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ELLEN DORRIT PETERSEN  
COSMINA STRATAN



# Shelley

A FILM BY  
ALI ABBASI

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FRI. 12, 12:30 PM @ CINEMAXX 2 (MARKET)

SUN. 14, 7:30 PM @ ZOO PALAST 2 (ADVANCED OFFICIAL)

TUE. 16, 10:30 PM @ CINEMAXX 7 (OFFICIAL PREMIERE)

WED. 17, 8:15 PM @ CINESTAR 3 (REPETITION)

THU. 18, 10:30 PM @ CUBIX 7&8 (REPETITION)

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PROFILE PICTURES

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# Shelley

A FILM BY  
ALI ABBASI

WITH  
ELLEN DORRIT PETERSEN  
COSMINA STRATAN

2016 – Denmark – 92 minutes – sound 5.1 – 1:1,85 & 1:2,39 - in English & Danish



## SYNOPSIS

Young Romanian woman Elena arrives in the Danish countryside to work as a housekeeper for a recovering Louise and her husband Kasper. It's an eerie feeling, being deep in a dense forest, far away from modern life. Especially since the isolated house is still and somber without electricity, according to Louise's wishes.

Elena adjusts quickly to her new routine of household chores, tending to chickens and helping fragile Louise. The two women grow closer, but the more they know one another, the more each finds the other stranger.

Louise is devastated being unable to bear children after a horrifying miscarriage. Desperate for a child of her own, Louise offers Elena a generous financial deal to be the couple's surrogate mother. Elena kindly accepts, and the money will help her return home sooner to her own small son.

Elena's pregnancy brings joy to the home of Louise and Kasper, but only briefly. The couple are troubled by Elena's atypical cravings and aloof behavior. Bizarre hallucinations and unbearable sensations drive Elena to believe that something is frightfully wrong. The life growing inside of her is taking shape too fast, upsetting the lives of everyone like an evil force...

## ELLEN DORRIT PETERSEN as Louise

Ellen Dorrit Petersen stars as childless Louise in Ali Abbasi's *SHELLEY*. She has been selected as one of the Northern Lights Talents at the 2016 Berlin Film Festival.



Ellen won much praise for her performance as the newly blind Ingrid in Eskil Vogt's *BLIND*, which won the Label Europa Cinemas Prize at the 2014 Berlin Festival. For *BLIND*, the Norwegian actress won her country's most prestigious prizes - Kanonprisen and Amanda - for Best Actress, as well as the Outstanding Performance Prize at Ireland's Subtitle Film Festival. Ellen's other film credits include Erik Poppe's *TROUBLED WATER*, Ole Giæver's *THE MOUNTAIN* (2011 Berlinale Panorama) and Knut Erik Jensen's *ISKYSS*, for which she won her first Amanda for Best Actress. Ellen is a cast member of the Norwegian TV series «Aquitted,» and has been a member of the Norwegian Theatre since 2006.

## COSMINA STRATAN as Elena

Cosmina Stratan stars as the troubled surrogate mother Elena in Ali Abbasi's *SHELLEY*. She won Best Actress at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival for her role as Voichita in *BEYOND THE HILLS*, directed by Cristian Mungiu.



She was selected as a "Shooting Star" at the 2014 Berlin International Film Festival. Cosmina was featured as Dorina in the HBO series, *SHALL WE KISS*, directed by Constantin Popescu. Her other credits include "Les Territoires du silence" (dir. Christophe Perdon, France 2015) and recent appearances in the German TV series "Die falsche Zeugin" and "Tatort Klingelingeling". Born in 1984, Cosmina studied acting at the National University of Theatre and Cinema in Bucharest. She has played in several theatres in Bucharest, working with directors like Andrei Serban, Neil Labute and Gelu Colceag.



## COMMENTS FROM WRITER-DIRECTOR ALI ABBASI

### PREGNANCY IS WEIRD

The screenplay for *SHELLEY* was born out of research and rewrites I did for another project (which I ended up not directing). My early story involved two sisters, and one would become a surrogate mother to help the other who couldn't get pregnant. The baby would have two mothers. Something was wrong with the child and we wanted to know why. I remember being shocked learning details about surrogate motherhood. I wasn't aware that it is legal and commercial in many places. Pregnancy in itself is really weird when you think hard about it. An alien object growing inside of you, and for most of the time during a pregnancy, the fetus is not a human being yet. There is a certain kind of tension and claustrophobia which is embedded in pregnancy.



