



MOVIES

'Lillian': Film Review | Cannes 2019

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Ulrich Seidl Filmproduktion

THE BOTTOM LINE

A fascinating walk through a mysterious land.



Acclaimed Austrian filmmaker Andreas Horvath retells the true story of a woman who walked from New York to Alaska.

Sometime in the winter of 1926 or the spring of 1927, Lillian Alling set out to cross the U.S. and Canada on foot. She was an emigrant, probably Russian, who spoke no English and had no money. Although little is known about her epic journey from New York to Alaska, it has inspired books, an opera and now Andreas Horvath's long-in-the-making feature film *Lillian*. The Austrian photographer and director, who has won major awards for docs like *This Ain't No Heartland* (2004) and *Earth's Golden Playground* (2013), combines his knowledge of the American Midwest and the Yukon in an enigmatic road movie — never was a term more descriptive — that is at once a portrait of female spirit and determination and a reflection on the loneliness at the heart of America today.

His modern-day *Lillian* is played with true grit by newcomer Patrycja Planik, who says not a word during the whole film. It's a role that would test the mettle of much more experienced actresses, but Planik handles the challenge with a kind of stubborn naivete that is intriguing to watch. Some viewers may miss the talk and the emotional reactions that are normally part and parcel of endurance films. Planik's stoic face reflects little or no emotion during her trials, and Horvath seems completely unperturbed about the questions her presence raises — Who is she? What is she after? Nor does the film provide any answers. It simply recounts her grueling journey down lonely, deserted highways and through vistas of breathtaking beauty.

What isn't so beautiful is the bleak desolation of the U.S. dotted with the occasional smoking factory, impoverished small towns, the parody of a rodeo. We meet Lillian, a 30-ish girl with high cheekbones and classic features, in the New York office of a porn producer. Skin-crawling images of women play on monitors behind him. The girl's visa has expired and she has no tax number or insurance, so he can't hire her. "Go back to Russia, it's the land of opportunity," he leers.

She takes him literally and in the next shot she is already walking. She breaks into a weekend house in the woods and finds a jar of cheese balls and a map of the U.S. That night she plans her route.

While much of the film has the air of a European filmmaker marveling at America, Lillian in her ill-fitting clothes stolen from a laundromat looks more like an alien on a visit to Earth. Those who sees her rummaging through a thrift shop or flea market for clothes might assume she's a lost runaway, and no one makes a fuss when she walks out of the store without paying.

The original *Lillian* may not have had such easy opportunities to gear up, but one would hope she ran into more charitable strangers. People don't bother the girl, not even a pack of cross-country bikers; they look the other way not to see her poverty and neediness. The locals themselves appear to be staring into a bleak future after flash flooding destroyed their towns, or a future pipeline threatens their reservation. There are so many abandoned farmhouses with their roofs falling in.

Lillian may be a mysterious character, but Horvath grounds her journey as a walker in everyday problems. She sleeps in drainage pipes and under viaducts when no empty houses are available; she chews a raw ear of corn from a farmer's field; swipes a watermelon at a country fair where a demolition derby is in progress; washes herself in public toilets. When she gets her period, she cleans her panties in a river.

En route, she suffers heat and cold, hunger and thirst. Horvath's score turns sinister and menacing. But still she trudges on through the metaphorical emptiness of America, and the omnipresent cheer of radio announcers who comment on the big topics of life: the weather, sports, money. "We want the best that we can buy," they confide. Road signs read, "Smile! Your Mom chose life" and "Where is your family?" Horvath's documentary training keeps him from spelling things out any more, which in any case would be superfluous.

Her one brush with the law is a humorous encounter with a Nebraska sheriff who hears about the walker on his two-way radio and checks her out using classic hands-on-the-hood technique. In the end, he drives her to the county line and gives her some well-meant advice regarding a girl traveling alone. Then he gives her his own leather sheriff's jacket — the biggest act of generosity towards young Lillian in the whole film.

She faces two frightening incidents. The first is in Iowa, where she is chased through a vast cornfield by a lecherous farmer, played with creepy realism by production manager Chris Shaw. The other takes place in the Badlands of South Dakota, where Horvath's camera conveys a sense of the impossible odds Lillian faces traversing such a hostile landscape. As her journey progresses into the cold north and winter comes, the mystery of nature turns into something almost metaphysical. Her eyes reflect the flashing green lights of the Aurora Borealis in a poignant scene that invites the viewer to ponder.



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Cast: Patrycja Planik, Chris Shaw, Albert Lee

Director-screenwriter-director of photography-music: Andreas Horvath

Producers: George Aschauer, Ulrich Seidl

Costume designer: Tanja Hausner

Editor: Michael Palm

Venue: Cannes Film Festival (Directors' Fortnight)

World sales: Cercamon (Dubai)

130 minutes

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