

MOTHER TERESA – AN IDOL WITH CONTRADICTIONS

HANS CHRISTIAN MEISER IN AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUELINE FRITSCHI-CORNAZ

Preliminary remark: In 2010, Swiss theatre and movie actress Jacqueline Fritschi-Cornaz and her husband Richard Fritschi initiated the humanitarian feature film **Kavita & Teresa**. In a compelling parallel story, the movie features Mother Teresa as the “woman behind the saint” and Kavita, a young, contemporary Indian woman. Hence, the film inspires an international audience of all ages and classes to speak up for peace and justice within their personal sphere of influence. All of the movie’s revenues will be donated to institutions which care for the education and health of poor, sick, disabled and abandoned children – especially in India (www.kavitateresa.film). The film will premiere in 2020, on the occasion of Mother Teresa’s 110th birthday.

Meiser: Jacqueline Fritschi-Cornaz, could you tell me something about the origin and the development of your 100% non-profit movie **Kavita & Teresa**?

Fritschi-Cornaz: Ten years ago, I visited Mumbai for the first time and I enjoyed looking behind the scenes of Bollywood as an actress. I sat in a taxi, on the way to the studios. We only advanced slowly, the road was crowded with cars, trucks, bicycles, auto rickshaws and pedestrians, so there was plenty of time to look around and gaze at all the things that were going on. Amidst this general disorder, I encountered the faces of begging street children which knocked at the windows of the cars and offered magazines, toys or flowers. I was totally shocked and saw myself confronted with only two options in this moment: either I would try to repress these images and emotions or I would act. It was instantly clear to me that I had to do something and that it was important for me to make a contribution to justice in our world, especially since children were concerned (according to the UN, globally speaking, there are still 264 million Children without access to education; in India it is every second child). The giant oil painting of Mother Teresa in the next film studio lit the spark for the humanitarian feature movie **Kavita & Teresa**. While examining her picture, I remembered her famous quote: “don’t wait for leaders, do it alone, person to person”. On the spur of the moment, I asked the producer if he would be interested in making a film about the famous pioneer of peace. I told him that for myself it would be a great source of

joy and motivation to participate in a movie which has an impact that reaches beyond mere entertainment. Luckily, the producer was very enthusiastic about the idea. A few weeks later, he notified me that he was unable to find investors in Bollywood but, due to his discovery a photo of the young Mother Teresa, he noticed that I resemble her quite a bit.

Together with my husband Richard, we founded the Swiss *Zariya Foundation*. Zariya is Urdu, one of the many official languages of India, and means “well”. Our impactful and sustainable movie is supposed to serve as a source of inspiration for an international audience of all ages and social classes and encourages people to investigate their values and to campaign for peace and justice within their personal sphere of influence. All of the movie’s revenues will be donated to institutions which care for the education and health of India’s poorest children. Thereby, this movie project becomes an efficient tool and multiplier.

By recommendations from various sides, we got to know Kamal Musale. Over three years, he carried out research and developed a screenplay. He is a Swiss-Indian film-maker and graduated from the renowned *National Film and Television School* in England with a degree in script writing. As the successful film-maker of over 30 short films and feature films who also worked on documentaries, commercials, and music videos, he will be the director of our film.

Meiser: Mrs. Fritschi-Cornaz, in your self-initiated international project, you play the woman who is known as a saint but who is also somewhat controversial. What was your intention behind spending so much time to study this icon of “humanness”?

Fritschi-Cornaz: I consider it a privilege and a special challenge to fathom the woman behind the myth and to portray her as a complex human being with all her contradictions. I approach this task with great respect and joy. I am thankful that Kamal Musale’s compelling screenplay, which interweaves Mother Teresa’s years of self-doubt with the story of a young contemporary Indian woman, has created the perfect base for a modern and enthralling feature film which does not shy away from dealing with Mother Teresa’s controversies either. It is of great concern to me to embody Mother Teresa in all her facets and, thereby, to encourage the audience to hold on to one’s visions and not to give up in spite of self-doubts and inner conflicts. There are also examples of later saints who experienced a longing and exercised their minds with an iron will but who were also afflicted with inner conflicts and despair. They thought that God had forsaken them and in this they were entirely human

and therefore also riddled with contradictions (it is these contradictions, which make a movie or a character interesting in the first place). I identify with Mother Teresa with all of my heart, in order to succeed in “becoming her” in front of the camera. To have the opportunity to immerse myself in ever-changing, complex characters, is an enriching experience in my life. Although I am a different person than those who I portray and although I think, feel and act differently in my personal life, it is my intention to authentically represent a character.

