

ELEMENTAL FILMS

presents

Voyageuse

A FILM BY MAY MILES THOMAS

STARRING SIÂN PHILLIPS

2018 - UK - 106 minutes

BIFA Discovery Award
WINNER BRITISH INDEPENDENT FILM AWARDS

Press Contact:

Owen Thomas
Elemental Films
owen@elementalfilms.co.uk
+44 (0)7538 280 480

www.voyageuse.co.uk/press
@VoyageuseFilm

SHORTEST SYNOPSIS

Romance, science and conspiracy in the 20th century.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

When Erica Thomas died in 2004 she left behind a collection of family films, photos, letters and objects dating back a hundred years.

Increasingly lonely in the years after her husband's early death in 1973, this archive had become her defence against a future too painful to face and revealed experiences her children knew nothing of.

Erica was born in Hungary in 1933 and came to England in 1938. Despite her private schooling and studies at Cambridge and Oxford, she struggled to 'become English' and to belong. Always feeling an outsider, her career nonetheless drew her to the dark heart of Cold War science. She faced a world of compromise, fear and betrayal; increasingly her psychological struggles reflected the trauma of world events.

Spanning 70 years, travelling from Romania to Britain, via America, Antarctica and outer space, *Voyageuse* reveals one woman's ordinary life, lived through extraordinary times.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Living with her oldest enemy - her mother - Erica Thomas wakes each day to the unquiet horror of her past.

Born in 1933, of Hungarian and Czech parents, Erica's story is of career and family intrigues played out against the geo-politics of the twentieth century: World War 2, the Cold War, end of Empire, the Atomic Age, eugenics and mind control.

These global crises Erica conflates with middle-class domesticity in which her mother, Vera, is cast as a latter-day Mata Hari; her brother, Eddi, is an MI6 agent recruited at Cambridge University;

and her father, Jozef 'Bob' Eisner, is an international spymaster and the inspiration for Ian Fleming's Bond villains. Closing the circle is her cousin, Thomas Polgar, ex-OSS and a CIA agent of the highest rank.

Erica's earliest memories are of rural Romania and her family's flight to England on the eve of WW2. When her father is interned as an enemy alien she is prompted to a decades long struggle to 'become English'.

Through private school to Cambridge and Oxford Universities Erica pursues a pioneering career in the experimental field of behavioural research. In this male-dominated world she is exposed to modish forms of medical and psychiatric treatment, leading to a series of jobs that reflect the threatening zeitgeist; clandestine work conducted in laboratories and hospitals, underwritten by the government.

In 1958, while working for the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, Erica participates in an experiment that will haunt her ever after. Fleeing her complicity, she accepts a minor post at Edinburgh University. Here, she finds love and happiness with Dr. Gwynne Thomas, a physicist recently returned from the Antarctic and his researches into solar radiation and the Aurora Australis; it is a match made in heaven.

Married in 1960, Erica is forced to leave her academic post when she gives birth to the first of her two sons. When her second child is born with a congenital deformity she experiences the stirrings of depression. Then, shortly after the death of her father, Gwynne is diagnosed with motor neurone disease.

On the day he dies, in 1973, Erica's life stops. For the next 30 years, consumed by grief, her mind clouded by psychotropic drugs, she exists in a state of suspension, of emotional paralysis.

Now 70, Erica's world is circumscribed by her care for Vera whose presence both imprisons and sustains her. Hoping that today will be different, obsessively she recalls the events of her life in a forlorn quest for solace and to find the will to rise again tomorrow.

Coda

Among Erica's possessions, found after her death in 2004, was a small, cellophane bag containing

four gold-case lipsticks and a torn Christmas card bearing the plaintive cry – *When did I stop using lipstick?*

SIAN PHILLIPS on MAY MILES THOMAS

When I was asked to voice *Voyageuse*, I read it and agreed at once. By way of preparation I watched *The Devils Plantation* and *Solid Air* both of which I loved and when the day came for work to begin I travelled to Soho full of admiration for the award-winning director I was about to meet. Nothing could have prepared me for the experience of working at close quarters with May Miles Thomas.

As the days went by I more and more felt that I was standing under a microscope in a force 8 gale. I had realised right away that her skills as a film maker were stunning. Now i was reminded that 'stunning' doesn't just happen and, though talent and a way with the light don't go amiss, stunning is the result of obsessive, grinding attention to detail and a passionate relish in hard work. Some days the gale threatened to overturn the whole enterprise as tiredness took its toll and the walls of the studio seemed to close in. On other days it was nothing but fun and exhilaration. I felt privileged to be there and I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

May is a rare bird; younger, sassier and twenty times more daring than I and she probably doesn't know that I've adopted her as one of my major role models.

