

Istanbul 2002

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THE 21st INTERNATIONAL ISTANBUL FILM FESTIVAL

took place on 13-28 April 2002 and presented twelve films in the international competition with an overriding theme of the world of the art and the artist.

From France, *Ma femme est une actrice (My Wife is an Actress)* by Yvan Attal explored the dilemmas of a sports writer whose wife was a famous actress. An actor in real life and married to a famous actress, Charlotte Gainsbourg (the daughter of actress /singer Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg, the *enfant terrible* of the seventies music scene), Attal drew inspiration from his own experiences in this warm comedy about the fragile male ego. The fact that Charlotte played the leading role added a certain dimension of *cinéma vérité* to the film.

From China, *Zuotian (Quitting)*, the third feature of Zhang Yang (*Shower*, 1999) was a sensitive rendition of the harrowing experience of the late eighties B-movies idol turned art house actor (in Wang Xiaoshuai's *Frozen*, Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*), Jia Hongsheng as he tried to kick off his drug addiction. A historical biography and a documentary re-enactment in which all characters play themselves, the film's bold experiment with time in the first half and space in the next was remarkably courageous enhanced by exceptional performance of the father.

Jan Dara, by Nonzee Nimibutr, one of the most influential filmmakers of Thailand, explored the 'Victorian' morals of Thai society in the 1930s in a highly sensual manner. Adapted from a controversial novel, the film suffered critically from the scissors of censorship to receive a release permit in its own country.

Young Dutch female director Ineke Smits's *Magonia* was a film on the power of narration and the narrative magic that can carry one to faraway lands. Israeli director Benny Torati's *Kikar Ha'Halomot (Desperado Square)* offered the spell of local movie theatres as an antidote to family conflicts. *Pismo do Amerika (Letter to America)* by Bulgarian Iglia Trifonova was the story of a long distance friendship sustained over the years through videotapes. *Qateh-ye Natamam (The Unfinished Song)* by Maziar Miri from Iran was woven around a legend in a country where it is forbidden for women to sing. Turkey was represented by *Yazgi/Fate* by the talented young Zeki Demirkubuz -- a Camus adaptation, which was also the first film of a trilogy, called *Karanlık Üstüne Öyküler (Stories About Darkness)*.

In the Arts and the Movies section, Paul Cox's *The Diaries of Vatslav Nijinsky* was definitely a labour of love but somewhat difficult to watch despite its exquisite visuals. Academy Award winner Bille August's *En sang för Martin (A Song for Martin)* described the story of two people who found love and tragedy late in life. French cinema was well represented with *Va Savoir (Who Knows)*, a refined character comedy by Jacques Rivette and *Laissez-Passer (Safe Conduct)* by Bertrand Tavernier. The latter was a tribute to the filmmakers of the acclaimed Golden Age of cinema in France. Catherine Corsini's *La répétition (Replay)* narrated the friendship of two girls infatuated with the theatre since childhood, an infatuation that gradually turned into love and obsession. Bertrand Bonello's *Le pornographe (The Pornographer)* was concerned with the struggle of a porn-movie director striving to escape the shadows cast upon him by a choice he had made long ago. Austrian director Christian Frosch's experimental work *Kafka -- Fragments* traced the passionate correspondence between the famous author and his lover, Felice Bauer over many years.

The award-winning *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, written and directed by the young American actor-director John Cameron Mitchell, who also plays the lead was one of the most enjoyable films in the festival, particularly for its music.

A city of true film-lovers, Istanbul lacks its proper cinematheque, which is a responsibility the festival shoulders, with many sidebars, homages and tributes. Cinema Peeks At Cinema is one of these sections that presented five documentaries on five famous filmmakers this year. In *La voce a te dovuta (The Voice Has Been Bestowed To You)*, Jacopo Gassman talked about his father Vittorio Gassman as an actor and as a

human being. In *Imamura, le libre penseur (Imamura, the Free Thinker)*, Paulo Rocha, one of the leading directors of contemporary Portuguese cinema pursued the tracks of the famous Japanese director. Carlo Lizzani paid tribute to the grand master of Italian Neo-Realism, Roberto Rossellini and André S. Labarthe to one of the most important voices of contemporary Italian cinema, Nanni Moretti. Sandro Lai followed the career of De Sica, whose eight memorable films were shown in the Memoriam section.

From Literature To The Silver Screen was a selection of recent films that fit the description: Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Mortal Transfer*, Claude Miller's *Betty Fisher et autres histoires (Betty Fisher and Other Stories)*, Léa Pool's *Lost and Delirious* to name a few.

In the Tributes section, a Turkish filmmaker, Tunç Basaran who found his place in *d'auteur* cinema after a long commercial career presented five award-winning films, *Biri ve Digerleri (One and the Others, 1986)*, *Uçurtmayı Vurmasınlar (Don't Let Them Shoot the Kite, 1988)*; *Piano Piano Bacaksız (Piano Piano Kid)* (1991); *Sen de Gitme (Please Don't Go, 1996)* and *Kaçıklık Diploması (Graduate of Insanity, 1998)*.

