

Montreal 2003

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MONTREAL WORLD FILM FESTIVAL 2003

One of the ironies of the 27th Montreal World Film Festival (27 August to 7 September 2003) was the presentation by Montreal festival director Serge Losique of three films programmed at relatively the same time by Venice festival director Moritz de Hadeln at *Venezia 60* (27 August to 6 September). These were the following: Andrei Zvjagintsev's *Vozvrashchenie* (*The Return*, Russia), winner of the Golden Lion, Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's *27 Grams* (USA), with Sean Penn awarded the Coppa Volpi for Best actor; and Hana Makhmalbaf's *Joy of Madness* (Iran), a documentary made by the 14-year-old sister of Samira Makhmalbaf on the latter's making of *Pan é asr* (*At Five in the Afternoon*), her competition entry at Cannes. By way of a return gesture, a Montreal competition entry, Goutam Ghose's *In the Forest Again* (India), was next shipped to Venice for its European premiere on the Lido. And it should be noted, too, that *The Return* had been originally booked for the Locarno festival - then yanked at the last minute from the lineup for entry in the Venice competition. Either the major international film festivals are relaxing their rules, or producers and directors and sale agents can play one festival off against another to get the best programming deal.

No matter, Montreal was the winner this time. From the more than 400 films from 75 countries programmed by Serge Losique, the committed cineaste could track an amazing array of new talent and trends from every corner of the world. Herewith a summary of themes and styles seen in key competition entries:

Grand Prix of the Americas to the Balkan: *Kordon* (*The Cordon*, Serbia-Montenegro)

Montreal audiences may well remember Goran Markovic's presence at the 1995 FFM - when, in flawless French, he expounded on the whys and wherefores of the "Third Balkan War in his *Burlesque Tragedy*. Selected for the competition, it dealt not only with conditions in Yugoslavia during the siege of Sarajevo, but Markovic also put the blame squarely on President Slobodan Milošević for leading the country to political and financial ruin. A French-Bulgarian coproduction, *Burlesque Tragedy* shared the prize for Best Director at the 1995 Montreal festival - and later went on to win the First Prize at the Yugoslav Film Festival in Herzeg Novi. It should be noted, too, that the screenplay had been penned by noted Belgrade writer-playwright Dušan Kovacevic, whose own written-and-directed *The Professional* is also contending for festival honours at this year's Montreal festival.

Five years after *Burlesque Tragedy*, Goran Markovic, now an international name on the festival circuit, was invited to participate in the New Territories section at Venice with *Serbia, Year Zero* (2001), a French coproduction that offered a personal, no-holds-barred view of the havoc wrought by the Yugoslav president throughout the 1990s. The film opens on the day after Milošević's fall (4 October 2000), when crowds stormed the state television station in Belgrade and other hated symbols of the regime. This year, Goran Markovic is back in the Montreal competition with what might be considered the third film in his political trilogy on the Fall of Milošević: *Kordon* (*The Cordon*).

The setting is Belgrade, a few weeks into the New Year of 1997. The citizens of Belgrade and the people of Serbia have been protesting in the streets for four months in a row, hoping that peaceful demonstrations will eventually result in the overthrow of the Milošević government. But the dictator responds by forming a "cordon" of police thugs with baseball bats to bully the leaders of the protest movement into making a fatal mistake that might wipe them out altogether. Six policemen - Zmaj, Crni, Dule, Kole, Seljak, and the driver Uros - form this cordon. In a sense, they present a cross-section of rightist, racist, Serb nationalist thought. Since they've been on their patrols day and night for weeks, often sent here and there by their superiors on wild-goose chases to prevent people from the surrounding towns and villages to enter Belgrade, their nerves are strained to the limit and an explosion is imminent. Are they the hunters or have they become the hunted?

