



# THE DEATHLESS WOMAN

'A powerful and poetic account of WWII Roma genocide and its contemporary resurrection. Hugely successful on both an artistic and a political level, it is a remarkable piece of work.'

Trisha Tuttle (BFI London Film Festival Director)

For screening link, director interview, and all other queries:

Roz Mortimer: 07779 399 563, [films@wonderdog.co.uk](mailto:films@wonderdog.co.uk)

Filmotor: [michaela@filmotor.com](mailto:michaela@filmotor.com)

The Deathless Woman - Director: Roz Mortimer, 89 Mins, UK 2019



**Artists' Moving  
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# THE DEATHLESS WOMAN

## SHORT SYNOPSIS (113 words)

The Deathless Woman is a ghost story for the 21st Century.

This urgent and magical hybrid documentary fluidly interweaves fantastical re-imaginings of buried secrets with a ghostly narration and direct to camera testimony from survivors and witnesses of historic and contemporary crimes against the Roma in Poland and Hungary.

A Roma woman buried alive in a forest in Poland during WWII returns to haunt us, uncovering a history of atrocities against the Roma in Europe. She is the Deathless Woman. Motivated by rage, she rises from her grave to draw our attention to the persecution of the Roma people from the 1940s to the neo-Nazi hate crimes of the present day.

## LONG SYNOPSIS (274 words)

Director and Writer: Roz Mortimer. Cast: Iveta Kokyová, Loren O'Dair, Oliver Malik.  
89 Mins, cert tbc, UK 2019. DCP

The Deathless Woman is a ghost story for the 21st Century.

When a series of uncanny events lead The Seeker to a forest in Poland she meets Zofia, a distraught elderly woman who hands her a note written in Polish that she cannot understand. Returning months later with an interpreter she hears the story of The Deathless Woman, a Roma matriarch who was buried alive in the forest by German soldiers in 1942.

The Deathless Woman begins to haunt The Seeker, leading her and us on an other-worldly and emotionally-charged journey from the Nazi era to the present day, revealing stories of genocide and resistance that have been omitted from the history books.

The Deathless Woman's narrative draws us from the scene of her death to other sites of Roma persecution. She hovers above the Gypsy Camp at Birkenau on the night the Roma revolt against their Nazi captors. She glides under the man-made lake in Várpalota that covers the land where 118 women and children were massacred in 1945. She passes through the burnt-out house in Tatárszentgyörgy where neo-Nazis murdered a Roma family in 2009. She crosses the border into the virtual realm of digital landscapes of the Internet, encountering hate speech and Olah Action, a racist 'shoot-em-up' video game where in 2005 players were invited to gun down unarmed Roma as they ran through the streets.

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# THE DEATHLESS WOMAN

## A HAUNTING

*What do you do when there is no record of something? When there is nothing visible left?*

The Deathless Woman is historically accurate, yet it is also a ghost story reminiscent of the work of Thai filmmaker [Apichatpong Weerasethakul](#) and his 'blend of reality and rationality with spirituality and mysticism'.

The film is a response to the virtual erasure of the history of Roma from our cultural memory of the Holocaust. It seeks to open debate and inspire social change by exploring traumatic memory through an engagement with haunting, and through the use of fantasy within a documentary context.

The Deathless Woman comes out of a prolonged period of research by writer-director Roz Mortimer, who has been working with Roma communities in London, Poland and Hungary for over 8 years. The Deathless Woman builds on [two earlier short films](#) and a [blog](#) by addressing haunting as a device to collapse time and space and bring historic sites of memory into direct dialogue with important socio-political issues of the present day.

*It's about to rain. Getting darker,  
The leaves, the leaves have long fallen from the trees.  
No monument stands, except in the minds of the old.  
Woods and land...woods and land bore witness.  
This older man declares, 'Roma are buried here, do not disturb this land'.*



# THE DEATHLESS WOMAN

## THE ROMA HOLOCAUST

The Deathless Woman was made after writer-director Roz Mortimer undertook a prolonged period of research in archives and travelled extensively in Central and Eastern Europe to interview people and uncover unmemorialised sites of atrocity against the Roma.

She participated in Roma memorial events in Poland, worked with Roma communities in London and Poland and Roma activists and academics, many of whom were attached to this project as consultants. Collecting testimonies from Roma and elderly witnesses who publicly shared their own family's experiences during WWII and beyond for the first time left an acute sense of responsibility to make these stories heard.

Up to 500,000 Roma are believed to have been killed during WWII, possibly half of the population in Europe at that time, and to this day Roma activists battle for recognition of this event. It was finally acknowledged as genocide by West Germany in 1982.

The Roma are today still one of the most marginalised minority ethnic groups in Europe. However, despite sharing a common language (Romani) and heritage, the Roma are also a diverse range of groups who do not worship a single faith - factors which may have contributed to a lack of awareness of the Roma Holocaust, also known as Porajmos (the Devouring).

