

Cabaret Balkan directed by Goran Paskaljevic

A deeply pessimistic film

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Cabaret Balkan (also known as *The Powder Keg*) by the veteran Serbian director Goran Paskaljevic, which appeared in cinemas in Europe, the US and Australia in 1999, has been widely advertised as a black comedy. Paskaljevic's film, made in 1998, and based on an award winning play, *Bure Baruta*, by Dejan Dukovski is not, however, particularly funny, but is rather a deeply pessimistic work.

Set on a freezing winter's night, the film consists of a series of loosely interwoven vignettes that purport to portray life in Belgrade. Paskaljevic provides a vision of the city that has descended into chaotic, random violence. Its inhabitants are walking powder kegs, ready to explode at the slightest threat or provocation, real or otherwise. Society, having lost its humane and civil foundations, is disintegrating.

The film begins with an introduction by Boris (Nikola Ristanovski), a cabaret-style master of ceremonies, who tells the audience that he is going to mess up their minds. His cynical and sneering comments set the tone for the rest of the film, which consists mainly of people violently and sadistically attacking one another.

In the first story, a teenager driving without a licence crashes into another car. The minor accident produces a violent outburst from the other driver who smashes the young man's windscreen and attempts to drag him out of the car. Unable to extract him, the enraged driver locates the teenager's home, threatens his father and wrecks the place.

In another story a young man brandishing a knife hijacks a bus, threatens the passengers and then crashes the vehicle. The passengers flee and the original bus driver who was enjoying a coffee when the bus was seized, rushes onto the vehicle and cracks open the head of the hijacker with a wrench.

The next vignette involves one of the escaping passengers—a woman—who flees into the arms of her boyfriend. He accuses her of flirting with the hijacker. The couple are then captured by a couple of drug dealers. The woman face is bitten and her fingers broken one by one by the thugs.

And so the film rolls on, from one violent and depressing scene to the next. Occasional humorous moments are preludes to even more horrific tragedies as the characters systematically beat, rape or threaten each other. The victim of one terrible tale is transformed into a villain in the next.

Paskaljevic produced this black picture of Belgrade in an attempt to shock his audience about the state of affairs in wide parts of the former Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, the scenes are so uniformly bleak and the characters so wildly exaggerated that after a few stories they have no real emotional impact.

One of the film's most serious problems is its failure to probe the underlying social and political events. Life in Belgrade is portrayed as dysfunctional and brutal, but no explanation is attempted as to why.

Obviously Paskaljevic is not producing a documentary film about the impact of a decade of economic breakdown and war on the Balkans, nor is he obliged to incorporate a political analysis of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. But his film should be animated by some understanding of the broader social and political factors that have produced a crisis for millions in the region, and from that strive to create characters who are more than comic book figures.

Cabaret Balkan provides no hint that Paskaljevic is interested in any of these issues. The end result is a deeply demoralised film whose underlying theme is that the human tragedies are self-inflicted. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the director believes that irrational outbursts are simply an expression of the inherent character of the Serbian people.

There are a number of indications. A taxi driver simply cannot comprehend that his passenger, a native of Belgrade, who has worked abroad for many years, wants to return. In another scene, a drug dealer tells his protégé, a Serb refugee from Bosnia, that the Balkans is the black hole of the world and Belgrade is its a...hole. If the people are not violent brutes then they are passive victims. The hijacker, for instance, berates the passengers on the bus for being like sheep and submitting obediently to his strange and weird requests.

Exaggeration, black humour and other dramatic techniques are useful methods for exploring or highlighting aspects of the human condition. But piling these characters together in one unrelenting scene after another reminds me of someone coldly playing with mathematical variables simply to test their extreme ranges and effect in a given equation. This is no substitute for an attempt, even if it fails, to create characters able to do more than just hate each other.

The only exception to this pattern is a scene involving a taxi driver and a former policeman talking in a bar. The cop is complaining about serious injuries he sustained when attacked from behind by an unknown assailant. During the conversation it emerges that the taxi driver was responsible for beating the cop, after the same policeman had beaten him and kicked him in the testicles so severely that he became infertile. This vignette about revenge and vulnerability is the only one to conclude on a slightly positive note as the two men appear to reconcile their differences.

Perhaps Paskaljevic might have succeeded in producing a more convincing depiction of the psychological and social crisis in this Balkan city if he had discarded the rest of the tales and just explored this story. In any case this well executed and moving scene is not enough to lift the film as a whole above a one-dimensional and caricatured commentary on life in Belgrade.

Cabaret Balkan is in marked contrast to Paskaljevic's previous features. All of them reveal a director of great sensitivity and sympathy towards the people he portrays, and high levels of skill and

craft. The main bulk of his characters are drawn from those who, in one way or another, were disadvantaged in post-World War II Yugoslavia.

