

LIFELONG

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY

ASLI ÖZGE

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LOGLINE Ela and Can seemingly have it all. Yet in this affluent section of Istanbul, love turns to suspicion, success delivers only material comfort and truth keeps playing hide-and-seek.

SYNOPSIS Ela is a respected artist, Can is a successful architect. They live in a stylish house Can designed for them, in one of Istanbul's most sought-after neighborhoods. Though the passion has mostly gone out of it, mutual respect and admiration still bolster their union. That is, until Ela overhears one of Can's phone conversations... Ela's comfortable life is quickly taken over by mistrust. Though she is deeply shaken, she doesn't dare confront her husband. Can senses something is wrong, but doesn't dare acknowledge it either. For a little while, true happiness and self-respect take a back seat to comfort and security. Both strive for complete denial of their disillusionment, until Ela develops somatic symptoms, forcing her entrapment to the surface. The marriage is teetering on the edge and Ela struggles with the burden of a huge decision.

INTERVIEW WITH ASLI ÖZGE

Your first film, *Men On The Bridge*, focused on characters from Istanbul, who were in the low income bracket. Your current film, *Lifelong*, also takes place in Istanbul, but it focuses on an upper-middle-class couple.

This time, I focused on the privileged part of society, who can "cross the bridge" effortlessly. The story is about "being stuck" in a certain place, "having nowhere to go," and "fears". The characters in *Men On The Bridge* didn't have the power to define the frame of their lives. They were stuck in a certain position, due to conditions over which they had no control. In *Lifelong*, however, the characters can't escape the conditions they themselves have created. Their comfortable way of life, their fear of losing what they possess make them dependent on each other. It is as if, taking risks has become too difficult for them. With time and advancing age, the impetus to change weakens. Despite unhappiness, people are capable of convincing themselves that the way things are, the life they have isn't so bad after all. One might turn a blind eye to reality, choose to pretend there are no problems, that everything is all right. That makes it harder to find the courage to change, to move towards the new and the unknown. By hiding behind the marriage, Ela and Can play a game not only for the benefit of others, but also for each other, and even for themselves.

It is possible to define Ela and Can as a couple that is afraid to break up. In addition, the fear of an earthquake, which plays

a major role in Istanbul's daily life, is also important in the film. Could we say that the story is woven around the theme of fear?

Fear is one of the main themes in the film. The earthquake, to me is one threat over which we have no control. Its timing is unknown. Since it threatens our very lives, since it threatens everything we possess, perhaps it pushes Ela and Can to hold on to one another. By reminding them that there are more important problems in life, it gives them the space to play a game.

Although the depiction of Istanbul is almost the opposite of the one in *Men On The Bridge*, both films are characterized by strong skills of observation. How do you manage to observe the life in Istanbul from an insider's point of view, as a director who also lives in Berlin?

Being born and raised in Istanbul, and having studied cinema in Istanbul, I feel I belong here. I have been living in Berlin for ten years now and I feel at home there as well. I travel frequently between these cities and I could say that I spend half of my year in Berlin and the other half in Istanbul. This gives me the chance to observe both, Istanbul and Berlin, from the inside and the outside. When you live in only in one city it is easier to get lost in its daily routines. The mobility and distance provided by living in two cities makes you more perceptive and alert to what's happening around you. Feeling that you belong to another place just as much as you do to the place you live in, and to be missing that other place, gives me a unique energy.

Your strong observation skills are also evident in your depiction of the social status and lifestyle of the characters. What's your



strategy for writing your films? Do you speak to the people who belong to the world you're writing about? Are there specific artists who inspired you while creating Ela's world in the film?

I speak to people who belong to the world of my story. I make use of their experiences. While writing the script for *Lifelong*, I also spoke to couples from the same age group, who chose to get divorced or who remain together despite their problems, just like Ela and Can. I also received support from successful people working

in the professions portrayed in the film. After having cast the film, I involved the actors in this process as well. For example, Defne Halman and I went to exhibitions and openings; I introduced her to artists in Istanbul. She also worked on her photography skills. This process took about eight months. I worked with the prominent architect Han Tümertekin while developing Can's character. To comprehend how a busy architect spends a day at work, I spent time with Han in the office or on the construction site. I tried

to observe the terminology, how his profession is reflected in his character, his daily life, and his language. Later on, I introduced Hakan Çimenser to Han as well. We copied Han's sketchbook and prepared the same for Hakan. Hakan worked on Han's original sketches. Bülent Erkmén, an internationally acclaimed graphic designer from Turkey, even designed business cards for Can. There were business cards in Hakan's pocket although we don't see them in the film. Also, for the scene in which Ela and Can visit an exhibition, we created

an exhibition based on the concept by Bige Örer (the director of the Istanbul Biennial), which was implemented by Bülent Erkmén for the film. In this exhibition, called "Invisible Cities," works from Füsun & Faruk Eczacıbaşı's collection and from the latest Istanbul Biennial were on display. Furthermore, throughout the film, Ela produces art works based on her daily life and experiences. She expresses her emotions by creating, not speaking. This is why I selected works of artists I like for Ela's creations. For example, to show Can's importance in Ela's life, I chose Ayşe



