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Professional Orientation
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Interview: Eugenia Kuzmina



Eugenia Kuzmina is a Russian born FORD model, Hollywood actress and stand-up comedian.

She moved from the Soviet Union to the US after having been scouted by a Russian designer at the age of 14.

*Her work includes movies such as *Fading Gigolo*, *Rock the Kasbah* with Bill Murray and more recently, *Bad Moms*.*

On top of her career, Eugenia is also a mother of three.

For this second interview, I was very lucky to be able to talk with Eugenia Kuzmina: a former FORD model and Hollywood actress. We've had a common friend for a long time and were finally able to speak over Skype after having heard of each other over the last months. What was supposed to be a classic interview ended up being more of a discussion about the role of arts in politics, cultural differences with the US and how women are perceived within the industry.

Eugenia has always been a rebellious soul. Raised in Moscow during the Soviet Union by nuclear scientists, she cut bikinis out of soviet officer uniforms when she was five years old. She remembers growing up in a very restrictive environment, where women had to stay in their place and had limited perspectives for their future. At the age of 14, Eugenia was scouted by a famous Russian designer, which allowed her to leave the Soviet Union for the first time in her life and join the prestigious FORD agency. When I asked her if it had always been a dream of hers, she said: "No one wants to be a model in Russia, it's actually quite miserable." Eugenia was training to be a professional ice skater and had no interest in fashion at the time, but being able to do it overseas was a way out. "The only way out", she said.

Her story alone represents the American dream, so how does she feel right now about the United States? Having both moved here to expend our opportunities; I was not surprised that our opinions on the results of the presidential election were similar. However, her perspectives were still very positive, telling me that the arts were a way to "bring people together rather than divide" and therefore reminding me of our privileged position as artists. It turns out that Eugenia had worked for the Hillary campaign and also had the opportunity to meet her several times. "Hillary is a fantastic woman and I realized politics are tough, but we have to keep moving forward."

Our discussion naturally went towards our respective perspectives on the culture we were currently experiencing and the main differences we found with home. Eugenia's answer to the question was pretty clear: "Education. It's too black and white in the US. I

feel like people are not trained to think by themselves. Europe is way more open and critical. The fact that things are so one-sided here makes it really easy for the media to manipulate people through fear.” We both came to the conclusion that education was at the root of most social problems and that it explained the current political climate. However, Eugenia also recognized that her range of opportunity is way broader in the US and that it allowed her to achieve her dreams.

For the last 3 years, Eugenia has been acting in a wide range of Hollywood movies, such as *Fury*, *Rock the Kasbah* and *Bad Moms*. She has been gaining a lot of fame within the industry but is still struggling with being type cast a lot due to her Russian background and her modeling career. It was an opportunity for me to ask her how it was to be a foreign actress in LA and if she faced any resulting prejudices. Her answer was non-equivocal: “Absolutely. I have been battling with them since the start of my career. I remember that my first agent in LA asked me to change my name to an American sounding one. I did it, but even though I was getting cast in movies, I quickly felt that I was cheating myself. I realized that he didn’t have my best interest in mind and it resulted in a law-suit when I tried to leave him.” She proceeded to tell me to “work with [my] head and [my] heart” and that it is “still a business”. That was very eye opening since it showed me that this industry is all about compromise, but that you have to know who you are and have thick skin to not let people model you after their own vision.

I had this false perception that past a certain level of success, actresses didn’t have to face as many prejudices in their careers, but it turned out to be wrong. Eugenia and I talked a lot about the issue of “ageism”, and how past a certain age, it was way harder for women to get cast in roles, almost as if they weren’t considered marketable anymore by the industry. She told me about another one of her experiences when she met Sharon Stone for the first time: “She was such a wonderful person. Probably one of the smartest women I had ever met. I remember her trying to produce a show back then and how producers were making fun of her behind her back as she was trying to promote it. It was truly sad.” This showed me that we still have a lot of work to do in terms of sexism, because if Sharon Stone can’t be taken seriously, then who can?

On top of her acting/modeling career, Eugenia is also the mother of three children. I had to ask her how she managed both at the same time, since it is a recurring concern for a lot of women who want to lead a successful career on top of their private lives. “It’s really hard obviously, but I am not a perfectionist. I don’t mind making mistakes because that is how I learn. I have never really been a neurotic person”. It was a refreshing statement in an age where people, and especially women, are told they need to do everything perfectly in order to attain success. We are allowed to make mistakes, as long as we know how to recognize them. “You can do what you want as long as you have fun doing it”.

I learned a lot from my discussion with Eugenia and that is not something I ever say light heartedly. Her perspective on what it is to live in this political/cultural climate while trying to be an actress in a very selective industry made me realize that she had to consistently fight for what she wanted despite the perceived advantages she had in her life. Her main advice for a successful career? “Know your values. Know why you choose your roles. If you’re doing this work for the wrong reasons, chances are you won’t last long in the industry.” Eugenia concluded the discussion with an advice my mother had always been telling me since I was little: “In the end, you want to keep your work humanistic.”