Born 1946 in Belgrade, Goran Markovic is the son of Rade and Olivera Markovic, both legendary figures in Yugoslav cinema and theatre. In 1965, he enrolled in the Prague Film School (FAMU) to study under Oscar-award-winning Elmar Klos. One of a half-dozen talented young Yugoslav filmmakers - later tagged

the "Czech Film School" directors - the group also numbered Goran Paskaljevic, Srdjan Karanovic, Lordan Zafranovic, Rajko Grlic, and Emir Kusturica. Markovic's first feature film back in Yugoslavia was an immediate hit with the home audience: *Special Education* (1976). He then followed with a string of artistic and commercial triumphs that won several awards at international film festivals: the black comedy *National Class* (1978), another commercial hit; *Jack of All Trades* (1980), a comedy awarded at Manila; *Variola Vera* (1981), a modern-day version of Albert Camus's "The Plague" classic; *Taiwan Canasta* (1985), a political film about the 1968 student demonstrations in Belgrade; *Deja Vu* (1987), a self-styled horror film invited to the Panorama at the Berlinale; *Meeting Point* (1989), seen at the Montreal World Film Festival, and *Tito and Me* (1992), a personal review of Yugoslav history that was awarded at San Sebastian. With each of these films, Goran Markovic shifted gradually from comedy and satire to social and political statements that made him a target by the Milošević government for his outspoken political views.

Gas Station Blues: Louis Bélanger's *GAZ BAR Blues* (Canada)

Remember all those quaint characters that walked in and out of Harvey Keitel's cigar store on a Brooklyn corner in Wayne Wang's *Smoke* (1994) and *Blue in the Face* (1994), the back-to-back productions that took the 1995 Berlinale by storm and went on to become one of the cult hits of the year? If you hold a soft spot in your movie-going heart for that tandem, then you will also like Louis Bélanger's *GAZ BAR Blues* (Canada), the Quebec production that opened this year's Montreal World Film Festival (MWFF). For nothing much happens in *GAZ BAR Blues* save for the little miracles that make the world go round: the local gentry who gather daily to talk weather and politics, the task of helping a little girl to get customers who forget or refuse to pay, the banged-up car towed onto the lot that belongs to the son of the owner. "I wanted to show the beauty of this universe," said Louis Bélanger about small-time, working-man's life in a provincial town back in 1989, as though the scene belongs to the past and never will return again. Indeed, for Bélanger it won't - for *GAZ BAR Blues* is autobiographical and is drawn from his own experiences as a boy.

"Boss" Brochu (Serge Thérault) is the owner of this rundown gas-station bar-café, half service station, half café. His wife is dead, he is suffering from Parkinson's Disease, and two of his three sons would sooner leave town rather than have to inherit or take over the gas station. Réjean (Sébastien Delorme), one of the sons, is a photographer with a yen for travel, and he does manage in one sequence to transport himself to Berlin to witness the fall of the Berlin Wall. Guy (Danny Gillmore) plays in a blues band at local jazz joints, a thematic element that lends both colour to the story and the title. Only Alain (Gilles Renaud), the 14-year-old son, would like to stay on at his father's station, but Boss won't hear of it. "I don't see the gas station owner as someone out to make money," said Louis Bélanger in an interview. "If he did, he wouldn't allow people just to sit around and shoot the breeze all day long at the station. In fact, most of those who stop by don't even have a car."

Born 1965, Louis Bélanger collaborated with filmmaker Denis Chouinard on the short films: *Dogmatisme or le songe d'Adrian* (*Dogma, or Adrian's Dream*, 1988), *Le Soleil et ses traces* (*The Sun and Its Rays*, 1990), and *Les 14 définitions de la pluie* (*The 14 Definitions of Rain*, 1992). He co-directed *Les Galleries Wilderton* (1991) with Bruno Baillargeon. His first feature film, *Post Mortem* (1999), was awarded Best Director at the 1999 MWFF. Set at a mortuary, *Post Mortem* sketches the life of a funeral attendant whose fate is intertwined with that of a single mother. She, in turn, supports her daughter by seducing men to steal their money and credit cards. As for *GAZ BAR Blues*, it was a multi award winner at this year's Montreal festival: the Special Grand Prize of the Jury, the Ecumenical Award, and voted the Most Popular Canadian Feature Film.

Homage to Indian Master Satyajit Ray: Goutam Ghose's *Abar Aranye* (*In the Forest Again*, India)

In a letter of 18 January 1970, Satyajit Ray wrote to Marie Seton about the calamitous opening of his new film, *Aranye Din-Ratri* (*Days and Nights in the Forest*, 1969), based on a novel by Sunil Ganguly: "The new film opened two days ago. The infamous Samity Mantid hired hoodlums in the theatre at the opening show - their misbehaviour nearly wrecked the films for the audience - quite the worst experience of its kind I've ever had. But subsequent shows have been OK - and I've heard some extremely favourable comments. Personally I think it's one of my most satisfying films - subtle, complex (but not bewilderingly so), and superbly acted by the entire ensemble. Almost certainly the most contemporary of my films in feeling."

