

A different feel: Maria Luisa Bemberg

By Sarah Gristwood

Argentinian filmmaker, *Maria Luisa Bemberg* came late to film-making but has never been afraid to stick her neck out.

There aren't that many avowedly feminist directors making artistically successful films for a general audience. And there aren't many of them who have a grandchild for each picture. *Maria Luisa Bemberg* was 50 before the world of film-making opened up to her 20 years ago.

The half dozen acclaimed features she has made since have each boasted an extraordinary female protagonist in conflict with her surroundings; a conflict which goes beyond the immediate context of *Bemberg's* native Argentina. Her latest *We Don't Want To Talk About It*, is no exception. "Charlotte stands for all of us who are different," *Bemberg* says.

In fact the real protagonist of *We Don't Want To Talk About It* is not Charlotte but her mother Donna Leonor - a woman whose pride is shattered when her daughter is born (in the film's harsh term) "a dwarf". Leonor's reaction, in the small town Argentina of 50 years ago, is to impose a wall of silence as the film takes on the poetic, Felliniesque tone of a fable.

"It's my most risky film," *Bemberg* says. "It was only when I had finished it I realised

it is my most personal one, too. In choosing to do a fable I needed the complicity of the audience: if they don't believe in it, they'll walk. But I don't want any of that psychoanalytical stuff."

Marcello Mastroianni plays the cultivated older man who falls passionately in love with the tiny Charlotte. But in the end Charlotte's eyes are set on a stranger, more independent, destiny.

In allegorical terms (a concept of which *Bemberg* has never been afraid), the repressive mother represents Argentina - and anyway, she says, women often are repressive, having learnt domination from their own mother, and from a culture which kept the status quo that way. "This suffocating little town is the essence of what human beings are. Charlotte is the only person there who's not a dwarf. And her decision at the end feeds something in me."

"What interests me is that, through her denial, the mother creates her own hell. A devouring, devoted mother - I see so many of them, especially in very Catholic countries." *Bemberg* has made explicit the parallels between the parent's role and that of the director on set, and there was an element of the good mother in her treatment of the first-time actress who played Charlotte.

"If you are trying to get close to art, it's very connected with ethics. She couldn't step out of her character when she went home at night, so I was obsessed by taking care of her. She was surrounded by love and respect."

"Mastroianni said he understood how his character could fall in love with her. She is anybody who follows their own inner voices," says *Bemberg*, acknowledging it was late in life before she was able to follow her own.

"You don't know what hell it's been for women of my generation, how difficult to trust your own voices," she says. *Bemberg* was raised on a large estancia. Her brief marriage gave her four children. Realising the life of an upper class wife was not

autobiographical," says *Bemberg*, whose own liberation was slowed by asphyxiating effects of her privileged life.

Her second script was another eye-opener - a man torn between a traditional wife and an independent mistress. She decided to direct the next film herself: "No man can understand what is happening with the new awareness of women," she said then.

But the script for *Senora De Nadie*, the story of a woman who leaves her husband and discovers that Mrs. Nobody is Somebody in her own right, was censored by the regime as threatening to family life, and filmed only in 1982. After *Canilla* and *Miss Mary* came *I The Worst Of All*, story of the 16th century nun-poet *Juana Inez de la Cruz*.

"She demanded the right to exist, the right to be a poet, an anarchist, an artist. She refused to be manoeuvred by her surroundings. In the final analysis the theme common to all my films is that of freedom, even

though it's not deliberately so."

All her films have been hits in Argentina, and hailed abroad. But *Bemberg* only wishes there were more of them. "Instead of six films I could have had 25, if it had all happened earlier. But it's over. No point in bitching. Now my obsession is to make one or two more movies while I still can."

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enough, she co-founded a feminist group before the advent of the military regime effectively closed all such activity down.

She entered film for ideological reasons; to propose a different image of women on screen. The first film she scripted - *A Woman's Story* (1972) - was the tale of a rich and anguished wife which caused a furore among macho husbands in the audience. "Very