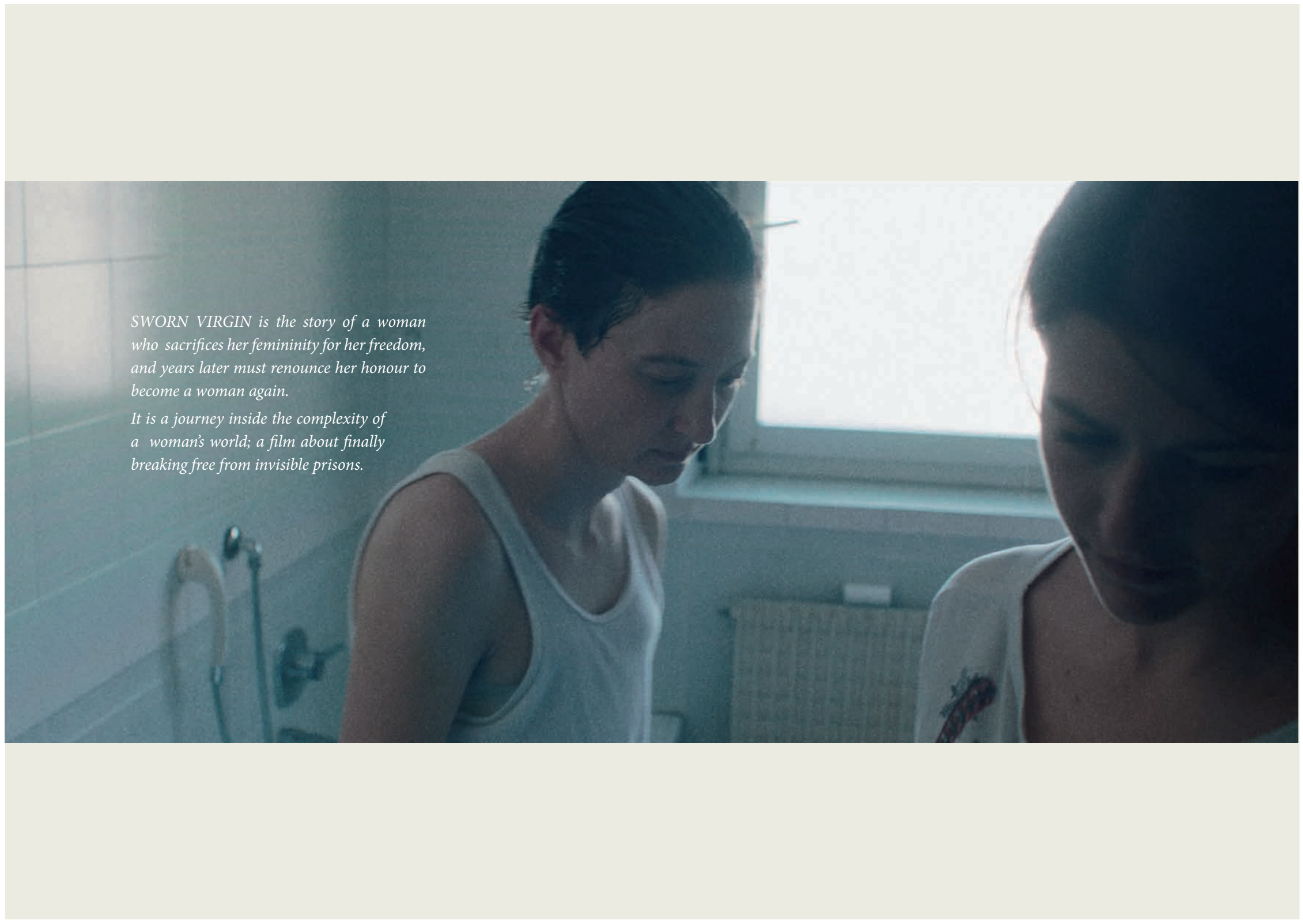


Berlinale  
65<sup>th</sup> Internationale  
Filmfestspiele  
Berlin  
Competition

# SWORN VIRGIN

A FILM BY  
**LAURA BISPURI**





*SWORN VIRGIN is the story of a woman who sacrifices her femininity for her freedom, and years later must renounce her honour to become a woman again.*