A few months later, *Days and Nights in the Forest* was invited to compete at the Berlinale - and again the same disruption took place in late June to ruin its international premiere. Four days into the festival, the Berlinale grounded to a halt amid a chorus of catcalls, resignations, and protests from both the international jury and would-be revolutionaries. Today, looking back, only a few critics even remember having seen the Ray film.

As Goutam Ghose underscores in his homage to Satyajit Ray, *In the Forest Again*, the importance of *Days and Nights in the Forest* cannot be underestimated in the overall oeuvre of Indian master. Termed by Ray himself as "one of my most satisfying films," it was to be the first of a film quartet that continued to probe the theme of complacency in modern Bengali society. The films to followed completed that study: *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*, 1970), *Seemabaddha* (*Company Limited*, 1971), and *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973), the last named awarded the Golden Bear at the 1973 Berlinale, the Golden Hugo at Chicago, and the Indian Prime Minister's Gold Medal. Set during the war and famine in Bengal in 1942/43, and based on a novel by Bibhutibhushan Banerjee, *Distant Thunder* is the story of a teacher and a doctor who set up a school in a village, only to see it disintegrate in the face of war and famine. Social and moral principles fail. All is determined by the fight for survival. But despite the insanity of a man-made catastrophe, Ray keeps his distance, wrote Berlinale film historian Wolfgang Jacobsen, and made "an elegiac rather than a plaintive film."

Sumitra Chatterjee, one of Satyajit Ray's favourite actors, played the lead roles in both *Days and Nights in the Forest* and *Distant Thunder*. Not by coincidence, Sumitra Chatterjee also plays the lead role in Goutam Ghose's *In the Forest Again*. And he is joined by two other actors from the Ray film and a third represented by a family member: Shubhendu Chatterjee, Sharmila Tagore, and Samit Bhanja. In the original they were four city-bred young men who wandered into the forest of Palamau for a vacation. Now, 34 years later, they return to the same forest again "on a walk down memory lane" (Ghose). One friend has died, another is dying of cancer. Things, of course, are no longer the same. But neither is the Palamau forest of Ray's time - it's now unsafe for tourists. *In the Forest Again* was one of the highlights of the recent Cinefan film festival in New Delhi.

Born 1950 in Calcutta, Goutam Ghose graduated from the University of Calcutta, worked in theatre and as a photojournalist, and began to make documentaries in 1973. A Marxist by temperament, he worked out his social and political problems in his feature films: *Maa Bhumi* (*Motherland*, 1979), *Dekha* (*Perceptions*, 1982), and *Paar* (*Crossing*, 1984). Together with Buddhadeb Dasgupta, another Calcutta-based director, Goutam Ghose has helped considerably to rejuvenate Bengali - and Indian - cinema. Other productions in his filmography: *Hungry Autumn* (1974), *Our Land* (1980), *The Occupation* (1982), *Land of Sand Dunes* (1986), *Meeting a Milestone* (1990), *The Voyage Beyond* (1992), *Boatman of the River Patna* (1992), *The Kite* (1993), *Beyond the Himalayas* (1996), and *The Doll* (1997) - the name named programmed at the Montreal World Film Festival. An *auteur* in the fullest sense, Goutam Ghose wrote, directed, photographed and composed the music for *In the Forest Again*.

Caught in the Throes of the Civil War in Sri Lanka: Prasanna Vithanage's *Ira Madiyama* (*August Sun*, Sri Lanka)

"I wanted the film to be as authentic as possible," said Sri Lanka director Prasanna Vithanage about the making of *Ira Madiyama* (*August Sun*). "As such, it required a massive cast of nearly 900." One of the most anticipated world premieres at the Montreal World Film Festival, *August Sun* was a long time in coming and took a long time to make. Set in the mid-1990s, when the civil war in Sri Lanka was at its height, it depicts how three individuals struggle to recover what they have lost and are willing to risk everything for what really counts in life: a longing for identity, a sense of dignity, and a yearning to love and be loved. With its large cast (reported to be 900) and its use of non-professionals who speak in two languages (Sinhalese and Tamil), to say nothing of the decision to shoot much of the film in the northern territories still partially under the control of the LTTE ("Tamil Tigers") rebels, *August Sun* was a undertaking that took four years to complete from conception to realization.