### **BIOLOGICAL DRIVE**

In *SHELLEY*, we see signs of evil impulses seesawing in Louise and Elena's relationship, then later in Louise and Kasper's couple. Each one of them wants to be good, but sometimes the impulse to survive, to reproduce, makes them act otherwise. It's a conflict of interests in its most brutal form, exactly as it is in nature. They are all part of this situation which turns rotten and infects them all one by one. I think what we call evil is a part of us all and we know it's there. We don't like it, but it's still there. A big part of evil for me is our ruthless biological drive for survival. It is genetically engineered in us. Even if we want to deny it, our bodies and genes are made as such, somehow autonomous in that regard.

### **STAKES OF SURROGACY**

I try to steer clear of the whole discussion for-against surrogacy. I know it is a complicated matter and sometimes it ends up being a win/win for a desperate couple and the poor surrogate mother, at least on paper. What you can't get around though is the fact that in commercial surrogacy the power balance is skewed between the buyer and the seller. This is the way it is presented in *SHELLEY*, as an indicator of the unbalance between Elena and the couple. Louise and Kasper have the luxury of living a 'simple' life in the woods. They have the luxury of affording the higher moral ground, and healers. They can afford to live a spiritual life. Elena's life is material. It is about tangible stuff, shiny objects, electronics, money. Of course, no one is innocent here. Both Louise and Elena try to take advantage of the situation in their own way, but the stakes are different: it is Elena who risks her body.

## CASTING

I think careful casting is probably the most important part of the work when collaborating with actors. It is essential to choose the right person for a role. If you don't, then no acting coach will be able to help you on set.

For SHELLEY, I chose the right people. Cosmina Stratan (Elena), Ellen Dorrit Petersen (Louise), and Peter Christoffersen (Kasper) are experienced and talented professionals. It wasn't difficult to trust them with the responsibility of their characters. I felt confident that my script had detailed characters and defined emotional beats. I believe that if actors have a script and characters that they're happy with and a director that they trust, then there's no limit to how far their talent will take them. We did some days of rehearsal mostly to become acquainted with each other, but that's all. The rest was about me being a pair of scrutinizing eyes from the outside to guide them to becoming the characters that I wanted for the film.

## THE HOUSE

SHELLEY was shot in southern Sweden near a big lake. We found this house that almost exactly matched my description from the script. I think location, the arena, is such an important part of the story. So much of the mood and dramatic possibilities depends on it. In SHELLEY, it was important to find this house, isolated and overlooking the lake to establish the world of Louise and Kasper. A kind of fairytale dream of living within nature that they bought into. And it had to have both sides of the coin: the beautiful picturesque side and the sinister side. The house was supposed to be the machine which makes this transformation from picturesque to sinister possible and we were lucky to find a place that did accommodate that.



### **AFRAID OF NATURE**

In pre-production, we talked a lot about what kind of evil we wanted to show in SHELLEY. Is it satanic? Is the house hanted? Where does this evil come from? I was not too concerned about its source. It is simply there, like the air we breathe. It's around us, watching us. Cinematographic representation of that would be the signs of our surroundings. In nature, in the case of SHELLEY. As a city person, I am fundamentally afraid of nature because it's not my natural habitat. It would be like being at a billionaire's mansion. I could admire and be impressed by the beauty of the luxury, but it would also make me feel uncomfortable.

### **PERSPECTIVE**

The world can be anything we project on it. There are so many layers of information and infinite ways of reading them. It depends on the perspective. I mostly see the half empty part of the glass. I don't know why but that's my way of seeing the world. So it's easy to see its ugliness and horror. Not that it's always like that, but beauty or tenderness usually tend to fall into the background. We have to search harder for it, find it. And the signal is weaker, too. Compare admiring a beautiful face with watching the face of a person being executed. Which would you remember better?

### **THE THIRD EYE**

I like when people or places are observed by the Third Eye, the evil. Like in CACHE or LOST HIGHWAY. We see the world through the eyes of evil and I love that. In SHELLEY, we have some zoom shots of nature in the beginning. They were originally intended for something else, but we eventually used them as the Third Eye, this feeling of observing the world through the non-human eye.