Meiser: You and your husband were looking for funds all over the globe in order to finance the film. What does the project’s financial situation look like today?

Fritschi-Cornaz: Our worldwide fundraising aims to collect an amount of 4 million euros in total, two thirds of this production budget are already warranted. In this regard, the *Zariya Foundation* team and the Patron’s Committee are organizing fundraising events and they are in contact with other foundations or private donators who want to be part of the vision behind **Kavita & Teresa** and support us with personal or financial contributions. We hope to complete the fundraising stage until early summer, so we can start shooting in India/Europe in November.

Meiser: What does the distribution of the movie look like? Where and when will the release take place?

Fritschi-Cornaz: At the beginning, we had to conduct research on the frame of the script and the character development. In this regard, Kamal Musale, Anaita Daravula and I examined all biographies and documentaries about Mother Teresa and wrote down a so-called “treatment” based on which Kamal Musale composed the script.

Because of my personal interest in the matter and in order to gain direct insights of the efforts of the *Missionaries of Charity* in Kolkata, I had the chance to work with abandoned and severely disabled children. I am very grateful for this touching experience and also for the numerous conversations with people who personally knew Mother Teresa. Furthermore, a visit to her hometown Skopje and a week-long stay in the monastery of the Franciscans in the Muotatal in central Switzerland provided me with deep insights into her life (though, when I decided to return home after a week in the monastery, my husband was happy).

In January 2018, Kamal Musale shot five scenes from the finalized screenplay with Karen David, Deepti Naval, and myself as Mother Teresa in India. He developed these scenes into a 20 min long pilot film which constitutes a fantastic tool to provide those who are interested in the project with more insights about the *Kavita & Teresa* film.

The release is planned for 2020, on the occasion of Mother Teresa's 110th birthday (with a premiere on an international film festival, for example the Berlinale). Subsequently, the film will be launched internationally.

Meiser: As far as you told me, there will also be an online-version of the film which one can watch for \$1. How will you carry out this paywall?

Fritschi-Cornaz: In the following months, the *Zariya Foundation* Team and Kamal Musale will develop a sophisticated concept based on the idea that the online-streaming will be offered on the *Kavita & Teresa* website (www.kavitateresa.film). For a minimal contribution of \$1, people everywhere around the globe will be able to watch the film and can subsequently make a donation if they want to. We are convinced that by means of this website (and the *Zariya Foundation*) it will be possible to achieve a multiplying effect which will generate financial contributions for children in India over many years.

Meiser: About the content: how did you conceptualize the movie in order to develop a complete story of 90 minutes and not only a portrayal of its main character?

Fritschi-Cornaz: In the screenplay of *Kavita & Teresa*, Kamal Musale intertwined Mother Teresa's years of doubt with the story of the young Indian woman. Two women's lives – passionate and uncompromising. Two women's lives – intertwined by parallel stories woven over generations. Both of them carry out their individual mission despite considerable personal struggles.

Her love to Jesus and her compassion for the unprivileged means everything to young Mother Teresa. Following God's call, she leaves her previous life behind and builds up an organization for the poorest of the poor in the slums of Kolkata. But after the foundation of her *Missionaries of Charity*, Mother Teresa feels more and more abandoned by God. Over years, she is pained by self-doubts; nevertheless, she realizes her vision and passion: to inspire thousands of humans to a peaceful and humane life and to build up an organization consisting of 5000 sisters today.

For Kavita, a young contemporary woman living in London, love is an illusion. She is torn by inner conflicts: an unhappy relationship, an unwanted pregnancy and the marriage plans of her parents.

A journey to Kolkata confronts Kavita with her roots and the past of her family. Due to community service, she encounters the aims and values of Mother Teresa and her sisters. Through the eyes of Kavita, we discover Mother Teresa's courage, her deep beliefs, and her devotion. Inspired by the humble pioneer of peace from Kolkata, Kavita starts to incorporate the vision of Mother Teresa into her own life, to love herself, and to take responsibility for herself and others.