As for the three individuals in the story, their narrative lines are not separate episodes but cross each other within a simultaneous time frame. Arfath (Mohamed Rahfiulla), an 11-year-old Muslim boy, struggles to keep possession of his dog while his family is being forced out of their home by the rebels - more or less on

religious grounds, for Muslims in Talaimannar are in the minority. Chamari (Nimmi Harasgama), a young woman living in Colombo, the Sri Lanka capital, sets out on a search to find her husband, a pilot said to be missing in action during the war. And Duminda (Namal Jayasinghe), a young soldier returning from the fighting front, walks into a brothel in Anuradhapura, a sacred city for the Buddhists, only to find that his sister is working there. She, in turn, has recently lost her only means of living - a job in a garment factory in which the women have been exploited by western companies. Since all three stories take place under a scorching hot August sun, the human side of these personal tragedies become searing experiences that, perforce, take precedence over the film's social milieu and political background.

Queried as to how difficult it was for the non-professionals in the film to relive the agonies of the recent past, Vithanage confirmed: "Initially, they were reluctant to go down memory lane with little or no previous experience in acting. However, they later agreed to join the project in order to be able to tell their story to the world." Workshops for the amateurs were held in Colombo and Anuradhapura over a stretch of some months - first, to find the right people, and then to coach them to interpret scenes in the proper realistic context. As for when *August Sun* will be released in Sri Lanka - if at all, he hinted that a favourable government decision depends a great deal on the film's success on the festival circuit. And he added that subtitles would surely be needed in Sri Lanka to preserve its authenticity in word and dialect for the respective ethnic communities.

Born 1962, Prasanna Vithanage worked first in theatre upon his graduation from school. In 1986 he directed for the stage George Bernard Shaw's *The Arms and the Man* from his own translation, and in 1991 he scored critical hits with stage productions of Dario Fo's *Raspberries and Trumpets*. Turning to the broader audience medium of cinema, he was successful from the start: *Sisila Gini Gani (Ice on Water)*, his debut feature film, received nine national film awards. Subsequent successful film productions have placed him in the forefront of Sri Lanka directors: *Anantha Rathriya (Dark Night of the Soul, 1996)*, *Pawuru Walalu (The Walls Within, 1997)*, and *Purahanda Kaluwara (Death on a Full Moon Day, 1997)*, awarded the Grand Prix at Amiens. When the government censor took exception to a misinterpreted burial scene in *Death on a Full Moon Day*, the film was denied release - and Prasanna Vithanage had to take his case to court to have the issue resolved in his favour. Still, it was only because the uncut version of the film had shown abroad in 1999 that a home release in 2001 was permitted without cuts. *Death on a Full Moon Day* then went on to become one of the most successful box office releases in Sri Lanka.

It was the international success of *Death on a Full Moon Day* that paved the way for *August Sun*. During his 1999 visit to the London film festival, Prasanna Vithanage discussed his idea of a feature film set during the civil war period with noted screenwriter Priyath Liyanage, who also happened to be working on a similar project. So they combined talents and enlisted the support of producer Soma Edirisinghe. The giant production ended up costing in the neighbourhood of \$10 million. To help finance the undertaking, they hit upon the idea of promoting the film via a homepage on the Internet (www.iramadiyama.com) whereby investors, supporters, and interested parties can track *August Sun* from the very first day of shooting right through the postproduction, the release, and its performance thereafter.

Chinese Independent Film on Ethnic Hani Tribe: Zhang Jiarui's *Ruoma de shi sui (When Ruoma Was Seventeen, China)*

"I wanted to make the film as realistic as possible, so I shot it like a documentary," said Zhang Jiarue about *Ruoma de shi sui (When Ruoma Was Seventeen)*, his debut feature film competing for the Prize of the Americas at Montreal. "Sometimes we were able to put the camera right in the middle of the streets to capture the flow of real life at an open market. Other times, however, I had to arrange the scenes to fit the exact context of the story. But I liked to improvise wherever a chance presented itself."

When I asked him how he was able to deal with the usual restrictions set down by government censors, particularly in regard to an approved script, Zhang made no bones about the fact that *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* is an "independent film, one of the first that can be shot outside of the studio system" - meaning that the chances are better than even to win government approval for home release. In view of the fact that western audiences until now have been dieting on "wildcat productions" - that is, foreign-financed projects that never even bother to seek government approval, but rely entirely on distribution sales through festival exposure - *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* is breaking new ground for the burgeoning "Chinese Independent Movement" that augurs well for the future.

