

# THE UGLY STEPSISTER

a film by Emilie Blichfeldt

Starring Lea Myren, Thea Sofie Loch Næss, Ane Dahl Torp



Norway, Sweden, Poland, Denmark / Norwegian, Swedish, Polish / 110 min

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## SYNOPSIS

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A sinister twist on the classic Cinderella story, *THE UGLY STEPSISTER* follows Elvira as she prepares to earn the prince's affection at any cost. In a kingdom where beauty is a brutal business, Elvira will compete with the beautiful and enchanting Agnes to become the belle of the ball.

## FESTIVAL SCREENINGS

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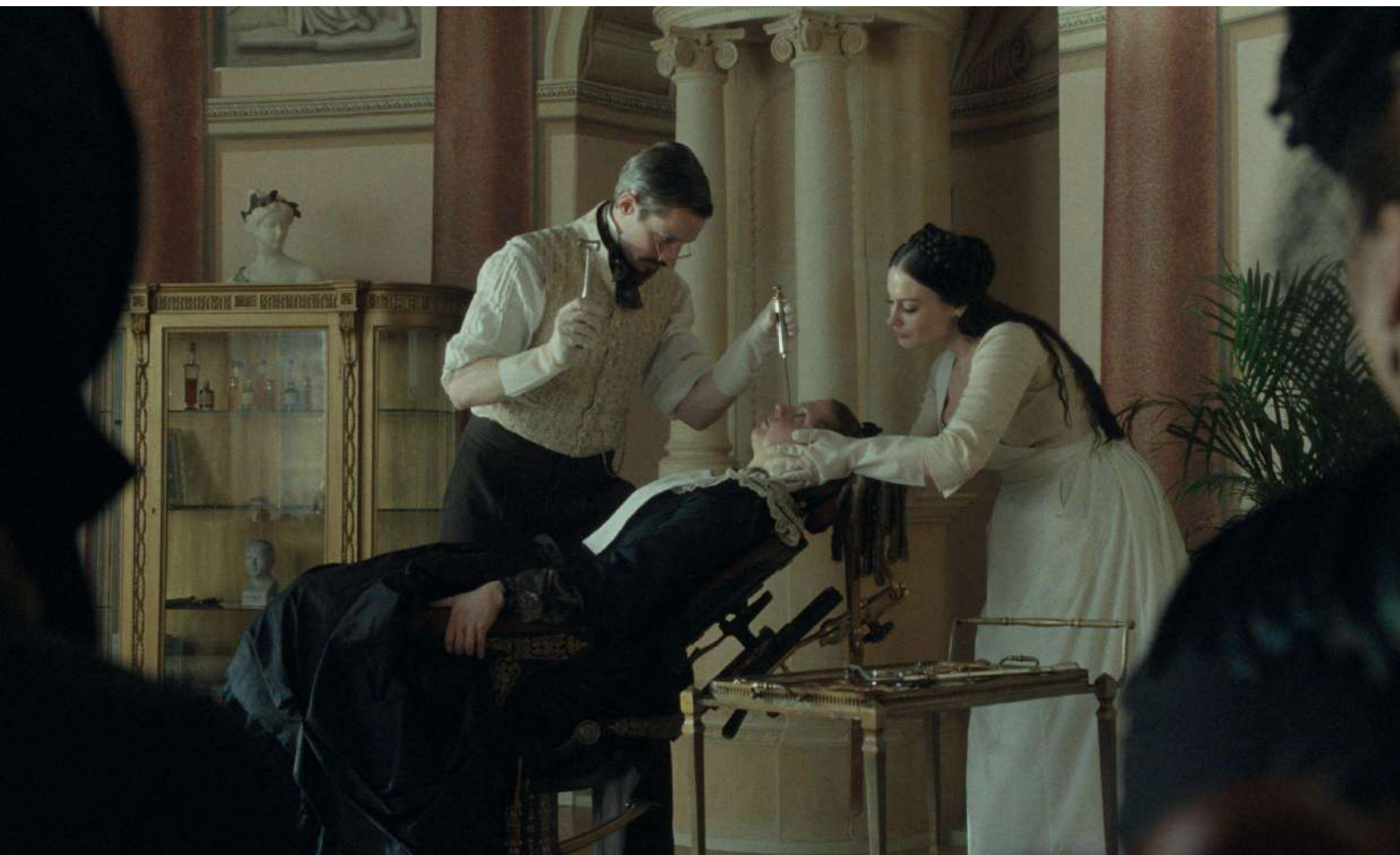
**Sunday, February 16th - 9:30pm @ The Urania Berl (European Premiere)**

Monday, February 17th - 4:00pm @ Cubix 7

Tuesday, February 18th - 10:00am @ Cubix 5

Saturday, February 22nd - 4:45pm @Colosseum 1

Sunday, February 23rd - 9:30pm @The Urania Berl



# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

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## **Beauty as Horror and Reimagining The Brothers Grimm**

THE UGLY STEPSISTER's comprehensive concept of "beauty horror" was inspired by body horror and the misogynistic doctrine "beauty is pain," and continues my exploration of the tyranny of beauty and how it affects young women. It's a theme that is very personal to me after years of struggling with body image and finding my place within femininity. Through this story, I aim to immerse the audience in Elvira's experience—provoking empathy, discomfort, and reflection. By mirroring her physical pain in the audience's own bodies, I hope to create a visceral connection that sparks meaningful contemplation.