Meiser: This issue of the „Gazette“ is focused on the topic “I! YOU! WE! – Separation, Similarities, (L)one(li)ness, Division, and Conciliation“. If I am not mistaken, these are exactly the topics which also play an important role in your movie. There is the I in the founder of the religious order who needs a YOU as a counterpart in which she can realize her I, but in the end, there is also the need of a WE to carry out the whole work. These themes are often accompanied by hostilities etc. so that also the subtitle comes into play. Have you also reflected on this aspect in your creative process?

Fritschi-Cornaz: The inner conflicts of Mother Teresa and her battle to speak up for the abandoned of our society despite her self-doubts are of central significance in the movie. In this sense, it is a deeply humanitarian film, a film about someone human and not about an aloof saint.

We observe and experience how Mother Teresa longs for the proximity and connectedness with God and see how she feels separated from him over decades (documented in personal letters by Mother Teresa in which she expresses this feeling in a highly touching way; published in the book “Come be my Light” in 2007).

No sooner had she followed the vocation of God than she lost the connection to God. She can neither hear His voice nor feel his energy and she felt detached, abandoned (and betrayed). God called her to “the homes of the poor“. She had left everything behind and dedicated her life to the poorest of the poor. She is desperate and feels completely alone. Besides her confessors, she can't talk to anyone and has to get the pain and loneliness off her chest in an endless number of letters written at night-time. Her suffering must have

broken her physically and mentally. In her disappointment, she also felt guilty again and again. She doubts herself and tries to find God's vicinity by working even harder, through relinquishment and obedience. In multiple letters, we read that she has lost her faith. Nevertheless, she keeps going, gets up every morning and sacrifices herself for the lost and the forgotten, those, for whom nobody cares anymore. In the end, she finds a certain acceptance in this task. A conciliation is not possible, but, after decades, she is able to recognise her suffering, which she describes as a "deep darkness", as a gift of God. Seemingly, she has to endure the same darkness as her protégés to understand their fate and to develop empathy and real compassion.

In her community service with the sisters in Kolkata, Kavita discovers this compassion and is deeply moved. She makes new decisions for her life, returns to London, and takes on responsibility for herself and her environment. Through Kavita and her contemporary story, a young audience can also identify with the film and is inspired to reflect on their own life, to develop a vision, and to pursue this vision even in difficult times. Therefore, the audience is able to experience the process from the I to the YOU to the WE by means of both characters in the movie and is encouraged to investigate their own values and to make a contribution to peace and justice in their personal environment.

Meiser: Mother Teresa has received the Nobel Prize for Peace and is being worshipped as a saint by the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, there are critics that accuse her in various aspects. Have you incorporated these contradictions in the movie?

Fritschi-Cornaz: As mentioned, for Kamal Musale, myself, and the *Zariya Foundation* team, it is important to deal with these controversies and to motivate the audience to think about their own and the humanitarian values. For example, through Kavita and her story, the topic of abortion is openly discussed. And we are presented with Mother Teresa, who, towards her pupils in the Loreto Convent, clearly voices her opinion against abortion. The film team, however, does not take a stand in this regard. It is important to us to depict the situations of the main characters and to stimulate individual thinking.

Meiser: How much did the topic of poverty and charity coin yourself? Or put in other words: Did you become a different person through your examination of Mother Teresa's life and impact?

Fritschi-Cornaz: My consternation did not decrease during all the trips to India which I undertook in the last ten years. Even today, I still feel sorrow, anger, and frustration when I am in contact with poor people. Because of my collaboration in this film project I don't feel impotent anymore. I am able to make an important contribution through my work and my own humanity – and all of this together with a fantastic team of creative, dedicated, and innovative people. We are carried by our collective vision, which gives us the strength and the endurance to create this extensive, humanitarian project and to offer it to the world – and hopefully, it sparks courage and inspiration to many people. In this regard, I exercise myself in humility and devotion, like Mother Teresa, and I experience that “what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop” (Mother Teresa).

Meiser: In the beginning, it was her faith, which carried Mother Teresa, later she could not get around doubting everything. Did you also doubt the plans you had and still have? What helps you to overcome your doubts?