*It is a journey inside the complexity of a woman's world; a film about finally breaking free from invisible prisons.*

## SYNOPSIS

In de kille en verlaten Albanese bergen leven de vrouwen uit het dorp volgens strenge en ouderwetse regels. Hana Doda (Alba Rohrwacher) besluit al op jonge leeftijd niet op deze wijze te willen leven en kiest voor een eeuwenoude traditie: ze zweert eeuwig maagd te blijven en te leven als een man. Met geweer op zak trekt Hana, nu bekend als de man Mark Doda, de bergen in en leeft daar tien jaar in isolement. Maar de herinneringen aan haar zus Lila, die op 14-jarige leeftijd het dorp ontvluchtte, doen haar besluiten af te reizen naar het bruisende Milaan voor een emotionele familiereünie. Het vrije leven voor vrouwen bevalt Hana en trekt zij stap voor stap haar geloften om als man en maagd te leven weer in.

SWORN VIRGIN volgt een vrouw op weg naar haar vrijheid, over de overweldigende Albanese bergen tot in Italië. De film ging in première op het filmfestival van Berlijn 2015 en werd genomineerd voor de Gouden Beer.



# SWORN VIRGINS

The right for a woman to declare herself a man, to behave like a man and gain all the rights that the Kanun reserves exclusively for men is recognised. There is evidence that this phenomenon has been going on for at least 200 years.

There are still a few cases today: approximately 100 cases in Kosovo and the areas near the Albanian border. This phenomenon was previously also present in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia.

It is assumed that the woman is a virgin, and consequently the conversion occurs on reaching sexual maturity. Total abstinence from sexual life is demanded, the reason why these women (“burrnesh”) are also known as sworn virgins (“virgjinat e bitume”). They are women who dress like men, as men’s clothing is seen as an element that legitimates the conversion oath, traditionally a ceremony before 12 men of the village. After the oath, the virgin takes on everyday male behaviour. She takes a man’s name, she is allowed to carry a weapon, smoke and drink with men in rooms where women are not permitted. They also acquire the right to sell, buy and manage property and can even take part in war or vendettas between clans. They have equal rights to men, but they can never marry or have relations with anyone of either sex.





# THE KANUN

The Kanun is the most important set of traditional Albanian tribal law. For centuries the Kanun has regulated social life in Albania, especially in the remote northern areas (and into Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro). The code deals with both civil and criminal law regulating various aspects of life: family, marriage, contracts, work, property, crimes against honor, and compensation for damages.

Giving one's word, blood feud, and absolute loyalty between family members, characterize an Albanian as a "man of honor". When it comes to honor, the Kanun is categorical: "In the eyes of the law a dishonored man is considered dead". Additionally, "blood cannot be paid for with a fine" and honor is not restored, not even by monetary compensation.

Furthermore, "a dishonored man does not appeal for justice and the valiant take justice into their own hands".

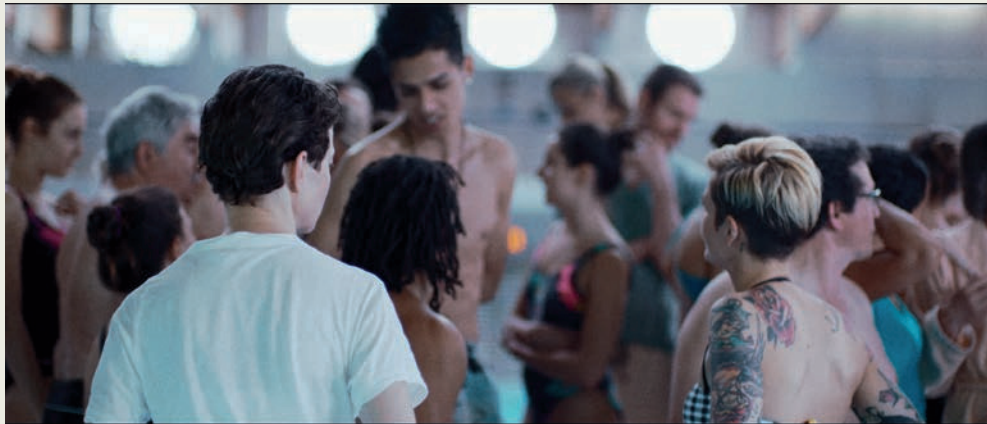
The sense of family is very strong; a patriarchal-type family system is based on the clan: an extended family with the eldest male as head.