Elvira's journey highlights the agony of adhering to unattainable physical standards. I am inspired by David Cronenberg's approach to the genre: bodily transformations serve as metaphors for his characters' flaws, dilemmas, inner fears, or even as a political comment on how society affects the individual.

The story also draws from the rich history of Cinderella, particularly The Brothers Grimm version, in which the stepsisters mutilate their feet to fit into the slipper. This timeless tale exists in countless variations—from biblical references to Chinese folklore, the well-known French and German retellings, and even an obscure 1970s Czech adaptation treasured in Norway and Germany. Rather than adhering to a single version, I chose to weave together elements that resonated with me, adding my own interpretation. After all, they are all made up stories, folk tales, carried from generation to generation through oral storytelling. Told to entertain, but also conveying prevailing values.

While it would have been easy to craft a modern Cinderella narrative, I was committed from the beginning to setting this story in the undefined "once-upon-a-time." This choice underscores how the motifs in the film, though resonant with today's issues, are truly timeless, rooted in cultural traditions that continue to shape our perspectives on beauty and identity.

## Visual Style and Location

The film's aesthetic draws heavily from the 1960s and 70s Eastern European fairytale cinema, celebrated for its gritty realism, gothic settings, practical effects, and natural lighting. These films strike a unique balance between the real and the unreal, creating an uncanny enchanted realism that became central to *THE UGLY STEPSISTER*.

Even before collaborating with Manon Rasmussen on costumes, I was deeply involved in shaping the wardrobe. Fashion is a passion of mine, and I conducted extensive research early on, defining silhouettes, periods, and details that aligned with the film's vision, even consulting with fashion icon Lady Amanda Harlech. While some designers found my input unconventional, Manon welcomed it from the start. Her legendary expertise—shaped by her work on all of Lars von Trier's films and having won 17 Danish Academy Awards—brought a grounded authenticity to every piece. She has an unmatched talent for crafting costumes that feel like an extension of the character, incorporating worn, stitched textures to make the actors feel at home in their roles. Together, we play on Disney's iconic silhouettes for Cinderella and the stepsisters, tying these designs to the mid/late 1800s when cosmetic surgery was beginning to emerge in medical practice.

Although shooting on film would have been a dream, the logistical and budgetary demands of this debut feature—featuring a large cast, castles, animals, practical effects, and a grand ball—made it impractical. Fortunately, my DOP Marcel Zyskind brought his passion for celluloid to the digital format, achieving a tactile, film-like quality through in-camera techniques, working with heavy filters, and playing with vaseline and zooms.

Finding the right locations was its own adventure. On the final day of scouting, we discovered the enchanting Gołuchow Castle in Poland, which became central to the film. The prince's castle proved more elusive, but we ultimately secured the breathtaking ballroom of a Cistercian monastery ruin near the Polish village of Lubiaz.

We were lucky that in Poland there have been extensive restoration efforts to preserve its architectural treasures. For instance, Gołuchow Castle's hand-painted wallpaper, stolen by the Nazis, was painstakingly recreated by local artists in the 1950s and 60s. It was surprising to me that the restoration of old castles, or the lack

of it, would be one of the biggest challenges of the movie. This film has made me aware of how important it is that we take care of our cultural heritage, and that the restoration needs to be of top quality for it not to be even more damaging to these artistic masterpieces.

### **The Music Of THE UGLY STEPSISTER**

For the film's music, I drew early inspiration from iconic 70s soundtracks like Bilitis by Francis Lai, as well as works by Goblin and Harold Budd. The harp, synthesizers and kettledrum were instruments I envisioned from the start and our lead composer, Kaada, brought this vision to life brilliantly. However, during the final stages of editing, my editor Olivea Neergaard-Holm and I realized the film needed something contemporary - an element that felt rooted in today. The film does its best to steer clear of anachronisms (though orthodontic braces are hardly period). But the film was missing a layer of irony, to enable the audience to connect not just with the characters but also with the ghost of an authorial presence. I like to see movies where you can lose yourself in the characters and enjoy a connection with the person telling the story. We found Norwegian artist Vilde Tuv's album Melting songs and fell in love with the sound. It perfectly captured the essence of a desperately romantic young girl - hard yet soft, ironic yet sincere. Vilde composed two original tracks and additional pieces for the film, blending seamlessly with Kaada's compositions. Together, their music transformed the film into something more unexpected and timeless, lifting it beyond the ordinary.