The Deathless Woman attempts to visualize and connect the traumatic past of Roma to other traumatic pasts and to the traumatic present, offering a space for reflection on past histories and discussion about how we can move towards a more tolerant society.





# THE DEATHLESS WOMAN

## TABLEAUX VIVANTS

The Deathless Woman features a number of tableaux vivants ('living pictures' - frozen in time) that were created in the film studio as theatrical and fantastical spaces.

Drawing on the techniques of documentary theatre – as opposed to documentary film – inspiration was taken from theatre companies such as [Hotel Modern](#) who use miniature film sets, puppets, animals, actors and more, to recount true and invented tales of human fragility. The aim was to create a film that breaks the frame of the traditional Holocaust documentary.

Each of the tableau vivant scenes relates to a traumatic moment in history (for instance, the Roma uprising at Birkenau; the massacre of Roma at Lake Grabler in Várpalota; the disinterment of the body of The Deathless Woman; the hate-space of inside the Internet).

These tableaux vivants are visualised by Mortimer as subversive spaces within the film where emotion is intensified, and trauma can be explored. Rather than the traditional tableau (where the audience is positioned outside the frame looking in), in these tableaux the camera enters these fantastical spaces to roam around inside the scene, thus creating a moving and subjective experience for the viewer that echoes the subjective memory of the witnesses and draws our attention to how we construct our understanding of the world.



# THE DEATHLESS WOMAN

## DIRECTORS STATEMENT

I was in Poland researching a different film when an uncanny series of events led me to Zofia, an elderly woman who took me to a forest clearing and showed me an indentation in the ground, which marked the site of a mass grave from 1942. Visibly upset, she thrust a blue post-it-note into my hand. I didn't have an interpreter with me that day, so couldn't understand what she was saying, but I knew I had to return.

Nine months later, as we sat in her living room, Zofia told me the story of a Roma woman who was buried alive by Nazi soldiers in the forest.

The next day, I began to write the story of the Deathless Woman. I drew on all the detailed research I had been doing into the 'forgotten' history of the genocide of the Roma during WWII, and the many events that have followed. I wrote the story in her voice; it was as if she'd possessed me. Her voice was charged and angry. I envisaged her rage as a physical force capable of setting fire to the forest, of cursing her killers, of destroying living beings. She rose up out of her grave and skimmed over forests and villages to look down and witness terrible events.

Then I wrote in my own voice, telling the story of how I came to find her grave. I imagined her watching me as I researched the history of the Roma, believing it was no accident that I'd found myself at her grave. She watched as I looked for her, and in the process of looking for her, I found other stories that deserved to be heard, yet had never been recorded.

These stories of great urgency and relevance to the racism and prejudice rising again in the world today underpin my film. The Deathless Woman is my response as an artist and filmmaker to the erasure of the history of Roma people from our cultural memory. Through the Seeker's testimony the film also interrogates what such an erasure can mean to us now and in the future. The film visually exhumes the Roma's buried and traumatic past and connects it to our traumatic present.

The project's organic evolution began eight years ago with fieldwork in Europe and has continued since then with the support and collaboration of Roma communities in the UK, Poland and Hungary. I shaped this raw material into a cinematic structure, integrating documentary evidence from other voices and witnesses, then drafted the narrative of my own quest and encounter with the Deathless Woman. I have taken a highly innovative approach that connects psychic and physical haunting, theatrical re-enactment, and character-driven narrative, all within a documentary context.

# THE DEATHLESS WOMAN

## CREW BIOGRAPHIES

### DIRECTOR - ROZ MORTIMER

Roz Mortimer is an artist, writer and independent filmmaker who lives and works in London. She initially trained as a textile artist and exhibited installation and sculptural work before starting to make films in 1995. She has an MA in Visual Sociology and a PhD in Documentary Film, teaches alternative documentary practice at universities in the UK and USA and is currently Senior Lecturer in Film at University for the Creative Arts. Her work has been supported by Arts Council England, Wellcome Trust, Rockefeller Foundation, British Council, Film London, Animate Projects and Channel 4 Television. Her award-winning short and mid-length films have been widely screened around the world in cinemas, galleries, online and on TV and include: *This is History*, *The Flayed Horse*, *Passages*, *Invisible*, *Tales from the Arctic Circle*, *Safety Tips for Kids*, *Gender Trouble*, *Dog of My Dreams*, *Neverland*, *Airshow*, *Wormcharmer* and *Bloodsports for Girls*. Roz's genre-breaking films blur the boundaries between staged theatre and documentary whilst challenging our social and political understanding of the world. *The Deathless Woman* is her first scripted feature.

### EDITOR - DANIEL GODDARD

Daniel Goddard is an award-winning editor who has worked with artists and filmmakers such as Clio Barnard (*The Arbor*), Gilliam Wearing (*Self Made*), Sally Potter (*Yes*), Jane and Louise Wilson (*Toxic Camera; Undead Sun*), Simon Pummell (*Body song*), John Maybury (*Love is the Devil*), Jonathan Caouette (*All Tomorrow's Parties*).

### DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY - PETER EMERY

Peter Emery is a cinematographer who works across drama, art projects and documentary. He has shot the award-winning documentary features *Lost & Sound* (Lindsey Dryden) and *Marley* (Kevin Macdonald), and has collaborated with artists Kathleen Herbert, Shelly Love and Lucy Cash.

### COMPOSER - STEFANS SMITH

Stefan Smith is a Composer, Sound Designer and Electronic Musician. He was the principal Sound Designer/Composer on the Dau cinematic cycle, including the acclaimed feature *Dau: Natasha* which premiered at Berlinale 2020. His work has been included in Philippe Parreno's *Anywhen* in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall and Celine fashion shows. He recently released his debut LP on Sapiens records.

### SCRIPT EDITOR - MARGARET GLOVER

Margaret Glover is an award-winning writer and producer whose credits as writer include *Shadows in the Sun* (2009), best original screenplay at Houston Worldfest, and as producer, *Blackbird* (2013), Michael Powell Award nominee and winner 'Best of the Fest' at Edinburgh International Film Festival. Margaret's professional profile includes festival juries, masterclasses, development and script consultancies for UK and European producers, along with workshops for EU Media funded EKRAN, Gulbenkian Foundation Portugal and Royal Film Commission Jordan

# THE DEATHLESS WOMAN

## CAST BIOGRAPHIES

### THE SEEKER - LOREN O'DAIR

Loren O'Dair trained at Ecole Jacques Lecoq, Paris. She has recently played the Fool in King Lear at the Globe Theatre, the title role in Sherlock Holmes (USA tour), Reza in Once (West End), Mojo in The Grinning Man (West End) and a Lost Boy in the National Theatre production of Peter Pan at the new Troubadour White City Theatre. She has also performed with Odin Teatret in Denmark and Poland. Loren spent two summers in Slatina, Romania in the early 2000s volunteering in orphanages and day care centres. More recently she helped run the charity Crew for Calais, bringing together people from the theatre and creative industries to help refugees. Vault Festival commissioned Loren to make a gig theatre show based on a recent Refugee Rights Data Report, which was then remounted at Battersea Arts Centre as part of Refugee Week. Loren is also a musician and aerialist.

### THE DEATHLESS WOMAN (VOICE) - IVETA KOKYOVÁ

Iveta Kokyová was born in Hořice, Czech Republic to a Slovak-Romani mother, and a Vlach-Roma father. A trained mechanical machinist she has also worked as a cleaning lady and a packer. She began her education at 35 years old and is currently studying for a Masters in Romani Studies at Charles University in Prague. Iveta regularly performs in public as a moderator and reporter for the Romea TV, Roma Internet television; is a consultant for the non-profit organization Tichý Svět (Silent World); judge of the Romano Suno (Romani Dream) literary competition; and is a lecturer in Romani language at Vaker Romanes (Speak Romani) and at Charles University. *The Deathless Woman* is her first film

### BOY - OLIVER MALIK

Oliver Malik is a young Roma activist whose aim is to raise awareness about Romany culture and heritage amongst non-Roma young people with the hope of challenging discrimination against Roma in London and beyond. He was born in the UK to a Lovari Roma mother and many of his extended family still live a traditional Roma life and speak Lovari at home. His ambition is to go to drama school and become an actor. *The Deathless Woman* is his first film.



# THE DEATHLESS WOMAN

## CAST & CREW

Production Company: Wonderdog Films

Writer-Director-Producer: Roz Mortimer

Director of Photography: Peter Emery

Editor: Daniel Goddard

Sound Editor: Chu-Li Shewring

Composer: Stefan Smith

Script Editor: Margaret Glover

Casting Director: Lucy Casson

Production Designer: Roz Mortimer

## WITNESSES

Witnesses from Poland (Bielcza, Szczurowa, Żabno, Borzęcin)

Witnesses from Hungary (Várpalota, Tatárszentgyörgy)

## CAST

The voice of The Deathless Woman: Iveta Kokyová

The Seeker: Loren O'Dair

The Boy: Oliver Malik

## SUPPORTED BY

Film London Artist's Moving Image Network (FLAMIN)

Arts Council England

The Elephant Trust

Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM), University of Westminster

## PROJECT INFORMATION

Original Title: The Deathless Woman

Country: UK

Director: Roz Mortimer

Language: Romani (Lovari dialect), English, Polish, Hungarian

Subtitles: English

Year: 2019

Premiere: BFI London Film Festival 2019

Genre: Hybrid Documentary

Format: DCP

Sound: 5.1

Running Time: 89 min.

## CONTACT

+44 (0)7779 399563

films@wonder-dog.co.uk

[wonder-dog.co.uk](http://wonder-dog.co.uk)

[thedeathlesswoman.com](http://thedeathlesswoman.com)

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Twitter: @deathlesswoman

Facebook: @thedeathlesswoman