Fritschi-Cornaz: Since we show Mother Teresa as a human being with all her doubts, we also hope to encourage the audience. Doubts are a part of life and despite these inner conflicts we manage to go on and to become stronger on the way. During this project, we also experienced moments of doubt. Will we manage to inspire others? Is it enough to initiate a visionary project, to make a big contribution ourselves, and to convince others about it? Will we bring together a production budget of 4 million euros from donations only? Are we able to do without co-producers and investors to keep at our vision of a 100% non-profit-movie and give *all* of the movie's revenues to institutions which care for the education and health of children in India?

These questions and risks continually worried us. But also when I was working on the character development, there were moments when fear overtook and I had the feeling of being insufficient. In moments like these, I am incredibly grateful to live in a great partnership with my husband, in a supporting family, and in an environment of true friends. This “foundation” gives me the strength and courage to go my way, to admit my deficiencies, and to keep living my dream.

Meiser: There are various models to counteract the poverty in our world, among which fighting the causes is probably the best. What would you suggest after your intense occupation with Mother Teresa?

Fritschi-Cornaz: Mother Teresa's already mentioned quotation „Don't wait for leaders, do it alone, person to person" is more up to date than ever before. We are all responsible to look, to reflect, and to act. We all have the possibility to take on more responsibility within our own sphere of influence (and beyond) and to create a more peaceful and just community. After all, I can also try to frame this task as creative, inspiring and enriching as possible. If I succeed to fill others with enthusiasm for a „good cause" and to act together, it is an incredible joy and there is a solidary energy and connectedness. Furthermore, through the challenges I encounter on the way, I can progress. There are so many possibilities to be active and to campaign for a „better world". I am far from prescribing an ideal strategy, everybody is allowed to find what they think is right.

Meiser: No matter how poor a country is, there always seems to be plenty of money for arms. How can the thought of charity become fruitful for these matters? Or is it simply impossible because humans don't see their neighbours as brothers but as opponents, no matter in what respect?

Fritschi-Cornaz: Sadly, it is true that many people are driven by greed, egoism, and their entitlement to power and they don't consider the well-being of others for their actions. You have brought up the arms. Even Switzerland, which I am proud of in many other respects, sells weapons to warring parties and, regardless of this, it claims to be a neutral country. What an unbelievable contradiction. As many other Swiss people, I am disappointed in our politicians' decisions concerning this matter.

But for myself it is not an alternative to protest against something, not to mention to resign. I try to contribute something constructive to universal peace with my own abilities and talents. In this respect, the *Kavita & Teresa* film is a wonderful tool because film is generally a medium which touches people's hearts and which moves them emotionally. And that is worth „fighting" for. And there are so many possibilities if we only focus on the positive energy and strengthen it. With your „GAZETTE", you also create a great source of inspiration, which encourages its readers in their daily life and stirs their thinking.

Meiser: Thanks for the compliment. I hope we fulfil this task. Can you imagine a peaceful together of the cultures or even a shared world culture or is the dream of enduring peace among humankind entirely unrealistic?

Fritschi-Cornaz: Our thoughts have an incredible power and I believe that it makes sense and is meaningful to understand ourselves as part of a world culture and to speak up for justice and peace. John Lennon once said: “A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is reality”. If we achieve to infect others with this thought, we have already created a world of mutual respect, tolerance and compassion within our own environment. Independent from my profession, as a private person it is important for me to get involved and to believe in the idea that it is possible to live in peace. “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other” (Mother Teresa).

Meiser: Many inspiring thinkers who want to change the world for the better fail, are being murdered or silenced whereas potentates and dictators can be sure of the support of large parts of the population time again (even after the experiences of World War II). Considering the concept of I – YOU – WE: do you have an explanation for this?

Fritschi-Cornaz: It makes me sad and angry yet again when I hear or see these “personalities” you have just mentioned and it is absolutely devastating to see how much negative power a single human being can execute. For many people, it seems to be easier to join the “winners” and to be a part of this energy. But if it is possible to develop so much negative energy as a single human being, the other way around is just as possible. Consider Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Pastor Sieber in Zurich and so on. All of them developed an incredibly positive inner energy against obnoxious circumstances and passed this energy on to others. I believe in this positive energy and that with patience and love we are able to create it within ourselves and to project it onto others, to move from the I to the YOU to the WE. It’s worth a try every day.