### **Casting Lea Myren**

As the film is a fairytale, I wanted actors with a wide range—capable of embracing the absurd and heightened emotions while staying grounded in the reality and humanity of their characters. I approach casting with an open mind, unconcerned with predefined notions of how a character should look or be portrayed. For me, the character comes to life during auditions, through the actor's interpretation. The casting process for the main roles was challenging—until, suddenly, the right people emerged.

The standout revelation, unsurprisingly, was Lea Myren as Elvira, the stepsister. From her very first audition, I was captivated; for the first time, I truly saw Elvira. Lea's unpretentious physicality, sharp comic timing, and unwavering dedication immediately marked her as the perfect fit. However, it was only later that I fully realized what a gift she truly is. Her fearless and wholehearted portrayal of Elvira—

navigating innocence and dreams, descending into madness, pain, and even visceral moments like vomiting—is unforgettable and groundbreaking. Lea embodies everything I wish I had dared to be and do as a young woman, free from the constraints of body image struggles. She is not only an incredible talent but also a beacon of hope and inspiration for future generations of girls and women.

### **On Being A "Stepsister"**

Fairytales present clear-cut characters: pure good or irredeemable evil. We naturally empathize with Cinderella, while the stepsisters and stepmother are easy to scorn. In the Brothers Grimm version, the stepsisters are described as evil but physically comparable to Cinderella. Walt Disney, drawing from Charles Perrault's French version, cemented the idea that inner and outer beauty are intrinsically linked—kindness belongs to the beautiful, while ugliness signifies cruelty. The stepsisters are mocked for their big noses, big feet, and delusional belief that they could win the prince's favor.

As a child, I shared this perspective. I dreamed of being Cinderella, laughing at the stepsisters' clumsiness. But rereading Grimm as an adult, particularly the scene where one stepsister cuts off her toes to fit the glass slipper, changed my view. For the first time, I empathized with her desperation. The mockery and cold laughter at her expense felt unjust. I, too, have longed to be chosen—whether by a prince or simply a boyfriend—and felt the sting of failing to fit impossible standards. No matter how hard I tried to conform, I could never fit into Cinderella's shoe because I am a stepsister too.

This realization sparked a need to retell the story with new insight. I wanted to breathe life into all the characters, freeing them from their rigid archetypes. Cinderella isn't just an ideal; she's a girl with secrets untold by Grimm, Perrault, or Disney. But I didn't want to flip the narrative and make the stepsister the hero or Cinderella the villain. Instead, I sought fairness.

When viewed through the social and economic lens of the past, the unreasonable actions of fairytale characters become understandable. For women, securing a husband was often essential for survival and social mobility. Appearance became their primary asset, and failure to marry was catastrophic. Yet even within this framework, many dreamt of romance and the chance encounter, where the longing

for social ascendance and true love merged into a higher unity. I wanted to honor these complexities in reimagining the tale.

The stepsister's tale, long overshadowed, deserves to be recognized as a powerful commentary on the oppressive standards that continue to shape our lives. I made this film for young Emilie who had big feet and a low confidence around boys. I made this film for all the young girls who struggle under the burden of feeling ugly, but I hope this film reaches far beyond that, because the questions it raises—about what we consider beautiful and who gets to decide—concerns us all. In empathising with Cinderella, but mocking the stepsister, we have been deceived to betray ourselves. There is only one Cinderella. The rest of us, struggling to fit the shoe, are stepsisters.

- **Emilie Blichfeldt, Writer / Director of THE UGLY STEPSISTER**

## **DIRECTOR – Emilie Blichfeldt**

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Emilie Blichfeldt is celebrated for her bold and provocative short films. Her Norwegian Film School graduation project from 2018, *SARA'S INTIMATE CONFESSIONS*, was selected for festivals such as the 2018 Locarno International Film Festival and the 2019 Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival.

*THE UGLY STEPSISTER* marks Blichfeldt's feature directorial debut.



# CAST

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Elvira	Lea Myren
Rebekka	Ane Dahl Torp
Agnes	Thea Sofie Loch Næss
Alma	Flo Fagerli
Prince Julian	Isac Calmroth
Isak	Malte Gårdinger
Otto	Ralph Carlsson
The feinschmecker	Isac Aspberg
The omnivore	Albin Weidenbladh
The cook	Oksana Czerkaszyna
Madam Vanja	Katarzyna Herman
Dr. Esthétique	Adam Lundgren
Frederick von Bluckfish	Willy Ramnek Petri
Sophie von Kronenberg	Cecilia Forss
Jan	Kyrre Hellum
Agnes' mother	Agnieszka Żulewska
Messenger	Staffan Kolhammar
Baron von Bluckfish	Philip Lenkovsky



# CREW

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Writer & Director	Emilie Blichfeldt
Producers	Maria Ekerhovd
Director of Photography	Marcel Zyskind
Sound	Tormod Ringnes Marius Paus Brovold
Production Design	Laurent Baude
Costumes	Manon Rasmussen
Hair & Makeup	Anne Chatrine Sauerberg
Casting	Luise Nes Catrin Wideryd Milosz Sawicki
Editor	Olivia Neergaard-Holm
Music	Vilde Tuv, Kaada