MAY MILES THOMAS on MAKING VOYAGEUSE

An independent film is one that's made within the arm's reach of the filmmaker, that's experiential - that the filmmaker makes in order to see not just the world at large but also [her] own place in it.

Writing in the *New Yorker*, Richard Brody provides a reminder of why I make films.

In September 2004, while clearing my late mother-in-law, Erica Thomas' home, I realised how most people at some point in their lives will go through this ritual, editing and discarding their

loved one's 'stuff'. What they choose to keep – heirlooms – they add to their own baggage; items to be passed on to the next generation.

A classic hoarder, Erica's worldly goods were mostly broken and useless but among them I found clues to an untold story: a series of plaster casts of an infant's limb, rolls of polygraph paper, terse handwritten notes recalling childhood slights, thousands of photographs, notebooks of her children's development more chilling than affectionate. And drugs. Lots of drugs. Years later, to rid myself of these ghosts, I decided to make this film.

There are few films about older women that resist cliché; most portrayals tend to the eccentric, vulnerable or wily. By recreating Erica I aimed to show the complexity of her character in all its frailty and contradictions. More importantly, I sought to tell the truth about a woman I had known for 11 years without learning of her past and her struggles with what she called 'her darker matters.'

The real Erica was difficult, dissociative and often a bore. Living alone for decades and unused to human contact, she lacked empathy and curiosity. On torn scraps of paper she wrote at length, decades after the events, documenting past pain inflicted by both her family and the local children. There were affectionate letters to her mother, written in her 20s, where she announces her love for a physicist, Gwynne Thomas, whom she would later marry. Her late diaries – screeds of tight handwriting in blue biro – she segmented into fifteen minute intervals where, in forensic detail, she describes her mood, her drugs and the experimental doses she ingested. Trapped in the present, she never wrote of a future.

Did this make her – and women like her – an unworthy subject for a film? Observing older women in the street and in shops, I wondered, what stories did they have to tell?

Erica's story was far from ordinary: a child migrant fleeing war, a gifted pupil, a student of Natural Sciences at both Cambridge and Oxford (attending Newnham and Somerville Colleges) at a time when female scientists were still relatively rare. A complicit doer of evil deeds. An inadequate daughter. A wife forced by maternity to quit her academic career. A traveller.

In 2012 I wrote a draft titled, *Voyageuse*, a word borrowed from *Women's Life*, a compendia of Victorian magazines once belonging to Erica. Written as a monologue, the script was a cross

between a narration and a performance piece. Where my previous film, *The Devil's Plantation* (2013) was a work of psychogeography, *Voyageuse* is a psychobiography, reflecting Erica's state of mind and the numbing repetition of her daily life. The story, rooted in a single day, spans 40 years across a fractured timeline, mirroring her thoughts as involuntary memories are triggered.

During my research I unearthed tantalising clues: her mother, Vera's correspondence with WWII government officials offering photographs of strategic sites to assist the war effort; recent letters from a relative, Thomas Polgar, ex-OSS and a high-ranking CIA officer; newspaper clippings about her brother, Eddi; papers relating to her father, Jozef a.k.a. 'Bob', and his career as a sugar engineer in the colonies of the declining British Empire. By piecing together timelines and verifying workplaces, home addresses and occupations, I discovered that her family was – to a greater or lesser extent – involved in espionage and counter-intelligence. From Erica's correspondence with various institutions I learned too that her own scientific career was not entirely benign.

At the end of 2014, with an unfinished script but a fully-formed idea, I asked my elderly neighbour for permission to shoot in her house while she was abroad. The house, untouched since the 1970s, was a perfect stand-in for Erica's Edinburgh home. Using my past production design chops, I dressed the location with her belongings and for ten days shot from early dawn until late at night. Here I attempted to conjure Erica's presence. One evening, catching my reflection in a dressing table mirror, suddenly I felt unnerved; in that moment it seemed she was inhabiting me.

With the trees still bare, in the spring of 2015 I made several trips to Edinburgh. Working alone, shooting in the streets, I retraced Erica's steps, locating the places where she lived and worked. In the nature of run-and-gun shoots, often I attracted curious onlookers and, on one occasion, a threat of violence that I skilfully defused. Chance encounters led to access, as did formal approaches. At no time was I refused entry. My story – "I'm making a film about my late mother-in-law." – convinced even the most obstructive gatekeepers.

