

De l'envoyée spéciale de NHM, Alice Kanterian : le film "Cunningham"/ une interview de Mko Malkhasyan



INTERVIEW WITH MKO* MALKHASYAN, THE DIRECTOR OF
PHOTOGRAPHY OF
"CUNNINGHAM"

Alice: "Cunningham" directed by Alla Kovgan takes the viewers to the artistic world of Merce

Cunningham, showing his evolution over three decades from 1944 till 1972, from his early years

as a struggling dancer in postwar New York to his emergence as one of the most visionary and

influential choreographers worldwide. I met Laura Weber, the line producer and associate

producer of "Cunningham" at the third edition of the El Gouna International Film Festival in

September, where she was presenting "Cunningham" as part of the documentaries selected for

the official competition. Laura looked after the project in Germany where it was mostly shot

aswell as in New York, and there was one day of shooting in France.

Alice: How did you get involved in the project?

Mko: Alla and me started working together since 2006. In 2012 I moved to NY and my

involvement in the project seemed quite natural. Along with exploration on Merce Cunningham's life and dances, Alla and me started scrutinizing 3D movie

technology. In 2013

we conducted our first tests, and it appeared unquestionable that we will be going toward that

direction in spite of tremendous difficulties, because only 3D would best depict Cunningham's

world of dances - complicated yet extremely spectacular.

Alice: You are originally from Yerevan but based since 10 years in New York, did you choose

together with Alla the locations? Where were you shooting?

Mko: In the beginning we believed that the film would be shot in New York, yet the majority of

it was made in Germany instead. This made us go through a long and challenging journey for

choice of locations. Alla suggested walking through all New York city from the top to bottom,

from East to West. At that time Alla just moved to NY from Boston, and her idea became the

best method for both of us to explore the city. Ironically we had only 1 day of shooting in NY.

Later I moved to LA in 2015, where I reside until this day.

Alice: There are some amazing views from the bird perspective over the buildings of NY, but

Laura said you had only one day of shooting in NY. How did you manage?

Mko: During that one day in NY we supposed to make shooting on the rooftop of Cunningham's

studio in Manhattan, which has a huge historical value. We planned to make it with a special

Drone. The whole crew was waiting until we get a special permit from the City for this kind of

shooting in NY, yet shooting day was fixed; we had only two days left. Acquiring the permit

became almost impossible; it was devastating moment for all of us. I was seating in a Manhattan

café, waiting Alla to join, when I looked up at a touristic helicopter hovering in the sky. When

Alla came I said "Look up!" The decision was made instantly. Thanks to our producers' amazing

job in two days we were flying over the city and filming the first and last scenes of the movie

from the helicopter.

Alice: I loved the feeling of been immersed in the world of dancing, the result is

spectacular, I didn't feel dizzy at all or even bored. Comparing with "Tina" by Wim Wenders, "Cunningham" is much more entertaining: the dance of the witches "Winterbranch" or the choreography in "Rainforest" when dancers are interacting with Andy Warhol's "Silver clouds". These are metallic pillows floating around the space created for Merce by his friend Andy Warhol, both belonged to the community, the members were generous to each other. His pure joy while watching his so called "Silver Clouds" is recorded, to my surprise, I never heard such a long sentence from him, Andy Warhol must have really enjoyed himself while watching his balloons floating around. Having worked with Kovgan on all her projects for screen and stage you have a deep understanding of choreography on screen, but this film is shot in 3D, how difficult was it to visualize space? Alla was commenting at the screening during the Filmfest Hamburg early October that in the beginning she didn't want to choose a project about Merce Cunningham because she was fearing not to be able to visualize his technique of embracing the whole space. Mko: Alla and me watched "Pina" many times and from the beginning it became clear that we are going to make an absolutely different movie. From "Pina" we got left the 3D and 2 amazing members of my team: French stereographer Josephine Deroche and Terry Pouffary (DIT). They brought their expertise and competence into the film. Although Merce Cunningham lived and created for a long time, almost 90 years, Alla decided to stop on 1944-1972 years, as she thought that it was the best period in Merce's creative life. It was a great period of collaboration with New Yorkers geniuses Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Andy Warhol, and others. At certain point, I feel lucky that I was able to become a part of this important and unique film, which also put tremendous responsibility on

me.

Although any film has its difficulties, "Cunningham" became a big challenge for me. The

unknown world of 3D and the exploration of the complexity of Cunningham's dances made me

review the whole journey of my creative life. I hope the film will be appreciated by the

audience and will find its unique place in the world of art.

Alice: You are hailed as a true master of light, is 3D more difficult to visualise than normally,

what did you have to take into consideration?

Mko: I really love "the light" tremendously and I almost always try to "tell" the story of the

movies using the light. In this movie, in addition I got the 3D as a tool in my hand. Actually

everything seemed different compared to regular filming; from special 3D rig to the perception

of the time and space in the 3D environment. We all were so much challenged and exhausted by

the 3D technology, but at the same time we all realized that this unique experience may never

revisit us again.

Alice: Atom Egoyan and Melik Karapetyan were in the audience, how are you connected?

Mko: I know Melik Karapetyan for a very long time and I am sure that any one who is associated

to movie in any ways in Armenia knows him well. In 2000 Merik returned back to Armenia from

United States with a huge film collection and became the "film-enlightener" for my generation.

Melik screened many famous as well as distinct masterpieces for film-affiliated people like me.

Later exactly Melik introduced me to Alla Kovgan.

Atom Egoyan, I believe, is well-known for everyone; I always greatly enjoyed his movies.

Unfortunately I did not have chance to know him in-person, but hopefully I will have an

opportunity to meet him in future.

Alice: What are you working at for the moment and what are your future projects?

Mko: As many other "superstitious" artists, I will not open the parenthesis now. I will briefly say

that this year I had an opportunity to meet a quite talented young director and scriptwriter

Michael Aloyan here in LA. He offered to make a project together. When I read his script I had

no doubts that I am dealing with a very gifted man. If everything goes smoothly the film will be

shot next year in spring. It is a historical film, around WWII theme and will be shot in Europe.

*Mko (Mego) est le diminutif du prénom Meguerdich.