix, a balance, and everything would be right with the world. Unfortunately, it's not that."

Demikovsky's advice for aspiring filmmakers who are eager to work on their films: "If you can live without it, don't do it. Just live without it. You might discover something else and become professional in that. But if you realize you can't sleep or breathe without it, then go for it!"