



**ORDINARY PEOPLE, EXTRAORDINARY LIVES
THE CINEMA OF MÁRTA MÉSZÁROS**

Diary for My Children (Napló gyermekeimnek)

+ pre-recorded extended intro by Márta Mészáros (Saturday 24 July only)

Rejected by Communist censors for many years, this first part of the *Diary* trilogy shows Márta Mészáros expertly weaving between the personal and political. Adding archival footage to the narrative, she raises questions about cinematic representation and autobiographical cinema while keeping us fully engaged in the story of young orphan Juli (her alter-ego) as she returns to Hungary in 1947 to live with her Stalinist aunt. Superb charismatic performances draw us into the award-winning drama.

bfi.org.uk

The orphan Juli and her grandparents, the remnants of the former emigrant family, return home from the Soviet Union at the end of the 1940s. Her aunt, prison director Magda, attempts to bring up the resolutely stubborn teenager to have blind faith in communism. She does not succeed.

Juli remembers the past as her sculptor father was arrested by the KGB and her mother died. The teenager unconsciously understands that people have started to be arrested even in Hungary and the system of Soviet terror is back in operation. Juli matures into an independent woman as she researches memories of her parents. In this, only Magda's brother, János, is any help. She sees her father in János.

The director reveals the era in the refraction of this psychological, emotional triangle where even the smallest private motif is woven through by politics. By selecting this method of depiction, she undertook nothing less than showing how after 1947 the Soviet Union could 'export' the model of Stalinist authority to the countries of Eastern Europe using psychological and political manoeuvring.

**Eszter Fazekas, *Restored Films of Márta Mészáros*,
National Film Institute Hungary – Film Archive**

Márta Mészáros's engagement with her country's tragic history, as it unfolded within her own lifetime, would become the major theme of the trilogy that remains her best-known work. *Diary for My Children* was initially shelved by nervous officials for a couple of years before its premiere in 1984 at Cannes, where it won the Special Jury Prize. Although names were changed, the film was openly autobiographical, with protagonist Juli channelling the young Mészáros as she leavens the fraughtness of her relationship with her foster-mother with regular trips to the cinema.

Whereas Mészáros's previous films had been, if not wholly apolitical, at least discreetly circumspect, *Diary for My Children* firmly grasped the nettle of living under Stalinism, and the constant tension between revolutionary aspiration and grim reality. In its interweaving of a reconstruction of the late 1940s with flashbacks, real and fictionalised newsreels and fondly remembered cinema trips, Mészáros's film language became far more intricate than before.

She didn't plan from the outset to make a series, but the first film's international success led to the continuation of Juli's story in 1987's *Diary for My Loves* and 1990's *Diary for My Father and Mother*.

Michael Brooke, bfi.org.uk, 2 July 2021

A contemporary review

Although *Diary for My Children* resembles earlier films by Márta Mészáros released in Britain – even characters' names are the same – in many ways it is significantly different. While *Nine Months* and *The Two of Them* – about young women struggling for independence from men – were coloured by the bleakness of contemporary Communist society, they were above all about personal relationships. *Diary* is also built round personal lives, but is primarily about Hungarian society, the ignominiousness of the post-war era. In the earlier films the search for honesty and the refusal to compromise led to an independence that also meant personal loneliness. In *Diary*, Juli's struggle for independence is of a different nature and leads to a different sort of loneliness-exclusion from the privilege and protection of the new power elite. Independence here is not something to be achieved from men, but from the compromises and lies of a political system.

The film itself is a brave attempt to bequeath to the present generation a truthful picture of a buried history. Mészáros understands that, to mean anything, history has to be personal, to be about people's lives. Juli finds herself in a world where people disappear, people who had once been on the same side. In Juli's case, this means that her parents, even though dead, have to be hidden. The rewriting of history entails the writing out of her family. By interweaving the story of an individual, a family and a nation, the film becomes a kind of psychoanalysis of contemporary Hungarian society. Remembering becomes a struggle both for political and personal independence. The story of the present is punctuated by Juli's memories of the past: lyrical scenes of misty forest landscapes, a pastoral idyll in tune with the innocence of infant memory and an age of political innocence.