Erkmen's work called 'Taş' ['Stoned']. I think a heavy, difficult-to-move stone describes Can's place in Ela's life pretty well. Moreover, the placement of this hard mass over the fragile glass roof shows Ela's position in this marriage.

Another inspirational work of art was Ann Veronica Janssens's 'Blue, Red, and Yellow' which inspired me to create the mist installation. When Can loses his sense of direction inside the mist and feels suffocated in this claustrophobic room, he finally understands how Ela has been feeling in their marriage.

The architecture of the house that Ela and Can live in has a perpendicular layout, allowing your characters to avoid each other, to sort of play hide-and-seek. Did you design the house with this idea in mind?

Early on the development of this project, we were aware of the importance of the house this couple lives in, especially since Can is an architect. Their house had to illustrate their lifestyle and social status. During pre-production, we scouted many locations. As soon as we saw this house, which was designed by the architect

Hayriye Özel, DP Emre Erkmen and I knew it was the right one, despite all the difficulties of shooting in it. We thought that this architectural structure would visually emphasize the idea of a couple standing side-by-side but who are actually very far from one another. That's why the narrow, claustrophobic atmosphere of this home interested us. With its perpendicular structure, all its glass dividers, the house allows to play hide-and-seek, and to live in boxes, separated from each other. Meanwhile, it also encourages a voyeuristic look by those who stand

outside. When we found it, the owners had moved out and all four floors were completely empty. We completely re-decorated it under Yeşim Bakırküre's supervision, and recreated the interior by handpicking each object individually. We took special care to select unique pieces of furniture that would have not been seen in any other film. But we also wanted to emphasize that this place had been lived in, so we chose used furniture. Also, without underlining it, we placed artworks throughout the house that matched the decor. In this sense, even



if it seems that Can has designed the place, Ela's touch is recognizable as well.

The majority of the film is comprised of sequence shots, or long takes. The camera, which remains distant from the characters at first, slowly approaches them, with the sensitivity of an anthropologist observing her subjects. Why did you choose longer takes and zooms in the cinematography?

This film follows the journey of a married couple who have been together for a long time and who strive to overcome the ambiguity

in their relationship. They are searching for a way to get past being stuck in their partnership. While providing segments from their lives, instead of focusing on what they show to others and each other, I tried to focus on what they were trying to hide. Here, sequence shots allowed for a complex mise-en-scenes, which in turn made it possible for the audience to spend more time with the characters, to identify more with their emotional changes. In some scenes, this is augmented by an indistinct, sneaky 'zoom in' movement to observe the characters

better. Generally speaking, no matter how much I worked on the script beforehand, I have a tendency to change it in shooting. I like improvisations and adapting to surprise elements, coincidences and the unforeseen mishaps in making a film. In this sense, I believe that long shots provide a larger area for the actors to perform better.

The first part of the film focuses on Ela. After the scene where Ela confronts Can, however, the focus switches to Can. Does this change reflect a willingness to understand Can?

The film tries to understand the most dominant feelings of both characters at a certain point in their lives. We meet them when they are faced with the threat of losing each other. The change of point-of-view takes place at the turning point, when they can no longer deny their problems, no longer avoid confrontation. I like unexpected turns in a narration, things for which the audience has not been prepared dramatically. They don't happen as a result of external forces. They arise from changes in the inner world of the characters.



You make bold and critical remarks about Istanbul's contemporary art scene, and the difficulties that artists face. How is this related to Ela's dependence on Can? As a director, creating a different type of art, do you feel that pressure as well? How do you see the relationship between money and art?

I think there is a love-hate relationship between art and money. Just like many artists, Ela experiences poverty within a prosperous life. This makes her dependent on Can. Her works

are exhibited in museums and expositions but she cannot obtain the financial security to be self-sufficient. Ela has to convince investors, who have no relationship to art, to fund her so that she can create the kind of work she wants to create. Perhaps in every form of art, when 'sales' are involved, artists are expected to create average, unvaried, easily perceptible types of work. It is almost impossible to sustain your life with your work unless you accept these conditions. I suffer from this just as many other directors do.