On the surface, this is a simple story set among the Hani tribe, a minority ethnic group in the southern Yunnan province. Ruoma (Li Min), a 17-year-old girl with an open smile and a friendly disposition, lives with her grandmother. Each morning, he packs sweetcorn on her back and walks across the rice terraces to a village to sell roasted ears on a street corner among other vendors. Because her costume is colourful, tourists - both Chinese and foreign - ask to take a picture of her, to which she shyly agrees in hopes that they will buy a roasted ear of corn in return. Her popularity is noted by Ming (Yang Zhigang), a young photographer down on his luck, who hits on the idea of having her pose in a native costume against the scenic rice terraces for American and European tourists who pass through to see the striking beauty of the terraces. It works, and soon Ming is making enough money to pay his room rent, while Ruoma has money in her pocket too.

Of course, Ruoma hopes one day to visit the big city and "ride in a glass elevator" - an experience told to her by a girlfriend who has recently returned home from a rather disappointing venture in the city. What happens next should be seen, but let it be said that Ruoma's romantic dreams are on the way to be fulfilled when she hits on the idea of joining Ming on his return to the city.

Although *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* is Zhang Jiarue's first feature film, he has an impressive portfolio to date. First he studied philosophy, graduating from Sechuan University in 1983. Enrolling in film courses at the Beijing Film Academy, he found work also as an assistant director at the Beijing Youth Film Studio. Moving on to television, he has directed a dozen telefeatures and tv-series. And it is this "TV polish" that is particularly evident in *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* - namely, close-up shots of faces and pictorial beauty to carry the flimsy story along its predictable path.

"I had to look a long time and test-cast hundreds of Hani girls to find Li Min," said Zhang Jiarue about his final choice for the winsome Ruoma, whose smile alone can light up a theatre. When audiences left the screening at the Parisien, the camera buffs in the crowd lined up to take pictures of "When Ruoma Was at the FMM in Montreal."

Life-and-Death Thriller: Ömer Kavur's *Karsilasma* (*The Encounter*, Turkey-Hungary)

Sometimes referred to as the "Turkish Bergman," other times as a master of the psycho-thriller along the lines of Clouzot and Hitchcock, Ömer Kavur is often compared on home grounds with the legendary Yilmaz Güney. An *auteur* in the best sense of that term, he has a way of linking all his important feature films together via recurring visual motifs and a slow-paced shooting style that allows the viewer plenty of time to meditate on the symbols, metaphors, and images as they mesh together into a whole. The image of a clock, for instance, is often used for a moment that is lost forever as well as for the passage of time in a particular context.

Critics and cineastes may well remember Kavur's *Motherland Hotel* (1987), with its oblique reference to the ruling party in parliament in the persona of a demented porter. In *The Hidden Face* (1991) he leans heavily on Sufi mysticism to accent colours and mirrors, simple objects and natural landscapes, faces and movements, in order to reinforce with aesthetic means and sensual beauty the feeling of a timeless journey into the self on the part of the protagonist. Also, in *Journey on the Hour Hand* (1997), the story of a clock repairman on a strange journey to a distant village to repair a tower-clock, the claustrophobic atmosphere of *Motherland Hotel* is felt when the repairman checks into a similar hotel when he arrives in the village of his destiny. And although the director is too original to steal from *Vertigo*, the parallels to the Hitchcock classic are visible nonetheless in *Journey on the Hour Hand*. Indeed, suspense is built as the scope of the story broadens into a murder mystery that involves a tyrannical husband who loves to hunt and a group of blind singers who "sense" more than what most people "see." If anyone is left in the dark throughout most of this zigzag tale of forbidden passions, then it's the introverted clock-repairman who meets and falls in love with a mysterious woman in a woods, who may or may not have committed a murder.