Traditionally, the life of a woman is severely conditioned by male figures. The Kanun refers to women as "a sack, made to endure weight and work". Women have minimal decisional power. They cannot own property, and they are not included in blood feuds.

# COMMENTS FROM WRITER-DIRECTOR LAURA BISPURI

## SYMBOL OF A UNIVERSAL CONDITION

This film was inspired by the book by Elvira Dones (Italian publisher: Feltrinelli, 2007). I fought to make this movie, pushed by a great love for the character of Hana/Mark, and by a sense of responsibility to the story, what I feel is a metaphor of the relationship between female freedom and the world. From the start, I was intrigued by the story's very unique dimension in terms of character, social topic and specific isolated geographical location. Yet I was confident that all this could touch on much wider and universal issues. *SWORN VIRGIN* shares aspects of the Albanian culture, in particular that of village life in the remote northern mountains: the Kanun traditional laws of blood, honor, revenge, women's roles, family clans. All topics that have been rarely seen in cinema and that I have chosen to use as a symbol of a more general condition.



## A FROZEN BODY

This is a film about the body, a frozen body. A body that cannot be either male or female; or that is both male and female. The Italian path of my character has always been for me a slow and progressive defrosting of a body. Mark is scared but also curious. He searches, experiments, opens up and then closes up again. Then finally, he slowly frees herself. But what is important to me is that at the end of the film Mark not only is Hana again, but finally comprises both sides in herself. In the final scene in the bar, I could have put Hana wearing high heels or a skirt, but it would have looked fake. I would have had the feeling of betraying Mark. I wanted to still recognize Mark, but also see some discreet physical traces of the profound journey she makes.







## MOUNTAINS OF THE DAMNED

We shot in the mountains of Northern Albania, at the border with Kosovo. They are known as the Mountains of the Damned because they are so hard and mysterious. We shot at a dead end in the mountains. Along this road there are some tiny villages, actually made of a few scattered houses, without any kind of town center. This is rough and rocky terrain. The mentality was as you'd expect from such an isolated area; Kanun law is quite rooted. The closest stores are one-hour away by car. Most villagers do not even have a car; they walk or ride. There is a different conception of space and time. We tried to make ourselves known to the villagers slowly, step-by-step. We involved many villagers on the shoot and we didn't have many problems, even if the working conditions were not easy.

## LOVE MEANS DEATH

I visited those mountains several times during the long preparation of the film. I was able to meet several sworn virgins of very different ages. One of them was only 35 years old. She was very tough and said things like "Love means death to me". They all have different reasons for choosing to become sworn virgins. Their stories are very diverse, but what is similar is that they often made the choice in their teens, so with a relative consciousness. Most of them are old as this phenomenon is disappearing, but there are still sworn virgins living isolated in those mountains. There are two moments in the film where a real sworn virgin appears.



## A MUTUAL HEAVY PAST

The relationship between Hana and Lila is an important axis in the film. They have a warm relationship, nourished by a mutual heavy past. We see this immediately, then slowly understand why. Hana/Mark upsets the balance of Lila's home. This happens first when they are children as Hana becomes the beloved step-daughter of Lila's father. Mark upsets adult Lila's home when he arrives in Italy without a place to stay. Lila is the love of Mark's life, a soulmate, a point of refuge.

I think I met with every Albanian and Kosovan actress of that age group. As soon as I met Flonja Kodheli all my doubts vanished. I think she and Alba Rohrwacher worked terrific together, and with them I could really achieve what I wanted.



## YOUNG LILA AND HANA

The two Albanian girls who play young Lila and Hana were a gift of the region. They are sisters who actually live in those mountains. When I was location scouting, I took a picture of them standing in front of the house. The following summer, I went back and I found them standing exactly in the same position. I took another photo of them. When I compared the girls' photo to Alba and Flonja, I was immediately struck by the incredible resemblance. Working with them wasn't easy, mostly because of the language. I had someone able to translate their mountain dialect, but in the end, particularly with little Hana, I managed to communicate directly. I still do not know how, but I did. She is a very emotional girl, and she gave all she had on the set. I love working with teenagers, and also this time I had a great experience.