Meanwhile, the script was still a work-in-progress. Overlong and unfocused, its running time I estimated at over four hours. Killing my darlings was painful but necessary. First with a set of index cards, then with paper and scissors, a task unfinished when, in late summer, I made a road trip across England. Over nine days I shot at 44 locations including Derby, Cambridge, Harwell, Didcot, Oxford, Orford Ness, Croydon and central London. Wherever I obtained permissions I was welcomed. Where I had none, I talked my way in.

The trip also served as a reminder of why people need stories. Arriving at Erica's first English home, in a suburb of Derby, as I stood my camera in the quiet street, I was approached by the owner, curious as to my purpose. Fortunately I had brought archive footage of the house shot circa 1938 – and the door was opened. Similarly, on a ferry ride to Orford Ness, by chance I met the site's photographer-in-residence who arranged access to its restricted areas. In Croydon, twice I was invited into strangers' homes.

For me, these random encounters were, as Brody asserts, proof of the experiential. Had I opted to make a conventional film *Voyageuse* would still have been at the development stage. In spite of capricious weather, long hours and stress, the happenstance of shooting was preferable to a pre-determined, constricting schedule.

On reflection, this was the easy part. Returning to Glasgow I began the edit while honing the script. By the autumn of 2015 I turned my attention to casting the voice of Erica and made a shortlist of potential actresses only to find my approach to London agents dismissed, possibly due to the film's small scale. In a moment of lateral thinking I contacted Frank Moisselle, a Dublin-based casting director, who offered advice and the names of two prominent actresses who met my requirements; I chose Siân Phillips. Within two days of sending the script I had the answer from her agent – she would love to.

Again serendipity played its part. Siân was soon in Glasgow, in a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Theatre Royal. Two days after our initial meeting, we began rehearsals in London before a three-day recording session. Warm, intelligent and meticulous, Siân embraced my unorthodox methods and we determined to do justice to the script. Rarely have I collaborated with such a willing and talented accomplice. We argued over lines, even single words. We experimented with aspects of Erica's behaviours and moods. Of all the decisions made in the service of *Voyageuse*, choosing Siân Phillips to portray Erica was the easiest – and most gratifying.

Returning home in early December, in my edit suite, I placed Siân's opening lines on the existing pre-title sequence and was so thrilled by how perfectly they fitted I wept with joy.

'Account' is another word for story. It also means a reckoning. The account of all our lives is one of gains and losses but in Erica's reckoning her loss outweighed any gain. One of the major themes of

Voyageuse is the grief that comes with loss. For over thirty years after her husband's death, Erica lived in a state of emotional paralysis, where her grief turned into chronic depression.

Loss and grief are universal but their expression in the culture remains *verboten*. Rather than avoid the issue of grief for fear of making a 'difficult' film, I embraced it. Writing the final draft of the script, for a time I hesitated over whether to include extracts from Erica's diaries, handwritten on scraps of paper, so raw and undiluted in their pain that it felt I breached a confidence by sharing her suffering. But I also knew to omit them would be withholding the truth - and to reveal the true Erica was my reason for making the film.

By January 2016, the film had progressed but the writer in me knew that crucial pieces were missing. Some sequences required only effort and a modest amount of money, such as a shoot in Torremolinos in the dead of winter at the Hotel Pez Espada, the first high-rise on the Costa del Sol, where Erica had honeymooned in 1960. Having given up on holidays in pursuit of the film I could justify a cheap flight and a weekend stay to fill the gap in the timeline. Thankfully, I found the Pez Espada, once a jet-set destination now catering mainly for pensioners, amenable to my request to shoot its original interior.

Other, more abstract scenes called for original thinking, such as an episode where Erica recalls how the Cold War zeitgeist impacted on her scientific career. This I resolved by a hectic trip to Central London to shoot war monuments. Negotiating with armed members of the Metropolitan Police – "I'm making a film about my late mother-in-law" – was met with confusion and I was left to my task. Outside the Bank of England, confronted with a Bollywood film crew in full flow, I simply sidestepped them, determined to get my shots.

By summer 2016 the timeline had expanded. The film was cut as five 'reels' not in deference to celluloid but to make my task manageable. But there were holes. Two sequences were missing, each requiring permissions to specific interior locations. One could not have been closer, the other – discounting an outer space odyssey – was in New Jersey.

The nearest location – as any location manager will testify – was the most elusive: an empty Nightingale hospital ward, still intact and a match for a London exterior. In my own neighbourhood such a place existed but on-site security was gleefully obstructive. Thanks to a contact, I met the person in charge of decommissioning several of Glasgow's hospitals. In her office I told my story

but didn't mention that the location was where my sister died and where, as a child, I was a patient on two occasions. Working alone in an empty ward, I was forced to confront my own ghosts.