Now comes *Karsilasma* (*The Encounter*), Ömer Kavur's entry in the competition at Montreal. The story begins at a group therapy session in Istanbul, where Sinan, an architect, meets Mahmut, the owner of an illegal gambling casino. Both struggle with their guilty consciences. Sinan is depressed because he feels responsible for the death of his son in a motorcycle accident. And Mahmut is contemplating suicide because he cannot forget a crime he once committed in his youth. When Mahmut receives word that he can meet someone from the past, he abruptly leaves Istanbul - and is later reported dead. At this point, the story shifts from a psychological drama to a psychological thriller, as Sinan sets out to investigate a case of homicide

that is peculiar for its complete lack of suspects. His search brings him to an island and a life-and-death encounter - first with a young man who bears a close resemblance to his dead son, and then with a young woman who resembles the face in a photograph carried around by the murdered friend.

Serbian Secret Service Strikes Back: Dušan Kovacevic's *Profesionalac* (*The Professional*, Serbia-Montenegro)

Devotees of stage and screen should recognize *The Professional* at a glance. The original stage version of Dušan Kovacevic's *Profesionalac* has been running at the Zvezdara Theatre in Belgrade (where Kovacevic also happens to be the manager) almost nonstop since its premiere there in 1990. A few years later, after the play had been performed to packed houses at the Zvezdara for the 100th time, it was translated into English and given a public reading at a theatre in Berkeley, California - again to enthusiastic response. The word spread - and, in 1992, *The Professional* was staged at the North Beach Repertory Theatre in San Francisco. A few months later, it was performed in London at the little Offstage Downstairs theatre. In 1994, the play was adapted as a telefeature by German writer-playwright Ulrich Plenzdorf to the similar milieu of the "Stasi" (the secret police of former German Democratic Republic) - when it fit like a glove. Andreas Dresen directed this adapted version under the title *The Other Life of Herr Kreins*. Then, in 1995, *The Professional* had premiered at the Circle Theatre in Manhattan, an off-Broadway venue. Now, at this year's Montreal festival, *Profesionalac* is running in competition in its original Serbian-language version - directed by its author, Dušan Kovacevic.

The Professional has the give-and-take of a Beckett play. The setting is postwar Belgrade. Luka, a former officer in the Serbian Secret Service, pays a visit to the office of Teja, a former intellectual dissident, who now heads a publishing house and hold a position of power in the cultural and political circles of the new Serbia. In typical "Endgame" fashion Luka carries with him a suitcase that contains everything of literary importance to the former dissident - in fact, much more than the writer Teja would care to know, for as a conscientious agent the stranger has been shadowing his intellectual partner for 40 years and knows all his secrets. During the sparring match, a hyped game of one-upmanship, the ex-dissident is forced to admit that he wasn't such a courageous writer after all. Indeed, his "shadow" could easily publish a bestseller based on the true story, if he so desired, simply because he has written everything down. So, once again, the tables have been completely turned.

Born 1948 in Mrdjenova, Yugoslavia, Dušan Kovacevic graduated from the Belgrade Academy of Film, Theatre, Radio and Television. Working in both film and theatre, he immediately made a name for himself as one of the countries best screenwriters in the genres of comedy and satire. Among his commercial and artistic hits were Goran Paskaljevic's *Special Treatment*, Goran Markovic's *Burlesque Tragedy*, Slobodan Sijan's *Who's That Singing Over There?*, and Emir Kusturica's *Underground*. On occasion, he directs his own screenplay: *Balkan Spy* was awarded Best Screenplay at the 1983 Montreal World Film Festival. Asked about what drives him to write about Yugoslavia, and now Serbia-Montenegro, with a sharp pen, he responded in an interview: "If next month we were lucky enough to embark on a new path, it would be my pleasure to begin writing about lovers hiding in closets when the husband has unexpectedly returned home. But that would mean that this region has embraced a new civility life. And then the Serbs would have terrible literature, but could finally live like other normal people. When that happens, I would agree to stop writing dramas of dread and horror - and inspiration would abandon me as well."

Trauma in the Balkans: Antonio Mitrikevski's *Kako Los Son* (*Like a Bad Dream*, Macedonia-Croatia)

Remember the political brouhaha over "Macedonia" that hit the Montreal World Film Festival back in 1991? That was when Stole Popov's *Tattoo*, the first feature film to bear the banner of the newly constituted state of Macedonia, was programmed in the Cinema of Today section. Critics recognized the film for what it was. This story of a cantankerous yet sympathetic individual who gets jailed for absurd reasons and then dies a victim of police brutality, *Tattoo* featured an outstanding acting performance by Meto Jovanovski as the "loser" Ilija, who gets jailed for loitering on a street bench after an argument with his wife. Another innocent in the same prison, who was treated even more brutally by the police than Ilija, was an Albanian student who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. *Tattoo* was the kind of timely socio-critical film document that does credit to a democratic society.

