

INTERVIEW

Joanna Kulig and Małgorzata Szumowska on *Elles*

VOL. 14 (FEBRUARY 2012) BY COLETTE DE CASTRO

Elles, which screened at this year's Berlinale, is a film about two young women living in France who prostitute themselves to pay for their studies. Colette de Castro met with Małgorzata Szumowska, the director of the film, and Joanna Kulig, who acted in the role of one of the prostitutes, to speak about the making of this piece...

Joanna, how did you end up coming to France and starring in the film?

JK: Well, our producers had the idea to make a film about student prostitutes. They were looking for an Eastern European director because they thought it would be a good idea to have an outsider's perspective on this problem. Then Małgorzata organised the money from the Polish Film Institute and Germany. Małgorzata saw me in my debut role, *Wednesday, Thursday Morning*, for which I won an award in Poland. She thought Alysia's role was for me. The problem was that I didn't speak French, but since I sing and play the piano it was easier to learn a new language: I have a musician's ear.

What was it like acting as a prostitute?

JK: It was quite difficult because these girls don't consider themselves to be prostitutes – they are students... They have a limited number of clients, usually three at most. I had to prepare psychologically – prepare questions for the characters and make an internal monologue. For me it's important to create a character and not use my own emotions. It was fantastic working with Juliette Binoche, we did lots of preparation work and I felt very comfortable with her. Because of the delicate subject matter, it was important to me that I get on well with the other actors.

Did you do any research for the role?

JK: Małgorzata met up with some girls, and I had some video resources to watch which really helped me.

Małgorzata, you made many documentaries before making this film. Did you consider making this film into a documentary?

MS: I've made three feature films and about ten documentaries. A documentary about this subject already exists. I didn't want to make a documentary because I think it's better to make a feature film. The script came from the producer; it was only one line, an idea. Then me and the co-writer we wrote the rest of the story. Still, in every film I use the documentary method: I follow the actors around, not vice versa. I don't force them to be stiff. I want the actors to be full of life. It's a very fluid method, observing how they behave.

JK: Yes, I do like this, it's the first time I've worked like this, I don't like being fixed. This way we can open everything to our mind and soul.

Why was the title changed from Sponsoring to Elles ?

MS: I don't know exactly. In Poland the title *Elles* is strange. But in English the title is *Elles* because the film is not only about the prostitutes. It's about women, old and young, about females. It's something more than just sponsoring. It is everything together.

What about prostitution among Parisian students?

MS: It's a different way of thinking. In the film, Alycja thinks "ah well it's not really prostitution, it's some kind of relationship". Like they say in the film, it's like cigarettes: you can't stop.

JK: It's not a new thing, it just hasn't been talked about much before. There's an empowerment in it. They don't have to go out onto the street, they say : "we choose, we decide". I think the script is a little controversial. But I'm proud of my character because I created the character myself. Now I'm just looking forward to the premiere in Poland.

Thank you for the interview.