British director Stephen Frears, Japanese master Shohei Imamura and Italian Nanni Moretti were the other filmmakers whose films were showcased in this section.

The country in focus was Germany with examples from the works of mostly young directors. One interesting aspect of the section was that six out of nine directors were women. One such director was Buket Alaku of Turkish origin, with *Anam (My Mom)*, a film that addressed the issues of being a foreigner and the difficulty to come to terms with one's life.

The recent crop of Turkish cinema, eleven films in all competed for the Best Turkish Movie of the Year and Best Turkish Director prizes in the National Competition.

A Turkish film, *Büyük Adam, Küçük Ask (Big Man, Small Love / Hejar)* by Handan Ipekci was prevented by the higher committee of the censorship board from participating in the festival (foreign films are not subjected to censorship). This cast a shadow on this festive event despite the remarkable quality of the films presented. *Big Man...* was commercially released in Turkey last autumn; it drew 100,000 spectators in six months. The story of an unusual friendship between a retired ex-judge and an orphaned Kurdish girl, this drama with a message of understanding and tolerance across ethnic and linguistic borders was partly funded by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and was even Turkey's entry for an Oscar in the foreign films section. The reason for the ban seemed to be the protest from the police force regarding their unfavourable depiction in the film. But the real motives were not clear. Turkey's censorship laws, which in one epoch sent many filmmakers into exile, have been quite lenient for over a decade. This year, another Turkish film, *Hiçbir Yerde (In Nowhere)*, first feature of Tayfun Pirselimoglu barely passed the scrutiny. There is a fear in the artistic community that these incidences may set the precedence to a return to the dark ages of Turkish cinema.

Pirselimoglu's film is about a mother's desperate search for her son who 'disappeared,' a familiar scene to many Turkish citizens. Talented Zühal Olcay, with her nuanced performance, carries the somewhat meandering story skilfully and the photography creates the right mood in this *voyage interior* film that is reminiscent of the atmosphere-road films of Omer Kavur *Gizli Yüz (Secret Face)*. No detail is insignificant when capturing the surface stagnation of the lives of country people to create the right mood. (One should mention here that Pirselimoglu is also a painter.)

Zeki Demirkubuz, a truly independent filmmaker who has carved a niche for himself recently with remarkable films such as *Masumiyet (Innocence)* and *Üçüncü Sayfa (The Third Page)* had two films in the festival. While *Yazgi (Fate)* competed for the coveted Golden Tulip in the International section, *İtiraf (Confession)*, the second part of the trilogy, was an entry in the national competition.

In the latter, a highly charged drama with remarkable performances, a man suspects his wife of cheating on him. He starts investigating and it turns out to be true. She also confesses, but her telling the truth unveils his inner confessions.

Turkey's first digital film, *9*, by former scriptwriter and advertising man Ümit Ünal was an exceptional work that delved into the hypocrisies that destroy the core of otherwise ordinary and 'peaceful' societies. In a lower middle-class neighbourhood of Istanbul, a young homeless girl is killed brutally. The police, who the

viewer only sees as a passing shadow, interrogate six people from the neighbourhood separately on split screen. They tell their biased versions about the neighbourhood and the incident. A strong indictment of everyday fascism in the lives of ordinary people, the film's leading roles are shared by some of the best talents of Turkish cinema and theatre.

References

AWARDS

International Competition

Golden Tulip Award for Best Film:

Magonia by Ineke Smits (The Netherlands)

The Special Prize of the Jury

Pismo do Amerika (Letter to America) by Iglıka Trıffonova (Bulgaria)

National Competition

Best Turkish Film of The Year:

9 by Ümit Ünal

Best Director of The Year:

Zeki Demirkubuz for *Yazgi (Fate)* and *tiraf (Confession)*

Best Actress:

Zühal Olcay in *Hiçbir yerde (Innowhereland)* and Serra Yılmaz in *9*.

Best Actor:

Tanel Bırsel in *tiraf (Confession)*

FIPRESCI Award (International Competition):

Yazgi /Fate by Zeki Demirkubuz (Turkey)

The FIPRESCI Award (National Competition):

tiraf (Confession) by Zeki Demirkubuz

People's Choice Awards:

Das Experiment (The Experiment) by Oliver Hirschbiegel (Germany) in the International Competition
Hiçbir yerde (Innowhereland) by Tayfun Pırselimolu in the National Competition.

Author Information

Gönül DÖNMEZ-COLIN is an independent researcher and writer whose publications include *Women, Islam and Cinema, Cinemas of the Other: A personal Journey with Filmmakers from the Middle East and Central Asia, Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East* (ed.); *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (Reaktion Books), and *Routledge Dictionary of Turkish Cinema* (2014).