Meiser: Mother Teresa and many other helpers of humanity have shown that much is possible once one actually begins with it. Karl-Heinz Böhm and his commitment in Ethiopia, which began with an appearance at the show “Wetten, dass” (literally “bet that”), is just *one* example for this. What Mother Teresa stands for is nowadays being continued by the Missionaries of Charity in 710 houses in 133 countries around the globe. Do we need less egomaniacal politicians and more “saints”?

Fritschi-Cornaz: Everywhere in the world, populist and racist tendencies become increasingly visible, audible, and noticeable. Egoistic claims for power, lack of awareness and sensibility in their contact with fellow human beings, and the desire for short-term profit maximization result in a rash culture and disrespectful communication.

I don't believe that we need more saints for a more just world (but yes, less egomaniacal leaders). However, as already mentioned, we all could take on more self-initiative and sense of responsibility individually. I am convinced that it is worthwhile to speak up for the well-being of everyone with empathy and compassion, to encourage and inspire others, to take on responsibility together for us AND for our fellow human beings. Thereby, we can live and cultivate peace in our everyday life.

Meiser: And in this manner, your film can also contribute to the creation of a more just and better world, in order that people remember their fundamental values and what it is that makes them "human" in a positive sense.

Fritschi-Cornaz: When – on the occasion of Mother Teresa's Peace Nobel Prize award – a journalist asked her how we can create universal peace she answered: "go home and love your family."

We hope that *Kavita & Teresa* touches its viewers and that, after the cinema experience, they contemplate with joy and motivation on where they could make an impact in their own environment more frequently. The film definitely allows for a reflection in an entertaining manner and can lead to an expansion of one's consciousness.

Meiser: Time again it is individuals which, despite all doubts and inner contradictions, are able to create a WE out of the I through the path of the YOU and they let us forget that humanity is not in the best shape. Hence, we could say that we will become extinct just like the dinosaurs and that in the aftermath, there will come something new (or not), or we can – by means of an enormous act of strength – try to continually refine the good characteristics of humanity. Are we in need of a new humanism and can the saint from Kolkata serve as a role model in this regard?

Fritschi-Cornaz: As an actress, it is actually a thrilling idea to die as a dinosaur – at least in a film or on stage... – but let's return to your question. I don't think we have to reinvent the wheel. In fact, we all know how we can contribute to a world that is worth to live in for

EVERYONE. We, in our so-called “first world”, must be willing to share. “Poverty is not made by God, it is created by you and me when we don’t share what we have” (Mother Teresa). I don’t see a different solution than orientating us towards the ideal ever again – with enormous efforts.

Meiser: What do you wish for in regard to the relation of I – YOU – WE for the present and for the future?

Fritschi-Cornaz: To be honest: I wish for an ideal world. It would be so nice. But I guess it would be too easy and it is probably a part of our duties in life to partake in this process of I – YOU – WE and to grow through challenges. We can merely try to live in this seemingly exhausting way, to celebrate the peaceful living together, anew and (self-)aware in every instance, as a “dance through life”. As a long-time ballet fan, I like this mental image. We can also try to receive our vitality from this interior but nevertheless collective movement and to pass it on to others... “person to person”...

Meiser: How (besides donations) can the readers of the “Gazette” further contribute to the project in order to support the poorest of the poor, those casted away, forsaken, or forgotten, so that they are not being seen as unworthy creatures but as human beings who long for love, recognition and the feeling of security?

Fritschi-Cornaz: As already mentioned, there are people in our immediate environment who are in need of support and to whom our attention and appreciation can already be a tremendous help in their everyday life. That is already a lot. In case people find the concept of *Kavita & Teresa* appealing and want to be a part of this vision, Kamal Musale, the *Zariya Foundation* team, and I would be happy about a donation or a spreading of the good news (for example on social media). By the way, we will express our gratitude for every donation individually. More information/donations: www.kavitateresa.film.

Meiser: The Gazette team and I wish you good luck and hope that your film is going to be a success and that it is going to be impactful not only in India.

Interview with Dr. Hans Christian Meiser, Editor in Chief, DIE GAZETTE, April 2019