## TWO VISUAL APPROACHES

We decided to make a visual change at the point in the movie when Elena becomes pregnant, about one-third in. This was to emphasize the change in story and character. We changed both format (from 16:9 to scope) and cinematographers. Sturla Brandth Grovlen did the first part and Nadim Carlsen did the rest. Sturla's part is more free and improvised. The second part was more carefully storyboarded and Nadim generally composed a frame and adjusted when necessary. The change in results are subtle but you might notice if you look closely.

## SOUNDSCAPES

Both sound designer Rune Sand and I shared the idea of integrating music and sound design as much as possible. We wanted the audience to get the impression that the music grows in and out of soundscapes. Composer Martin Dirkov is also a movie sound designer himself, so he understood our intentions very well. We tried an all-in electronica sound but it felt too imposing. We searched for something that would feel both organic and electronic at the same time.



## HORROR

Genre is a marketing device and a contract with the audience. In *SHELLEY*, I tried to take advantage of this contract with the audience and play with some techniques used in horror films. I wasn't trying to redefine the horror genre or anything like that. I don't even consider myself to be a horror fan. I've probably only seen 4-5 horror movies. But I do like what they do to our heads. I like feeling afraid. I like having nightmares -- good, interesting ones! Horror is like porn: the more you know about it, how it's made, the less sexy it becomes.