## ALBA ROHRWACHER AS HANA/MARK

I developed an almost symbiotic relationship with Alba Rohrwacher. On the set I felt a strong closeness to her. We were not Laura and Alba; we were Mark. I was sure Alba was perfect for the role from the very first moment I started writing the script. I convinced her to become a man, to speak Albanian, to abandon so many things. When she committed to this adventure, she gave all of herself. The most beautiful thing for me is that she really loved this character as much as I did. I wanted her to strip the layers of herself in search of the heart of the character. We had a lot of fun experimenting with coarse, alpha male attitudes. Mark amused us and moved us at the same time.

## TRANSFORMING ALBA

I wanted to harden Alba's physical appearance. We made her hair and eyes darker. Finding the right hairstyle wasn't easy. I didn't want something too predictable, like a shaved head or military cut. In the end the look we chose seemed to me very Albanian and not too obvious. Then we had to work a lot on the body. The agreement with Alba was she would wear Mark's clothes also off set. I advised her to eat, drink and sleep as Mark, and she did! The body, the posture, the walk – nobody could be Mark like her. After the shoot, we both had the feeling that Mark was still alive. "What will Mark do today?" Transforming Alba into Mark was an incredible journey for both of us.







## NECESSARILY FRAGMENTED

The film has three periods: the present, their past as children and the past when they're around 20. I chose this non-linear structure because I wanted to create an emotional crescendo and I wanted to be closer to the character's complexity. I knew the film's present-past structure wouldn't be easy, but I had hoped it would be intriguing and I worked on it starting in script stage. I was convinced that a linear narration wouldn't have helped me to reveal the layers of the Hana/Mark soul. My character in fact goes back and forth in her past, also in the present, and needs to go through her past again to feel free.

Albania is always experienced with a sense of nostalgia. This is evident at the end when Hana and Lila sing an old Albanian song. Albania is the land they love but in which they couldn't remain. With a linear structure I'd have probably lost this nostalgia. Although the story is necessarily fragmented, I chose to have Hana/Mark as the emotional thread guiding us through this time and space journey.



## A RECOGNIZABLE LINE

Because of the film's fragmented structure, I instinctively shot the film with long takes (AKA plan sequences). I shot all the scenes this way which was a rigorous, if not severe, choice.

Then in the editing I wanted to mark the difference between past and present by making internal cuts in the Albanian sequences, while in Italy the long takes remain untouched. This style makes the footage feel more lifelike to me. I feel the actors really alive in the scenes. If I had interrupted the action to frame them in various cuts and angles, I think I would have destroyed a vital stream. I wanted to feel very close to Hana/Mark. I wanted her constantly with us. The film is all shot as Hana/Mark subjective POV. There's one scene (the swimming pool moment with all the bodies), where Mark's subjective POV is totally melted with mine. It's the only scene I did not shoot as a long take.

I worked by subtracting rather than emphasizing, choosing always to put the camera in a fixed position and trying to use the strength of that specific angle. I usually have a very precise idea of where I want to put the camera, a determined point of view. Sometimes I have to abandon some details, but after I try to find alternative solutions to



include them

if I really think they are important. This forces me to have a continuous flow of ideas on everything. I don't strive to achieve the perfect frame. On the contrary, I want the frame to come out spontaneously, because I am confident that it will. I try to avoid underlining. My goal is to have a perfect canvas, then soil it with rough strokes. Precise

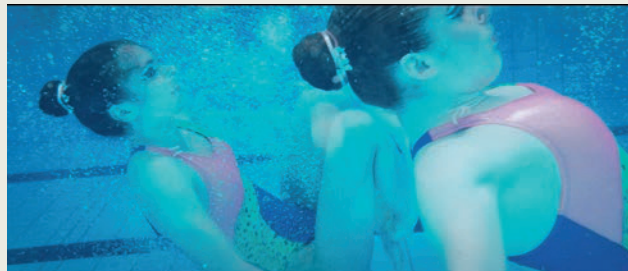
choices, but never tidy, composed ones. I chose a recognizable line also in the use of music. I do that because it belongs to me. I like to recognize myself in it.