In pursuit of *Voyageuse* at times I was in danger of self-sabotage, of failing, just as Erica believed she had failed. My last location was perhaps the most inaccessible but the script demanded I follow in her footsteps to the United States to where her brother, Eddi, had been 'engaged in Government work he was not at liberty to disclose.' In July 2016 I flew to New York with my kit and travelled to Holmdel, New Jersey to shoot the interior of Eero Saarinen's Bell Labs building for a sequence lasting maybe 40 seconds.

During a tour of the celebrated, two million square foot building, my guide summed up the Quixotic nature of my quest – 'Nobody knows what *really* happened here.' I realised I had reached a convergence, of magical thinking with the pursuit of conspiracies, and that Saarinen's building, like each of the places I visited, harboured a remanence – a force, the compelling spirit of those who came before.

Placing the missing pieces on the timeline, I mused on how *Voyageuse* did not conform to industry wisdom. Much of it was shot before the script was complete and editing began two years before I finished shooting. The sound design – over 1700 cues – had grown organically in that time into a complex layering of natural and synthetic sounds: birdsong, bells, waves and wind, strange voices cast over shortwave radio frequencies and even electronic 'silences'. Had I obeyed rules or sought permission the film would simply not exist.

With the shoot complete, for the remainder of 2016 I focused on post-production: the sound mix, visual effects work and colour grading. Erica's archive of films – dating from 1929-1970, shot on black and white 16mm by her father, and on 8mm by her husband – I transferred to digital formats. The thousands of photographic prints and negatives, I scanned and carefully retouched.

Today our lives are documented to an extraordinary degree, often from before we are born. In making the film, it was remarkable to have such a vast archive of Erica's life at my disposal, spanning her birth in 1933 to late adulthood. Given her family's escape from rural Hungary in 1938 as they fled Nazi invasion, it's a miracle that these films, photographs and documents survived.

In *Voyageuse* Erica is more stoic than disappointed at life's reversals, more measured than resentful of her present-day struggles. A refugee who regarded herself as an outsider, ultimately she achieved what she felt had eluded her – she became 'English' – confirmed, if not redeemed by her sense of duty, pragmatism and forbearance.

Completed in early 2017, I screened the film privately at the BFI Stephen Street to a small group of friends, industry colleagues and strangers and was overwhelmed by their fulsome and positive response. Twelve years on, as a passion project, the film's commercial prospects are moot. That was never the point. My only aim was to make the best version of Erica's story within my gift; a woman's life that otherwise would go unremarked upon. For me, this is sufficient consolation.

May Miles Thomas

July 2018

BIOGRAPHIES

May Miles Thomas (Writer & Director)

A graduate of the Glasgow School of Art, May Miles Thomas' career spans three decades. After working at BBC Television, London, she directed music videos and commercials in the UK and internationally. In 1995 May wrote *The Beauty of the Common Tool*, winning Best Film at the Palm Springs International Short Film Festival in 1997 and shortlisting for an Academy Award.

After a Fellowship at the Nipkow Programm, Berlin, May completed the UK's first digital feature film, *One Life Stand* (2000), winning a BIFA, five BAFTA New Talent awards and the inaugural Scottish Screen Outstanding Achievement Award. For her contribution to Digital Cinema she was awarded a NESTA Fellowship. In 2003 May completed *Solid Air*, winning Best Director and Best Cinematography at the 2004 Festroia Festival Internacional de Cinema.

Honoured as a Pioneer to the Life of the Nation for her services to British Cinema by H.M. Queen Elizabeth II, in 2007 May won the SAC Creative Scotland Award for *The Devil's Plantation*, an interactive website containing 66 short films. At the 2010 BAFTA New Talent Awards it won the Best Interactive category and was later reworked as an iOS app and a feature-length film, the latter nominated for a BAFTA Scotland/Cineworld Audience award. *Voyageuse* (2017) is May's fourth feature film.

Siân Phillips (Actor)

Born in 1933, Dame Siân still works constantly in film, theatre, television and radio. Peerless on stage, she's won or been nominated for every major acting award, in roles ranging from Hedda Gabler to Marlene Dietrich. On film, her aquiline beauty and seductive, perfectly modulated voice has attracted directors as various as Martin Scorsese, Milos Forman and David Lynch.

Growing up in rural Wales, Siân won the National Eisteddfod and started acting for BBC Radio at the age of 11. Always single-minded, she took a degree in English and Philosophy at Cardiff University, all the while performing, before leaving home for London and RADA. On graduating, and winning the Bancroft gold medal, Siân was offered major Studio film contracts. In love with

the theatre and unwilling to sign away her career, she refused them all.