Yet when *Tattoo* was invited to the Montreal film festival, its presence as an official entry from the newly named "Republic of Macedonia" (following the country's breakaway from the Yugoslav federation) provoked a protest by the city's Greek community - without, however, anyone having even seen the film. Later, too, when *Tattoo* was honoured by a jury of peers with a Nomination for European Film of the Year, the Greek government again demanded its withdrawal from award consideration through Mikis Theodorakis, a member of the same European Film Academy. But both the FFM and EFA stood firm, and *Tattoo* was given a complimentary press conference and Montreal and the largesse of free publicity for a rediscovered national identity. Overnight, Macedonian cinema became known the world over!

Antonio Mitrikevski (sometimes spelled Mitricevski), invited to compete at this year's Montreal festival with *Like a Bad Dream*, is also well known to the FFM public. His debut feature film, *Across the Lake* (1997) premiered at Montreal six years ago in the Cinema of Today section. Based on a true story, it's the ill-fated story of young Macedonian man who spent two decades in Albanian prisons and hard-labour camps - simply because he dared to cross Lake Ohrid to the Albanian shore to visit the woman he loved. The idea for the feature came from Mitrikevski's award-winning documentary, *The Love of Koco Topencarov* (1991). *Across the Lake* featured a finely etched performance by Polish actress Agnieszka Wagner as the heroine. And the film's striking cinematography led several critics to praise Antonio Mitrikevski as "Sergei Paradjanov of Macedonia."

Born 1961 in Skopje, Yugoslavia, Antonio Mitrikevski studied cinema at the Lodz Film School in Poland, where he directed four awarded student shorts: *The Duel*, *A Day, Time*, and *Echo*. Before directing his debut feature *Across the Lake*, he worked in television and made a name for himself with a telefeature based on William Saroyan's *Is Somebody There?*, followed by *The Cheater* and *The Landlady*. As for *Like a Bad Dream*, it's an interlinking tale of people who have experienced traumatic experiences and seek to have them rubbed out of their sub-consciousness by relegating the past to the realm of a "bad dream." For two of the individuals, their ordeals were indeed traumatic: Sheytan experienced a hell on earth during the Balkan War, and Ivan couldn't come to grips with the demanding lifestyle of a western metropolis

Look Forward in Anger: Nicolae Margineanu's *Bincuvantata Fii, Inchisoare (Bless You, Prison!, Romania)*

Based on a true story, Nicolae Margineanu's *Bincuvantata Fii, Inchisoare (Bless You, Prison!)* recounts the prison ordeal of Nicoleta Valery-Grossu, a young Romanian intellectual, who was arrested in 1949 on a false charge of espionage and sentenced to four brutal years in a hard-labour camp for women. In truth, she was arrested and interrogated simply for being a member of the opposition party and thus a thorn in the side of the Ceausescu regime. In this regard, it should be noted that Tito's break with Stalin in mid-1948 led to many such instances of false charges in all the neighbouring Balkan countries. The film's title is taken from a poem by Alexander Solzhenitsyn: "Blessed Be Thy Name, Prison!" - in reference to the Russian writer's own time of prison internment (1945-53) in the gulag of Central Asia, a experience that later formed the core of his book "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich." It should be noted, too, that both Valery-Grossu and Solzhenitsyn were released from prison in 1953, shortly after the death of Stalin.

As recounted in the film - adapted from her book with the same title - Nicoleta Valery-Grossu (Maria Ploae) experiences a conversion back to her religious faith after weeks of exhausting interrogation, solitary confinement, and suffering under the brutal hands of her guards. Furthermore, since she felt that her faith helped her enormously in her struggle to maintain her dignity, she was quite willing to pass this "blessing" on to her fellow prisoners - in this sense; don't despair or give up hope under any circumstances. The film chronicles not only her gradual acceptance of prison life as and a test offered by her Maker, possibly even a gift of God, but also how she inspired her fellow prisoners to rediscover their religious heritage and faith as well. "You can betray," she says in a key scene. And adds: "You can die. Or you can find God."

