

“Not to banalise, not to rewrite, but to keep the discussion going”: Radu Mihaileanu’s Train of Life

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The 8th Cottbus Film Festival of young East European film was also the venue for the German premiere of *Train de Vie* (*Train of Life*) by the Rumanian director Radu Mihaileanu. The film is guaranteed a controversial reception should it reach German audiences (up until now it has no German distributor), above all for its subject matter—the use of humour in dealing with the deportation of the Jews during the Second World War. The film invites comparison with the Italian film star Roberto Benigni’s recent project *Life is Beautiful* (more below). In the opinion of this writer, Mihaileanu has made a far better film.

The story: in 1941 Schlomo the Fool runs into his shtetl (a Jewish village in Eastern Europe) to inform the village elders that all the adjoining Jewish settlements have been overrun by the Nazis. Their village is next. Having informed them of the danger, Schlomo also comes up with a solution. The villagers should acquire a train. Half the village should dress themselves as German soldiers, the other half as refugees, and they should deport themselves in exactly the opposite direction from the Nazi death camps. Schlomo’s advice is accepted and the undertaking begins. A meeting of the village is convened and the village elder calls for volunteers to act as Nazis. The response is less than clamorous. In the event the Nazi officer and his troops must be selected from the village inhabitants. A number of hilarious scenes follow as the villagers prepare for their exodus.

The villagers employ a linguist to teach them to speak the German language. One of the trainees is struck by the resemblance between German and Yiddish. The tutor reminds his students that both languages are very

similar—in fact German is Yiddish with all traces of humour removed—one of the villagers then speculates whether the Germans have declared war on them because the Jews make fun of their language. In another scene a Jewish tailor requests a villager simulate a fascist salute so that he can get the fitting under the arm for his new Nazi uniform exactly right. At the same time the spectre of Communism is in the air. The elder warns those villagers whom he sends on assignments into other towns: "And don't forget, don't come back a communist!" And his own reworking of the *Communist Manifesto* comes down to "Men and Women of the World unite!"—i.e., a sort of permanent orgy.

We follow the tribulations of the villagers as the train sets off. The train is stalked by a band of Communist partisans who are trying to blow up what they think is a Nazi train. After a number of near misses the partisans finally intercept the stationary train as the occupants descend to gather in a field—it is the Sabbath! Peering through his binoculars the confused leader of the partisans reports back to his chief by radio that he does not know what to do—the German soldiers are swaying their bodies back and forwards and saying prayers together with the deportees! Under instructions from the chief the partisans call off their mission. Above all, what makes all of the comic scenes work is the immense affection and care with which Mihaileanu has recreated the life and self deprecating humour of the Jewish villagers.

In the event the finale of the film makes clear that what we have seen is merely a fantasy. For the occupants of the train there can be no escape from the camps. At the same time the extent of the horror of the Holocaust is laid bare: the elimination of a vibrant,

resourceful community with their dreams, loves and plans for the future.

Radu Mihaileanu's own parents were deportees (of itself, unfortunately, no guarantee of truthful and artistic work) and he left Rumania at the age of 22 to live and work in France. His first feature film, *Betrayed*, is a variation of the Faust story concerning a writer who, in order to write and publish, makes a deal with the Rumanian Securitate secret police.

Mihaileanu, who was in attendance in Cottbus, explained that he had the idea for his new film after seeing *Schindler's List*. He was concerned about the growth of the ultra-right in Europe and the way in which various forces were working to suppress further discussion of the Holocaust. He declared his own aim to be: "Not to banalise, not to rewrite but to keep the discussion going. I wanted to depict the tragedy of the Holocaust using the language of comedy, to use comedy to strengthen the tragedy. Laughter after all is another form of crying."

In his use of humour Mihaileanu draws on a rich tradition of Jewish ironic comedy. One particular inspiration, he said, was the artist Chagall, who at the beginning of the century, enraged established circle by daring to portray everyday farmyard animals—goats and donkeys—in extravagant tones of red and blue.

In 1996 Mihaileanu sent his script to the Italian Roberto Benigni and offered the latter the role of the fool in his film. Benigni turned down the role to concentrate on his own film. In the meantime Mihaileanu encountered considerable opposition to his own project in France. Difficulties were encountered in finding financial support. He was accused in turn of being an anti-Semite and an historical revisionist. As a result a year was lost. Mihaileanu is not prepared to be drawn on the issue of whether or not Benigni stole his project. He declares merely that the two directors have produced two very different films

One approaches such a film with trepidation. The director treads perilous ground. I agree, however, with Mihaileanu's own assessment that he and Benigni have made two very different films. In many respects the humour of Mihaileanu's film is richer and more genuine. It centres not so much on the comic qualities of the actor Benigni and entourage but on the warmth, self-mocking humour and solidarity of an entire people and its culture. And in the event *Train de Vie* is the

more tragic of the two films. Despite the death of its main protagonist, Benigni's film ends on a positive note. Through cunning, resourcefulness and mutual love a couple are able to rescue their child and survive the tribulations of the camp.

Mihaileanu's film, on the other hand, makes patently clear that for the vast majority of the victims there was no way out. In becoming so intimately acquainted with the richness and warmth of the Jewish community, we also get a glimpse of what was lost in the Holocaust. In the film the bald and horrifying statistic of six million victims acquires flesh and blood and that is in itself a considerable artistic achievement.

See Also:

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Film festival in Cottbus, Germany, November 11-15, 1998
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