## FEMININITY AND FREEDOM

SWORN VIRGIN is an exploration inside femininity told in its thousand folds and contradictory forms. I decided to tell the story of a divided identity, taking such a complexity as my entrance into the story itself. Being with Hana/Mark we continuously cross the line between her two identities, moving in different temporal dimensions, stories and states of mind. Sworn virgins are beings that in the name of freedom make a choice which in fact binds them. Such a starting point is an invitation to a big reflection on femininity with reference to identity and freedom. A reflection which moves from the archaic to a contemporary level. I think that we should all ask ourselves: "Are women really so free today?"

Mark's relationship with the niece, Jonida, deals a lot with this question. Synchronized swimming is a sport where young girls are forced, even in water, to wear perfect makeup because they must look like identical dolls. In Western society, femininity is tied to an idea of women being obliged to be beautiful and perfect.

This relationship between femininity and freedom is for me the film's real red line. I wanted to make a contemporary movie, telling through my story also that of many other human beings living nowadays in our cities, that for other reasons or other desires, share a similar sensation of not feeling themselves women or men. Such beings are constantly changing, in search of a place, a way of life, a belonging or not-belonging that can lead them to happiness.



## A QUEST FOR IDENTITY

A sworn virgin, because of her choice, is obliged to renounce all love and sex. It is a very serious oath, and in the Kanun culture, breaking it is not even conceivable. Long ago, sworn virgins who broke the oath were sent to the stake. Mark has followed this law and therefore removed all thoughts of love and sex. But this repressed desire still lives inside her, and her body begins to push it to come out. In Italy, Mark finally finds the courage to follow his body. Meeting the swimming pool guardian Bernhard (Lars Eidinger) awakens her. She trusts her curiosity and lets go.

But also Bernhard is curious about Mark's ambiguity. When I saw Lars Eidinger and Alba together, I was deeply touched by their similarity. This feeling inspired me to rewrite Bernhard's character. Mark and Bernhard are both strangers, both ambiguous. They both seem to belong to another world. I believe in their encounter.

I don't think Hana/Mark is lesbian or transgender, but I'm convinced that lesbians and transgenders can somehow identify with her/him. Most of all for the mood and quest for identity. I hope that not only they can identify with my character, but also everyone who is interested in great human journeys, life challenges, and the search for past loves and new encounters.



## A PASSION FOR ALBANIA

I had no connection to Albania until I started working on this project. When I decided to make this movie, I began trying to penetrate the Albanian world and in different ways. It became a sort of healthy obsession. I made Albanian friends, spending time with them, talking to them. Then I read Albanian literature and poetry, studied the Kanun. I documented with photos, videos, I started listening to Albanian music. I ended up developing a constant urge to go there. As soon as I was away from Albania too long, I started to feel bad and I felt an urgent need to go back. I really developed a passion for Albania, which is full of contradictions, but wins over your heart. At least it did so to me, and I always felt great when I was there. I think this deep love was returned to me: during the shoot, those mountains gave me the beautiful gift of the snow I had hoped for!



## LAURA BISPURI (writer-director)

Laura Bispuri, after a degree in Cinema at “La Sapienza” University of Rome, was selected to attend the direction and production school “Fandango Lab Workshop”. With her short film *Passing Time* she won the David Donatello Award (Italian Oscars) for Best Short Film in 2010. *Passing Time* was also selected as one of the eight best short films in the world at the “Short Film Golden Night”, organized by Académie des César in Paris. With the other short film, *Biondina*, she was awarded in 2011 with Nastro d’Argento (Top Italian Film Critics Award) as “Rising Talent of the Year”.

*Sworn Virgin* is her first feature film that in development’s phase was selected by the Cannes Film Festival’s “Atelier de la Cinéfondation”, by New Cinema Network at the Rome Film Festival’s International Project Workshop, by Les Ateliers d’Angers of Jeanne Moreau and by The Venice Film Festival’s “Gap Financing”.