At RADA Siân fell in love with Peter O'Toole. They married in 1959 and, through the 1960s, were as glamorous and famous a couple as their friends, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. Though their 20-year marriage was passionate and turbulent, Siân's focus and talent ensured her career thrived, winning her consistent acclaim in both Britain and America. In 2000 she was awarded a CBE and, in 2016, was honoured as a Dame for her services to drama.

After 70 years of acting and adventures, Siân's talent is as refined and as deep as can be imagined. Her voice is as expressive and subtle as it has ever been. Her ability to intuit and reveal character in even a single inflection or moment of silence is without compare. It is a privilege and a profound education to work with Siân.

MAY MILES THOMAS' FILMOGRAPHY

One Life Stand (2000)

Rotterdam International Film Festival
Silicon Alley Film Festival, New York
Dublin International Film Festival
Popcorn Film Festival, Stockholm
Edinburgh International Film Festival
HOF International Film Festival, Germany
Galway Film Fleadh
Warner Bros Studios, Los Angeles (invitation screening)
The Hamptons International Film Festival, USA
Bergen International Film Festival, Norway
Raindance Film Festival, London
BAFTA, London (private screening)
Leeds International Film Festival
Festival International de Films du Femmes, Paris

Solid Air (2003)

Edinburgh International Film Festival
Cinequest, San Jose, USA
Festival de Cannes (market screenings)
Gijon International Film Festival, Spain
Brussels International Film Festival
Galway Film Fleadh
Festiroia Festival Internacional de Cinema, Portugal
Mannheim International Film Festival, Germany
Notting Hill Film Festival, London
Festival International de Film de Femmes, Paris
Britspotting Film Festival, Berlin

The Devil's Plantation (2013)

Glasgow Film Festival
Strelka Institute of Architecture and Design, Moscow
Heartlands Film Festival, UK
BAFTA Scotland (private screening)
Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow
Market Gallery, Glasgow
Glad Cafe, Glasgow
Glasgow School of Art

Voyageuse (2018)

British Film Institute, London (private screenings)

Glasgow Film Festival 2018

Picturehouse Central

Glasgow Film Theatre

Light House Cinema, Dublin

Watershed, Bristol

MAY MILES THOMAS' AWARDS

Best Film - Palm Springs International Short Film Festival 1997, *The Beauty of the Common Tool*

Fellowship - Nipkow Programme, Berlin 1997

Best Live Action Short shortlist - Academy Awards 1998, *The Beauty of the Common Tool*

Best Film, Best Actor - New York Silicon Alley Film Festival 2000, *One Life Stand*

Best Film, Best Director, Best Writer, Best Actress - BAFTA New Talent Awards 2000, *One Life Stand*

Best UK Feature commendation - Edinburgh International Film Festival 2000, *One Life Stand*

Outstanding Achievement Award - Scottish Screen 2000

Fellowship, National Endowment Science Technology and the Arts, 2000

Best Achievement in Production - British Independent Film Awards 2000, *One Life Stand*

European Screenplay Finalist - Sundance Institute/NHK International Filmmakers Awards 2001

Best Director, Cinematography - Festroia Festival Internacional de Cinema Portugal 2003, *Solid Air*

Pioneer to the Life of the Nation, HM QEII, 2003

Creative Scotland Award - Scottish Arts Council 2007, *The Devil's Plantation*

Best Interactive Project - BAFTA New Talent Awards 2010, *The Devil's Plantation* website

Cineworld Audience Award nomination - BAFTA Scotland 2013, *The Devil's Plantation*

Best Actress nomination - BAFTA Scotland 2018, *Voyageuse*

Discovery Award - British Independent Film Awards 2018, *Voyageuse*

CREDITS

Writer

May Miles Thomas

Director

May Miles Thomas

Producer

Owen Thomas

Additional Photography

George Cameron Geddes

Original Music Composed and Performed by

Euan Stevenson

Voice Recording

John Green & George Roberts, Voiceover Soho

Music Recording

Graeme Young, Chamber Studios

Douglas Whates

Casting Director

Frank Moisselle

Legal Representation

Kami Nagdhi, Clintons

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Somerville College, Oxford

Paul Stallan

Edna Thomas and family

Philip and Stephanie Thomas

Bruce Wallace

Original archive film shot by

Jozef 'Bob' Eisner

Gwynne Meyler Thomas

The Conet Project

extracts courtesy of Irdial-Discs

"Nocturne"

Andrzej Panufnik

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performed by The Polish Radio Orchestra

Conductor, Lukasz Borowicz

"Sinfonie Elegiaca"

Andrzej Panufnik

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Conductor, Lukasz Borowicz

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