Although they aren't major turning points in the story, the two segments when the characters get away from Istanbul (Ela and Can's trip to Ankara as well as Can's trip to Van) function as breaking points. How do you explain these breaking points happening away from Istanbul?

I was curious about the outcome of the tension that is created when a person is stuck in a car for many hours with someone they can't stand, without the option to escape. Many of us have probably experienced a loss of control,

an outburst of repressed emotions in situations where you can't restrain yourself and have no place to hide your emotions. Although such episodes are difficult in the moment, they also provide some measure of relief. In fact, Ela gradually enters such a state in her journey with Can. In Ankara, at their daughter Nil's house, when Ela has to sleep in the same bed with Can—whom she believes no longer desires her—the feeling of entrapment reaches a point where it causes a physical (psychosomatic) breakdown. Yet a feeling

of relaxation comes along with that, and she gains confidence in her struggle with Can. With this transformation in Ela, the fear of losing takes over in Can. In fact, although he doesn't initially want to go, Can's trip to Van after the big earthquake is an attempt to escape his fears. Witnessing the destruction caused by the earthquake, the bereft and determined faces of the people of Van in the aftermath of a disaster, Can comes to realize the value of what he has. So after his return from Van his efforts to get closer to Ela flow from that.

The search for a new home is a theme we come across in all your films, from *Little April to Men On The Bridge*. What is the importance of this theme for you?

To me, "searching for a home," means a new beginning, but also an ending. It is about negotiating past events and stepping into the uncertainty of what is to come, a state of being in-between. Actually, again, it is like being stuck. Perhaps I am still searching for my own home since I have been stuck in between two countries. When I start to think about a film, I'm mostly pondering themes of 'belonging', and 'insecurity'. Interestingly, the project I am currently working on, called *All Of A Sudden*, also contains themes of searching for a home and relocation.

There are practically no scenes without the two leading characters, Ela and Can.

That must have made their casting especially important. What factors went into your casting decisions?

I enjoy working with actors for long periods of time. I continue developing the script during pre-production. I pay particular attention

to working with actors who don't prioritize their own physical qualities, flaws and egos over the characters they enact. I prefer to work with actors who are willing to audition, or who believe in long rehearsal periods. In Turkey, many experienced actors are afraid to take risks. The majority has given in to the status quo. This is why I feel very lucky to have met Defne Halman near the end of a long casting period. Defne got involved eight months before the shooting started. So we had the chance to spend quite some time together. I enjoy making constant changes on the set by rewriting the script, by doing lots of takes and tiring the actors out. Defne is a person who doesn't get tired of repetition and trying alternatives; she is very energetic and highly motivated.

For the character of Can, our search took longer. Though I felt hopeless at times, Defne was with me throughout this process with her positive attitude. As a matter of fact, Defne played an important role in introducing us to Hakan Çimenser as well as in our decision to cast him. Hakan had been away from acting, and had focused on directing plays and teaching. We worked for two months intensively so that he would get used to my method, get his actor's discipline back, and get ready to play the character of Can.



AYŞE ERKMEK, *STONED*, 2003



ANN VERONICA JANSSENS, *BLUE, RED, AND YELLOW*, 2001

of the underground gallery building, causing the showroom below to be cordoned off for safety reasons. The stone contrasts dramatically with the transparent and fragile glass, which is in danger of being smashed to pieces if the stone falls through. There are two reasons for the choice of this installation. First of all, fear and anxiety raised by the placement of the stone is juxtaposed with Ela's fear and anxiety. Secondly, the stone is massive, impossible to move. The stone in this installation represents the state of being of Ela who cannot move forward and break free of her emotional entrapment. On the other hand, it's also a significant symbol for Can's place in her life.

The second installation in the film is the installation that Ela designs for the opening of the exhibition. This scene is inspired by one of Ann Veronica Janssens' mist installations entitled 'Blue, Red, and Yellow'. In this work, the characters are put in a situation where the border between the body and its surroundings are blurred and characters lose their sense of orientation, as if floating in space. When Can enters the room filled with colorful mist, he stands almost in nothingness. Though his eyes are wide open, he sees almost nothing. This installation reflects the rising anxiety and the emotional claustrophobia in the narration of the film.

There are also works from prominent artists like Sarkis ('Speed of Colors'), Kutluğ Ataman ('Su'), Camilo Yáñez ('Estadio Nacional 11.09.09 Santiago De Chile'), and Bill Viola ('Transfiguration') that are placed in the background. All these works contribute to the atmosphere of the scenes they appear and provide clues about the characters' inner worlds.

ART IN THE FILM Art has a very special place in this film since one of the protagonists (Ela) is a contemporary artist. Her works are reflections of her thoughts and feelings, which she represses and can't deliver in verbal communication. Ela's activity is crucial for the development of her character.