It is impossible, of course, to say to what extent *Diary for My Children* is autobiographical, but one might assume that Juli's other form of escape – to the comforting anonymity of the cinema – is Mészáros' own. One of Juli's childhood memories is of going to the village cinema with her mother – the screen supported by wooden poles and the surrounding forest serving as an amphitheatre. In Budapest, Juli escapes Magda – her present – and rediscovers her mother and her past at the cinema. There are newsreels and there is Garbo-different sorts of fantasy. Growing into a young woman, she mimics the gestures and make-up of the stars; gradually, in the late 40s, the stars disappear too and solid social realism takes their place.

Mészáros' own cinema has a rare intelligence and an eye for telling detail; she is best at the small statement, the quiet combination of curiosity and revolt. Only the portrait of Magda lacks nuance and ambiguity, her over-emphatic military rigidity making her more akin to a Lina Wertmüller character. It is obvious why *Diary for My Children* would make the bureaucrats nervous (completed in 1982, it was not allowed a screening in the West until 1984). Yet, while Mészáros' hatred of the post-war Communist regime and her insistence on remembering is admirable, she may herself have been forced to compromise, like many East European filmmakers, in order to avoid censorship. A critique of the past – however full of contemporary resonances – is always a substitute for a forbidden critique of the present.

Susan Barrowclough, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 1985

DIARY FOR MY CHILDREN (NAPLÓ GYERMEKEIMNEK)

Director: Márta Mészáros

Production Companies: Magyar Filmgyártó Vállalat,
Budapest Hungarofilm

Production Manager: Ferenc Szohár

Collaborators: Béla Balázs, Melinda Csöngé, Katalin Guelminó,
László Janicsek, Andrea Kormos, Lóránt Mertz, László Nagy,
Gabriella Okolicsányi, Sára Szakáts, Roland Tavi,
János Csáki, Rudolf Grätzer, Klára Iványi, Katalin Juhász,
Miklós Lapedáth, Eva Molnár, Jolán Niederhoffer, Antal Szabó,
Krisztina Szöllösy, Péter Timár

Assistant Directors: Dezső Koza, Kálmán Balogh

Screenplay: Márta Mészáros

Adaptation: Balázs Fakan

Hungarian Dialogue: András Szeredás

Director of Photography: Nyika Jancsó

Camera Operator: Ernő Haeseler

Editor: Éva Kármentő

Production Designer: Éva Martin

Set Decorator: József Sáritz

Costume Designer: Fanni Kemenes

Wardrobe: Zsuzsa Balai

Music: Zsolt Döme

Sound Editor: György Fék

Literary Consultant: Endre Vészi

Ágnes Csere

Teri Földi

Sándor Oszter

Vilmos Kun

Ildikó Bácsági

Eva Szabó

Éva Albert Almási

Kati Bùs

Péter Czibulás

Éva Gyulányi

Antal Horváth

György Bösze

Zorigt Cedengijn

György Gonda

Aliz Halda

Eszter Horváth

László Horváth

Attila Kaszás

Gábor Markaly

György Miklósy

Nándor Rékai

Kati Sir

György Tézli

Gyula Kéry

Lajos Kranitz

Kati Marton

Gyöngyi Polónyi

Ödön Rubold

Imre Surányi

Valéria Wágner

Hungary 1984

109 mins

Cast

Zsuzsa Czinkóczi (*Juli*)

Anna Polony (*Magda*)

Jan Nowicki (*János*)

Tamás Tóth (*János' son*)

Mari Szemes (*grandmother*)

Pál Zolnay (*grandfather*)

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THE CINEMA OF MÁRTA MÉSZÁROS

Diary for My Children (Napló gyermekeimnek)

Sat 24 Jul 14:10 (+ pre-recorded extended intro by Márta Mészáros);

Wed 28 Jul 17:50

Diary for My Loves (Napló szerelmeimnek)

Sat 24 Jul 17:30; Sat 31 Jul 20:30

Diary for My Father and Mother (Napló apámnak, anyámnak)

Sat 24 Jul 20:45; Sat 31 Jul 14:40

Nine Months (Kilenc hónap)

Sun 25 Jul 12:30

The Two of Them/Two Women (Ök ketten)

Mon 26 Jul 18:10

The Heiresses (Örökség)

Tue 27 Jul 20:30

The restorations in this season were made from the original camera negatives, original magnetic tape sounds and positive prints, supervised and presented by the National Film Institute Hungary – Film Archive. The restorations were carried out at the NFI Film Archive and Filmlab.

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