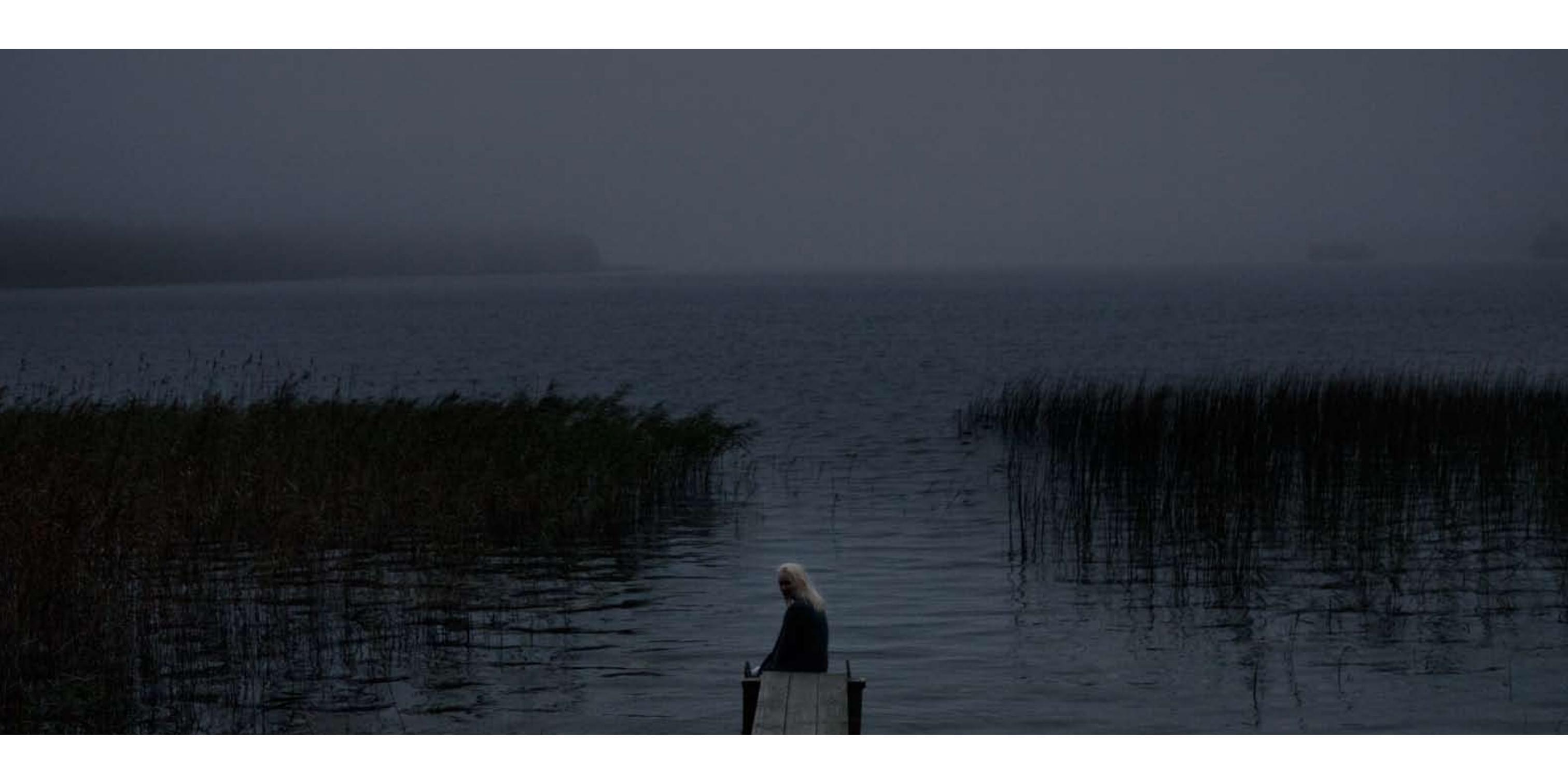




## MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

I went to film school in Denmark. Most of my collaborators and industry acquaintances are Danish, so it felt natural to make my first feature there. I am Iranian, but I lived for a long time in both Sweden and Denmark. I did a few shorts in Iran some years ago. I would love to shoot a film there because I still feel I know the country and the culture in detail, having grown up there. I'm in early development of a project in Iran, but before that I hopefully will get to first do my troll movie set in Sweden. Part of me definitely feels Swedish. I would not be me without that part. My kid is Danish, no matter how much Farsi I speak with him at home. But he will have something extra. It's not simply about multiculturalism. It's about having multiple identities.

Language is a powerful way of establishing identity, as seen in *SHELLEY*. Elena is one person on the phone with her parents in Romania, and another person when speaking broken English with Louise in Denmark.





## ALI ABBASI

Writer-director Ali Abbasi makes his feature film debut with **SHELLEY**. Ali has a background as an author and has published several short stories in Farsi. Born in 1981 in Teheran, he abandoned his studies at Teheran Polytechnic University in 2002, and travelled to Europe. He resided in Stockholm where he studied architecture at The Royal Academy of Science. In 2007 he started his education at the National Film School of Denmark in Film Directing. He graduated from the film school in 2011 and culminated with the acclaimed **M FOR MARKUS** - a surreal, experimental, Lynchian police investigation short.

2016 **SHELLEY** 92 min, Denmark

2011 **M FOR MARKUS** 30 min, Denmark

2010 **IN DARKNESS THERE IS LIGHT** 7 min, Denmark

2010 **ENEMY WITHIN** 27 min, Denmark (cannot be publicly viewed, contact the National Film School of Denmark)

2009 **OFFICER RELAXING EFTER DUTY**, 18 min, Denmark

2008 **5 SECONDS WITH ALEX** 3 min, Iran

2008 **LOVE no.II** 4:30 min, Denmark

2007 **MASUM** 55 min, Iran

2005 **3RD EPISODE** 26 min, Iran

2005 **PARAFIN** 30 min, Iran

2004 **THE BOX** 5 min, Sweden

## MAIN CAST

Ellen Dorrit Petersen (Louise)  
Cosmina Stratan (Elena)  
Peter Christoffersen (Kasper)  
Björn Andrésen (Leo)  
Kenneth M. Christensen (Simon)  
Patricia Schumann (Nanna)  
Marianne Mortensen (Doctor)

## MAIN CREW

Director **Ali Abbasi**  
Screenplay **Maren Louise Käehne & Ali Abbasi**  
Based on original story by **Ali Abbasi**  
Cinematographers **Sturla Brandth Grøvlen D.F.F. & Nadim Carlsen**  
Production Designers **Sabine Hviid & Kristine Køster**  
Costumes & Makeup **Camilla Nordbjerg**  
VFX Supervisor **Peter Hjorth**  
SFX Makeup SODA **Morten Jacobsen & Thomas Foldberg**  
Casting **Gro Therp**  
Editor **Olivia Neergaard-Holm**  
Sound Designer **Rune Bjerre Sand**  
Composer **Martin Dirkov**  
Color Grader **Carsten Dahl**

Producer **Jacob Jarek**  
Executive Producers **David Atlan-Jackson, Ditte Milsted, Thor Sigurjonsson**  
Co-Producers **Magnus Paulsson, Anders Banke**

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