“... and I said, Lord OK, I’ll follow you. I think you are calling me”
“A religious is somebody human... striving for perfection”

Jennifer is an enclosed Carmelite nun. Within the monastery, the cloistered community live out an ideal of work and prayer as a creative life following the Discalced Carmelite Rule.

This film centres on Jennifer and takes us through the chores and rituals of daily life. She has recreation time but most of her day is spent in prayer. In two interviews she talks about what brings her to this way of life.

The interior of the monastery itself becomes a presence; its rooms enfold the reverberations of this total world. But there are porous boundaries between the monastery and its surroundings through sound and light and the comings and goings of the world outside at the turnstile door.

The film gives us a rare access into enclosed life. Enclosure is a choice, but what does it mean to live this life? What are the difficulties of this “sublime endeavor” as St. Teresa calls it and what are its rewards?
Nina Danino studied Fine Art, Painting at St. Martin’s School of Art and Environmental Media, Royal College of Art, London. She made films in the ambit of the London Film Makers Co-op 1981-1992 including the seminal Stabat Mater (1990) and “Now I am yours” (1992). She made Temenos in 1997, a feature length landscape film on the apparitions of the Virgin. She has worked with narrative voice and singers highlighting the importance of sound and the voice in her films. Her films have been shown in international film festivals including London, Edinburgh, Feminale, Chicago and in museums, galleries and cinemas worldwide. They are in the British Film Institute National Film and Television collection. She teaches Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London. In 2010 she worked with Oscar winning cinematographer Billy Williams BSC on a short 35mm black and white film Communion (2010). Her recent works include Apparitions (2013), the audio piece Meteorologies (2012) and a multi part video and sound installation, Sorelle Povere di Santa Chiara (2015). She was born in Gibraltar and lives in London.

“Peace, quiet, relaxed, nothing to do, watch the birds, I’m longing for a day like that”
How did you choose Jennifer as the protagonist of the film?

I knew Jennifer from summers on the beach as children; I remember that she used to go underwater fishing. I knew that she had become an enclosed nun. I made contact with her about seven years ago when my sister, who knows her sister, put me in touch as I wanted to visit her in her monastery in Ronda, Spain to see if it would be possible to collaborate on a film about her life.

At this meeting, I felt that she would be a strong presence, which would fill the cinema screen. After my visit we kept in touch, I visited regularly and trust developed.

It can take a long time to be given permission to film in an enclosed monastery if it is given at all, was this your experience?

It is very rare to be given permission to film in an enclosed monastic community; its purpose is seclusion from the world. Seven years after my first visit we obtained agreement from the Prioress. However, it was assumed that it would be an interview in the Visitors’ Parlor with Jennifer behind the symbolic but real grille. I wanted to go further than the homilies or pieties that can sometimes be the substance of interviews of this kind.

How did you gain access to film in an enclosed monastery?

I didn’t. In fact, the film has been directed from the outside. But the seeds of how this could be done were crystallised in the Spring of 2014, when out of the blue I received a video clip of Jennifer with lovebirds that she was rearing which is included in the film. It was intimate and uncomplicated and it immediately suggested a visual direction and a possible path to filming within the monastery, which we were prohibited from entering. Thinking about it now, it might have been a message to say; ‘We are ready” but who was the cameraperson?

Can you tell us something about the founder St. Teresa?

St. Teresa of Avila (d.1582) is the founder of the Discalced Carmelites, whose 500th Anniversary of her birth is in 2015. A super energetic woman, associated with practical matters such as the foundation of convents (despite enclosure, she herself travelled all over Spain in this task) and outpourings of visionary creativity in her writings. She is represented in art in the famous Bernini statue in Rome depicting her vision of the Transverberation. The film has quotes from The Way of Perfection – very different to her mystical writings in the Interior Castle or her accounts of her visions in her Life. In fact, The Way of Perfection is a down to earth manual, which Teresa wrote for her nuns as a spiritual and practical guide to prayer and community life, which they use to this day. The principle of perfection is a key to the ideal of this life but it is inscribed with the idea of striving, that is, fallibility.
Some scenes show Jennifer working at domestic chores. What is the relationship of work to the life of prayer?

In the Carmelite way of thinking, you consecrate yourself through the ritual of work as well as vocal or mental prayer.

The film combines documentary and narrative can you say something about this.

The inter-titles refer to the Divine Office -the medieval structure for prayer that divides up the monastic day and provides a narrative structure also in the film. At these times, the sound of voices in prayer reverberate within the monastery as a space which contains this sacred ritual, which is at the centre of the life of the community. As the community could not be filmed they are present in the voices and sound off. Yet four hours of the day are in fact spent in mental prayer, so silence is an important part of contemplative life, as rich as sound. The camera films the rooms mainly without close up images of the devotional art and other objects so as to clear a durational space for these reverberations and voices. The interior is constructed in the editing as one would in a narrative film.