One of the veteran directors in Romanian cinematography, Nicolae Margineanu was born in 1938 in Cluj, Romania. Upon graduating from the Theatre and Film Institute in Bucharest, he found employment first at the Buftea Studios as a director of photography and was the DP on nine films for other directors. After he made his debut as a feature film director with *This Above All* (1978), he never looked back and has directed a dozen feature films to date. He belongs to the so-called "Generation 1970" - composed of Dan Pita, Mircea Veroiu, Stere Gulea, and Iosif Demian, among others - who had set new standards of responsible filmmaking

in the wake of the thaw that swept across Central and Eastern Europe. Also known as an "actors' director," Margineanu drew a refined, balanced performance from Maria Ploae in the lead role.

References

AWARDS

INTERNATIONAL JURY

Grand Prize of the Americas

Kordon (*The Cordon*, Serbia & Montenegro), Goran Markovic

Special Grand Prize of the Jury

GAZ BAR Blues (Canada), Louis Bélanger

Best Director

Antonio Mercero, *Planta 4a* (*4th Floor*, Spain)

Best Actress

Marina Glezer, *El Polaquito* (*The Little Polish*, Argentina-Spain), Juan Carlos Desanzo

Best Actor

Silvio Orlando, *Il posto dell'anima* (*The Soul's Haven*, Italy), Riccardo Milani

Best Screenplay

Dušan Kovacevic, *Profesionalac* (*The Professional*, Serbia & Montenegro), Dušan Kovacevic

Best Artistic Contribution

Benecwantata fli Inchisoare (*Bless You, Prison*, Romania), Nicolae Margineanu

Innovation Award

Le intermittenze del cuore (*Memory Lane*, Italy), Fabio Carpi

Short Films

Best Short Film

Vie et mort d'instant d'ennui (*Life and Death of a Boring Moment*, France), Patrick Bossard

Jury Award

In Bed with My Books (USA), Michael Bergman

Most Popular Canadian Feature Film

GAZ BAR Blues, Louis Bélanger

FedEx Award - Most Popular Canadian Short Film

Cherry Fruitbread, Laura Turek

Special Mention

Islet, François Brault

Air Canada People's Choice Award

Planta 4a (*4th Floor*, Spain), Antonio Mercero

Special Mention

GAZ BAR Blues, Louis Bélanger

Special Grand Prizes of the Americas - for exceptional contribution to the cinematographic art

Erland Josephson, Swedish actor

Denise Robert, Canadian producer

Martin Scorsese, American director

Prix M. Bessy for Film Journalism

David Thomson, critic and publicist

OTHER AWARDS

International Critics (FIPRESCI) Award, Feature Film *Profesionalac (The Professional*, Serbia+Montenegro), Dušan Kovacevic

International Critics (FIPRESCI) Award, Short Film

Vie et mort d'instant d'ennui (Life and Death of a Boring Moment, France), Patrick Bossard

Ecumenical Award

GAZ BAR Blues (Canada), Louis Bélancger

Special Mention

Benecuvantata fli Inchisoare (Bless You, Prison, Romania), Nicolae Margineanu

GOLDEN ZENITHS

Best First Feature Film

J'ai toujours voulu être une sainte (I Always Wanted to Be a Saint, Luxembourg-Belgium), Geneviève Mersch

Special Mentions

Dogs in the Basement (USA), Leslie Shearing

Moving Malcolm (Canada), Benjamin Ratner

GOLDEN ZENITHS - FILMS OF DIFFERENT CONTINENTS

Best European Film

Kopps (Sweden), Josef Fares

Best Canadian Film

The Delicate Art of Parking, Trent Carlson

Best U.S. Film

Die Mommie Die, Mark Rucker

Best Latin American Film

Cleopatra (Argentina-Spain), Eduardo Mignogna

Best Asian Film

Watashi no Guramppa (My Grandpa, Japan), Yochi Higashi

Best African Film (ex aequo)

(ex aequo) *El Kotbia (The Bookstore*, Tunisia-Morocco-France), Nawfel Saheb-Ettaba, and *Le soleil assassiné* (Algeria-France-Belgium), Abdelkrim Bahloul

Best Oceania Film

Alexandra's Project (Australia), Rolf de Heer

Best Documentary Film

Sexe de rue (Street Sex, Canada), Richard Boutet

Author Information

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit), Polish Rings, Cannes Gold Medaille, the American Cinema

Foundation Award, the Diploma for Support of Russian Cinema and an honorary award from the German Film Critics' Association.

Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.