The artworks that are created by Ela in the film are inspired by two acclaimed contemporary artists: Ayşe Erkmen, and Ann Veronica Janssens.

Two of Ela's installations are portrayed in the film. The first one is 'Stoned' inspired by Ayşe Erkmen's work with the same title. For this installation, Erkmen arranged for a massive hunk of rock to be lowered onto the transparent glass roof

ASLI ÖZGE WRITER & DIRECTOR



Lifelong is Asli Özge's second feature film. Her first theatrical feature *Men On The Bridge* (2009)

premiered internationally at the Locarno and Toronto Film Festivals and won the Best Film awards at the Istanbul, Adana, Ankara and London Film Festivals. The film was released in several countries including Germany, the UK, USA (MoMA NYC), the Netherlands, and Turkey and has been shown at around 40 film festivals.

Asli Özge was born in Istanbul, Turkey in 1975 and has been living in Berlin since 2000.

Özge is currently preparing her new film *All Of A Sudden* which is presented in the Co-Production Market of 63th Berlin International Film Festival.

Completed Films

- 2013 **LIFELONG**
HAYATBOYU
WORLD PREMIERE 63th Berlin International Film Festival, Panorama Special
- 2009 **MEN ON THE BRIDGE**
KÖPRÜDEKİLER
- 2005 **HESPEROS' APPRENTICES**
HESPEROS'UN ÇÖMEZLERİ
documentary
- 2003 **LITTLE BIT OF APRIL**
BIRAZ NISAN
feature
- 2000 **CAPITAL C**
short
- 1999 **QUIRCK**
short
- 1998 **3 ETC**
short
- 1997 **ACTUALLY**
short
- 1996 **LITTLE FROSH**
short

In Development

ALL OF A SUDDEN
script development

ASPHYXIA
project development

LIFELONG HAYATBOYU

A FILM BY **ASLI ÖZGE**

MAIN CAST

ELA
DEFNE HALMAN

CAN
HAKAN ÇİMENSER

NİL
GİZEM AKMAN

TAN
ONUR DİKMEN

MAIN CREW

WRITER-DIRECTOR
ASLI ÖZGE

PRODUCER
NADİR ÖPERLİ

CO-PRODUCERS
ENİS KÖSTEPEN
ROMAN PAUL
GERHARD MEIXNER
BERO BEYER
WILLEM BAPTIST
METE GÜMÜRHAN
MICHAEL REUTER
REBEKKA GARRIDO

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
EMRE ERKMEN

EDITOR
NATALI BARREY
ASLI ÖZGE

ART DEPARTMENT SUPERVISOR
YEŞİM BAKIRKÜRE

SOUND ENGINEER
MARCEL DE HOOGD

SUPERVISING SOUND EDITOR
DANIEL IRIBARREN

SOUND DESIGNERS
DANIEL IRIBARREN
MARK GLYNNE
DOMINIK SCHLEIER

SOUND RE-RECORDING MIXER
LARS GINZEL
MARK GLYNNE

LINE PRODUCER
KAAN KURBANOĞLU

PRODUCTION MANAGER
ENGİN SİVRİOĞLU

CASTING BY
SELİM ÜNEL
NİMET ATASOY ÜNEL

COSTUMES BY
NAHİDE BÜYÜKKAYMAKÇI

MAKE-UP & HAIR STYLIST
EBRU SÜREN

Defne Halman *AS ELA*



Defne Halman was born and raised in New York City where she attended the United Nations International School,

and studied at the School of American Ballet. Defne then moved to Turkey, received a BA in acting from the Istanbul State Conservatory for Drama and worked extensively in Turkish theatre, film and television. In the 1990's she performed on the New York stage in many shows and received the New York Arts and Business Council's 'Encore' award. In 2008 she returned to Istanbul and has since appeared in various plays and received five major 'Best Actress' awards. Halman appears in her first leading role in *Lifelong*.

Hakan Çimenser *AS CAN*



Born in 1968, originally from Istanbul, Turkey, Hakan Çimenser graduated from Hacettepe University National Conservatory with

a degree in Theatre. Between 1994-1996, he worked as the director for Diyarbakir State Theatre. In 1996, he started working at the Ankara State Theatre. Between 1997-2003, he worked as a lecturer of Theatre Arts at the Hacettepe University National Conservatory. In 2010, he received an Afife Theatre Award for his accomplish as the year's most successful director. He is currently a lecturer at Bilkent University, Istanbul Aydin University and Baskent Communication Studies Academy. *Lifelong* is Çimenser's first leading role.

LIFELONG HAYATBOYU

2013 | TURKEY-GERMANY-THE NETHERLANDS

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