This is no quiet idyllic retreat, women's monasteries, are not only busy places but unlike the larger monasteries of the male Orders in removed places, the women's are usually founded in the middle of busy towns and cities.

The windows look out to busy streets and the exterior penetrates the interior through the light coming in through the many windows, and through the sound from the street and the town outside. All the sound whether it be voices, prayers or atmosphere is recorded in the location or within the scene itself such as when Jennifer puts on a CD to play some music as she prepares the altar in the church.

What is your interest in this subject?

St. Teresa is a towering figure and as such is inexhaustible. I made “Now I am yours” (1992) mixing Teresa's writings and her representation in the Ecstasy of St. Teresa by Bernini in Rome. In Jennifer I wanted to make a film based on direct contact with 21st century female contemplative life following the legacy of Teresa and what this hidden and perhaps extreme practice means today, in particular prayer as a radical form of resistance and non comodifiable expenditure. This interest was enriched through discussions with Tina Beattie, writer on female mysticism and spirituality and Alice Forbess from the social anthropological perspective and her work with Eastern Orthodox women's religious communities and how these women consecrate their lives. The Carmelite organization was also helpful in pointing to advisors on Teresian spirituality. One source of inspiration throughout has been the writings of Julia Kristeva, especially now that she has discovered St. Teresa herself in her recent work. One of the most astonishing talks that I have been to recently was given by a Carmelite nun on how Teresa's 16th Century experiences can be lived in post modern life, negotiating alterity, postmodernity and the dialectics of the Self and Other in contemplative life.

Can you say something about enclosure and women's Carmelite spirituality?

The film unfolds the rhythm and inner life of the monastery over the course of one day. It invites the audience into this world of enclosure and gives one person's testimony behind choosing this way of life and is a portrait of a person within a community. The grille and the walls, which normally separate the enclosed religious from the world, are sombre but there is an unexpected performance from its exuberant and informed protagonist, which shows that this is a contemporary life in the 21st century. As Jennifer says, this is not a place for hiding away or escaping, it is a place for celebrating life, where everyday reality co-exists with the higher ideals of spiritual practice.
Cast
Jennifer del Corazón de Jesús
Herself

Camera and Sound
Alejandro Román

Alejandro Román acts as a contact for the nuns and has permission
to gain access to the monastery. He trained on camera and sound
for the production of Jennifer with Supervising Cinematographer
Tim Sidell and Director Nina Danino.

Supervising Cinematographer
Tim Sidell

Tim Sidell has worked as cinematographer in drama, artist’s
film, commercials, music videos and fashion films since 2005.
He recently shot artist’s 35mm film Jangbar by Zarina Bhimji;
short film Talgar on 16mm, in Kyrgyzstan, with Charlie Crane
(Knucklehead); short film Rags with Tom Beard (Partizan) on
35mm and Norfolk - an iFeatures fiction film for the BFI, Creative
England and BBC Films with director Martin Radich. He has
recently shot commercials with artist photographer Nadav
Kandar and Susanna White and Music Videos for Alt-J, Gang of
Four, La Roux, Twigs, King Krule and Will Young.

Editor
Elisa Cepedal

Elisa Cepedal was born in Asturias, Spain. In 1982. She graduated
in Fine Arts from the University of the Basque Country and in
filmmaking from The London Film School. She worked as an
assistant editor for BBC Drama and edited numerous short films
that have shown in festivals internationally: The BFI London Film
Festival; Buenos Aires’ BAFICI; Clermont-Ferrand; Guadalajara;
and New Directors/New Films at MoMA in New York City. Her
work in feature films include Llar (2014) by Elisa Cepedal which
premiered at Mar del Plata, If I Were to Forget You (2014) made for
a solo exhibition by the artist Sharone Lifschitz and Jennifer (2015)
by Nina Danino.

Sound designer
Joakim Sundström

Swedish-born 2014 EFA European Sound Designer Joakim
Sundström's credits include a number of Oscar, BIFA and BAFTA-
winning films including Seven Psychopaths (2012), Fish
Tank (2009), The Constant Gardener (2006), Touching The

He is a long-time collaborator of Micheal Winterbottom's including
the The Killer Inside Me (2010). Most recently he has worked on 45
Years (2015) starring Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtenay, Jake
and Dinos Chapman's film adaptation of The Marriage of Reason
and Squalor (2015), Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's documentary
feature 20,000 Days On Earth (2014) and Bypass (2014) for English
director Duane Hopkins. In 2012 Joakim Sundström won a BIFA for
his work on Peter Strickland's critically acclaimed Berberian
Sound Studio (2012). He has been nominated for a BAFTA
two MPSA Golden Reels, a British Independent Film Award, an
International Press Academy Golden Satellite Award and a London
Film Critics’ Circle Award for Berberian Sound Studio (2012).

Temporal Films
Production Company

Temporal Films was established in 2000 for the production of
innovative, artist-filmmaker authored projects. Temporal Films
draws on experience and production networks built up over 25
years to bring into production innovative projects in moving
image and films for cinema.