



## SXSW '14: First-time director sets sail with "Vessel"



5 hours ago by [Kevin Ritchie](#)



**Director Diana Whitten talks to *realscreen* about making her SXSW-winner *Vessel* (pictured), a documentary about the organization Women On Waves and its unorthodox quest to provide women around the world with access to safe abortions.**

A drama set on the high seas against a backdrop of polarizing religious and political views sounds like a solid bet for a night out at the cinema or an appointment with the TV set.

However, if that drama centers on a reproductive rights advocate fighting for women around the world to receive access to safe abortions, then bringing that story to the screen might not be so straight-forward, dramatic though it may seem.

Seven years ago, director Diana Whitten set out to make a documentary about Rebecca Gomperts, a Dutch physician who transformed a shipping container into a health clinic, in a bid to travel to countries where abortion is illegal to offer women safe ways to end unwanted pregnancies and push for liberalizing local laws, via the safety of international waters.

Gomperts and her team of activists traveled to Ireland, Portugal, Poland, Spain and Morocco, and each time were met by reporters, raucous crowds of anti-abortion protesters, and women seeking their services.

The resulting film, *Vessel*, world premiered at SXSW in Austin, Texas this week, and [last night won](#) Special Jury Recognition for Political Courage in the Documentary Feature Competition. The film will form the basis of a social outreach campaign Whitten is undertaking (in partnership with the Fledgling Fund, Chicken & Egg Pictures, Film Sprout and exec producers from Impact Partners and Fork Films) that she hopes will advance the women's rights agenda in the United States and overseas.

*Realscreen* spoke with Whitten about her challenges financing and making *Vessel*, which is available for domestic and international distribution deals during the festival.

### **How did you find out about Women on Waves?**

When I first learned about Women on Waves, I had been working in production design for a few years and had left that to go back to grad school for international media studies. I was immediately interested in the group's use of offshore space. It's a space that is traditionally used

for crime and personal gain, and here was someone that was using it for social justice. I thought that was such an interesting spin.

### **Did you know right away you had the makings of a documentary?**

Not immediately. There were a few reasons why I wanted to explore it. I was an English major in my undergrad and I loved the idea of a woman leaving one realm of sovereignty in order to reclaim her own. I thought that was very beautiful. I also thought Rebecca was such a charismatic character. I had never even done an interview before I interviewed Rebecca. So I'm not sure I knew what I was getting into when I started. Seven years later there is a film and I've learned a lot.

### **Why did she trust you?**

That was a big part of the process: gaining the trust of someone who works directly with media in very clever ways. A big part of my process was to gain Rebecca's trust and to gain the trust of the women [seeking abortions]; to have empathy in situations where I had to recognize the most important thing happening in certain situations was the woman's experience and not my filming it.

What I respect most about Rebecca is that she lives her creed to trust women. That's what her message is in terms of the political world and in terms of abortion. She works with her team in similar ways. She's good at seeing what people are good at and letting them run with it. Once she knew what I wanted to do with this story and understood where I was coming from, I felt great trust from her and I do to today.



Director Diana Whitten

### **Was it a challenge to get the film financed?**

That was challenging for sure. I was a first-time filmmaker working on a highly controversial issue with a story that, quite frankly, scared people a little bit.

Abortion pills are considered revolutionary because they offer safe, accessible alternatives when women can't get access adequate health care. Rebecca's is one of the few organizations that publicly educates women about these pills, and they do so regardless of restrictive laws. When we started the film, the abortion pill was relatively unfamiliar in the United States and this idea of self-induction was completely foreign. We had these potential allies and potential funders, but they were unfamiliar with the reliance on these pills by women in countries where they don't have other access.

That was seven years ago and now the landscape has completely changed. Many more people are familiar with the pills, self-induction and the realities on the ground for women. Because of the onslaught of restrictive laws in the U.S., many women here are faced with the same restricted options as the women visited by Rebecca's ship. It's interesting how quickly things change.

### **What was it like filming the scenes of the boat arriving to port and being surrounded by protesters?**

It was definitely some of the most exhilarating experiences I've had with the camera. Adrenaline kicks in. I don't remember feeling personally afraid when there were mobs around us. I think the camera puts an interesting barrier between you and what you're in the middle of. As we've seen from Occupy and Twitter and all these social media events, people who might otherwise be compelled to cause harm might think twice if there's a camera in their face.

### **How did you evoke that feeling when you were editing those scenes?**

When the ship arrives in Valencia, Spain, that was such an exciting afternoon. We wanted to recreate that. The music was biggest in that moment. Whatever we could do to make you feel that excitement of all these the elements from the past 10 years coming together in this triumphant moment of being able to get the ship in. They had all the elements in place to help women in a practical way, which was bigger than the spectacle of the ship arriving.

Everything that I know! I have a background with cameras and production design and I had done my share of shooting. But in terms of the process, everything I know I learned on the job.

*Vessel made its world premiere at SXSW in Austin, Texas yesterday (March 10) and screens again on Friday (March 14).*

*Watch a clip from Vessel below:*

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