## ALBA ROHRWACHER

(as Hana/Mark)

In barely a decade, Italian actress Alba Rohrwacher has become one of the world's most sought-after young actresses. She recently won the Venice Film Festival's Best Actress award for her performance in Saverio Costanzo's *Hungry Hearts*. Her other recent film credits include: Alice Rohrwacher's Cannes-winner *Le Meraviglie*, Marco Bellocchio's *Dormant Beauty*, Doris Dorrie's *Gluck*, Silvio Soldini's *The Commander and the Stork* and Emma Dante's *Via Castellana Bandiera*.

Alba made her screen debut in 2004 in Carlo Mazzacurati's *L'Amore Ritrovato*. Other roles quickly followed: from *Melissa P.* by Luca Guadagnino (2005) to *Mio fratello è figlio unico* by Daniele Luchetti (2007); *Giorni e nuvole* by Silvio Soldini (2007) for which she won a David di Donatello award for Best Supporting Actress. The following year she won their Best Actress award for Pupi Avati's *Il Papà di*

*Giovanna*.

Alba was a "Shooting Star" at the 2008 Berlin Film Festival. Other film credits include Luca Guadagnino's *I Am Love*, Costanzo's *Solitude of Prime Numbers* and Marco Bellocchio's *Sorelle Mai*.

Alba has also worked in theatre, appearing in *La casa degli spiriti* directed by Della Seta and Sevald (2003), *Bric à brac* directed by Lupaioli (2004), *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* directed by Cruciani (2005), *Lisa* directed by Gioielli (2006) and *Noccioline* directed by Binasco (2007). Born in Firenze to a German father and Italian mother, Alba studied at the Accademia dei Piccoli in Florence (1997-1998) and the Compagnia de' Pinti School (1998-2000). She graduated in 2004 from the Scuola Nazionale di Cinema.

Alba will soon be seen in a new film by Marco Bellocchio and Matteo Garrone's *The Tale of Tales*.





# SWORN VIRGIN

een film van LAURA BISPURI



## MAIN CAST

Alba Rohrwacher as Hana/Mark  
Flonja Kodheli as Lila  
Lars Eidinger as Bernhard  
Luan Jaha as Stjefen  
Bruno Shllaku as Gjergj  
Ilire Celaj as Katrina  
Drenica Selimaj as Little Hana  
Dajana Selimaj as Little Lila  
Emily Ferratello as Jonida

## MAIN CREW

directed by **Laura Bispuri**  
written by **Francesca Manieri** and **Laura Bispuri**  
inspired by the novel *Vergine Giurata* by **Elvira Dones**  
(published by Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, Italy)  
cinematography **Vladan Radovic** editing **Carlotta Cristiani, Jacopo Quadri** original music by **Nando Di Cosimo**  
set design **Iliara Sadun** in collaboration with **Tim Pannen**  
costumes **Grazia Colombini** hair **Connie Sacchi**  
make-up **Tanja Maria Koller, Miria Germano**  
sound **Marc von Stürler**  
sound design **Daniela Bassani** and **Mirko Perri**  
mix **Denis Séchaud** casting **Francesca Borromeo**

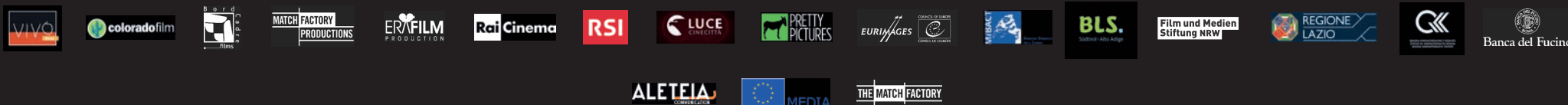
produced by  
**Marta Donzelli & Gregorio Paonessa**  
**Maurizio Totti & Alessandro Usai**  
**Dan Wechsler**

**Michael Weber & Viola Fügen**  
**Sabina Kodra & Robert Budina**

delegate producer **Serena Alfieri** co-producer for RSI  
**Gabriella De Gara** executive producers **James Velaise,**  
**Alessio Lazzareschi, Jamal Zeinal Zade**



2015 – Italië/Zwitserland/Duitsland/Albanië in samenwerking met Kosovo – 90 minuten – cinemascope – sound 5.1 – Albanees & Italiaans gesproken - Nederlandse ondertiteling







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