His first highly acclaimed film *The Dog Who Loved Trains* (1977), is a story about a female prison escapee who will do anything to evade recapture. She settles in a village where she works in a touring rodeo show until her lover, the rodeo man, decides to turn her in. It is a film with a wide emotional range—tenderness and violence, drama and humour.

His next feature, *And the Days are Passing* (1979), reveals a sincere humanity. The story is about a pensioner who rekindles the lost passions of his fellow nursing home mates. Before his arrival, the home was a sad and depressing place. He manages to get the residents involved in setting up a New Year's show and through his patient, persistent care helps them to feel alive again.

Special Treatment (1980) and *The Illusive Summer of 1968* (1984) are two hilarious comedies. The first, a satire, is about the attempts of a fanatical doctor to cure a group of alcoholics. The second is a charming story about an adolescent boy in a provincial Serbian town during the politically turbulent summer of 1968.

In 1989, amid the breakup of the Stalinist bureaucracies in Eastern Europe, Paskaljevic made his first overtly political film—*Time of Miracles*. Set in the aftermath of WWII in a small Serbian town, it deals with the conflict between the new rulers and the religious sentiments of the residents who have been ordered to convert the local church into a school and paint over its frescos. But the frescos keep reappearing. And the local teacher is brought back to life by a mysterious stranger. Only by trickery and then murder do the local party officials manage to suppress these miraculous events.

The film reveals not only hostility to the Stalinist bureaucrats and their methods but also a rather contemptuous attitude—though not as pronounced as in *Cabaret Balkan*—towards ordinary people. They oscillate back and forth between the Church and party officials, depending on which side is more convincing at a time. Paskaljevic, it seems, blames ordinary people for the domination of the Tito bureaucracy in the post-war period.

During the 1990s, Paskaljevic produced two films, not including *Cabaret Balkan*. The first—*Tango Argentino* (1992)—touches on the turmoil in the Balkans but fails to examine it in any depth. It tells the bittersweet story of a young child whose parents are in a dire financial and moral crisis. The child helps his mother find and provide care for elderly people and at the same time finds comfort in this relationship. The second—*Someone Else's America* (1995)—his only English language film, steers away from dealing with the issues of Yugoslavia by examining migrant families seeking a better life in Brooklyn, New York.

Despite differing degrees of artistic success, Paskaljevic's previous films all have a common thread—the director's faith in humanity and empathy towards the plight of ordinary people. Even *Time of Miracles* deals with a complex range of characters, relationships and emotions. In contrast, *Cabaret Balkan* appears as a kind of derailment—a sudden and complete turn-about. It is completely devoid of his previous sensitivity, and to a large extent, of his artistic creativity.

How is one to account for this apparent artistic impasse? This cannot be explained merely by observing his artistic development and analysing his work, but has to be seen in the context of the tremendous political and social upheavals in the region over the past decade. No doubt *Cabaret Balkan* reflects the disorientation, confusion and demoralisation prevalent among many artists and intellectuals in the

Balkans today.

At the beginning of 1990s in Yugoslavia, there was a sense of liberation from the old Stalinist rule. But years of civil war, declining living standards and the stirring up of ethnic hatred has shattered a lot of the hopes and led to political disorientation and shock, a loss of morale and perspective. While Paskaljevic does not ignore the social retrogression underway, he seems to see no way out of the morass. His inability, or perhaps refusal, to examine the broader social and political roots of the crisis leads him to blame ordinary people—the victims—for what is taking place. The unrelenting bleakness of the film reflects the director's own frustrations, despair and perhaps even growing cynicism.

It is no doubt for that reason that a number of critics have seized on *Cabaret Balkan* and hailed it as a success. They find in the film a justification for their own political prejudices and a vindication of the crude propaganda used by NATO during its brutal bombardment of Yugoslavia last year.

One American critic praised the film because, according to her, the violence inflicted on women in the film was “the logical outcome of a people who use rape as a strategy of war.”

Another declared: “Just when everyone begun to think that the Serbs must be entirely crazy (or worse), along comes veteran Serbian director Goran Paskaljevic with *Cabaret Balkan*, a brilliant and powerful explanatory coda to the recent ethnic cleansing and mass murders undertaken by his countrymen in Kosovo.”

And according to Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* all the males in the film blur into a composite figure “an alcoholic middle-aged man, lurching through the world killing, vomiting, urinating, bleeding, belching, swearing and entertaining himself by terrorising women.” Someone, according to Ebert, “not unlike Slobodan Milosevic.”

Thus the very one-dimensional character of the film and the crudeness of its message appear to be the reason why it has managed to win such high praise internationally, and even a few awards. These accolades certainly cannot be attributed to its artistic merits.



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