

Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 2

Critical and intelligent voices, not squeezed lemons

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It surely must be taken as an encouraging sign that critical and intelligent voices are once again being heard in eastern Europe and the Balkans. And not from the “dissident” generation, for the most part as used up as squeezed lemons, which slavishly assisted in the imposition of “free market” conditions, with all their disastrous consequences. Already this year, we’ve seen *The Cuckoo* from Russia and *My Town* from Poland, neither a towering work, but which cast a generally empathetic look at human problems. Until recently, nearly all the films emerging from the region in the post-Stalinist era have been cynical, hopelessly demoralized or merely mercenary.

Jan Kraus’s *Small Town* takes a fairly cold-eyed and sardonic look at life before and after the so-called “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia, or what is now the Czech Republic. Neither the old Stalinist bureaucrats nor the grasping new layer of exploiters escapes unscathed. In the opening sequence, set before 1989, the local officialdom welcomes a regional Stalinist boss, who is gracing the town with a visit. He becomes immeasurably drunk. “Find me a woman!” he bellows. “Crotches of the world, unite!” And the local officials do just that, coming up with one of their wives, who makes a sacrifice for the good of the town.

After the restoration of capitalism, a new group takes over, not in any way superior in human qualities to the previous crowd, perhaps worse. The party of Independent Eroticists takes over the town government. They seem mostly interested in staging stripteases and offering pornography for sale. Some in the town feel their moment has arrived. “It’s all about the market, privatization.” Workers are laid off. One budding entrepreneur explains, “There’ll be money after privatization. This is the life. No more working for the Bolsheviks [sic].”

Others are concerned with getting old family land back, presumably confiscated by the postwar Stalinist regime. The naïve fall for the new con games. One girl is promised a wonderful prize, if she will only mail in such and such an amount of cash. Needless to say... Somebody swears at the *nouveau riche* driving around in their BMWs, “Such pigs and getting rich.” For most, the promises go unfulfilled, while the

genuinely backward whip themselves into a frenzy over the new immigrants, muttering curses about the “Gypsies, Armenians, Russians and Chinks.” One of the disappointed *nouveau riche* hangs himself.

The picture provided is not vast in its dimensions, and no effort is made to explain how and why Stalinism in Czechoslovakia rose and fell, but the picture of contemporary life rings true, and that must be worth something.

Fuse from Bosnia’s Pjer Zalica has a somewhat similar “feel,” although the brutal circumstances in the region’s recent past make for a somewhat more charged and tragic atmosphere. The film is set in contemporary Bosnia, but the civil wars of the 1990s dominate everyday life. The former police chief sees and speaks to his dead son, killed in the conflict. He is inconsolable. In the opening sequence, a girl just returned from exile in Germany steps on a land mine.

Gangsters, in and out of police uniform, run the town, smuggling cigarettes, liquor, undocumented workers and prostitutes. Some “international observers” arrive, informing the town that Bill Clinton is considering a visit, but the town must clean up its act. Clinton, the town’s “Godfather,” is to be made an honorary citizen. Local officials decide they have no choice: the brothels must be closed down, at least for the president’s visit, and generally the town has to put its best foot forward. Local firefighters—Moslems—and those from the “Bosnian Serb republic” are told they must work together. Great bitterness and mistrust exist on each side. A Serb woman returns; she’s called a “Chetnik whore” on the street, by a shopkeeper—a passerby notes—who comfortably sat out the civil war in Germany.

There are genuinely amusing moments. The local Bosnian “patriots” are temporarily stymied in their efforts to fly the national flag because no one has any idea what it looks like. The local Mafia chief remakes himself as a civic leader, presiding over the opening of a cultural center. “Brothels are out of date,” he observes to a colleague.

Every aspect of the town’s renovation is a fake. Uneasy Serbs from a nearby town are hired and bused in for two hours to prove that the process of “ethnic reconciliation” is well

under way. Unable to locate “Bosnian” musicians, officials hire a Gypsy band and dress them up in the appropriate national costume. In the face of an audit by the “international community,” the crooked mayor and his staff haul away their account books and burn them. The mayor anxiously asks for reassurance from one of the Clinton reception organizers that there will be nothing “anti-capitalistic” in the performances or speeches.

The big day comes. The mayor is wearing a tie with dollar signs on it. The town has been spruced up. The “ethnically incorrect” band is ready, the US flags are flying. And everything, of course, goes to pieces in the worst possible way for the town officials. One feels no sympathy for them whatsoever.

Meanwhile, however, and here *Fuse* genuinely demonstrates some bravery, the Bosnian and Serb firefighters have fought through a few issues and found some common ground. The possibility of solidarity above and beyond the manipulated communalist warfare is suggested.

The festival catalogue quotes the director, Zalica: “I made a dozen films in Bosnia during the war ... People commented on the courage, veracity and significance of what I had done. However it sickened me to be making films about the horror I was seeing all around me... It was an utterly terrible and oppressive experience... I wished I was making films about peace... Then peace came and I continued to make films. However, I discovered that peace could be worse than war. Now I have come to understand the tragicomic optimism that gives the human spirit its inexplicable strength to recover from awful war and bitter peace.” Again, someone is either thinking for the first time or has recovered his ability to think.

Jagoda in the Supermarket from Serbia is so fast-paced and nearly hysterical that it does not provide the viewer much time or space to think, but it has its merits. Produced by famed filmmaker Emir Kusturica (who plays a small part), Dusan Milic’s work takes place entirely in an “American-style” supermarket, run by one of the Serb *nouveau riche*, during a bizarre hostage-taking. One of the cashiers, Jagoda (Branka Katic), angered over losing a potential boy-friend to a fellow cashier, snaps at an old woman trying to buy strawberries and drives her off. The next day the old lady’s outraged grandson, Marko, an army veteran, returns, armed to the teeth, and takes over the store. “My grandmother took three buses...so you could mistreat her!”

The police arrive, including members of an elite commando unit, and surround the building. A conflict erupts over the advisability of negotiating with the “terrorist” or launching an all-out assault. Presumably, the filmmaker means this as a metaphor not only for the present situation facing Serbia, but for its past traumas as well. Crowds gather outside the supermarket. The cops inform Marko that they consider his action “a terrorist attack on foreign territory,” because the store has had “100 percent” American investment. “We’re friends

with America now!” Marko scoffs at this. “Did they give you those stupid uniforms?” he demands of the “anti-terrorist” squad chief. Do they want to know why he’s taken over the store? “Injustice! That’s what’s bothering me.”

Inside the store, the vengeance-seeking hostage-taker, unaware that Jagoda is the individual who abused his grandmother, falls for the charming cashier. Jagoda is continually trying to lose weight; the “terrorist,” who claims to be a savage killer, turns out to be an army chef and nutritionist. Eventually, all hell breaks loose. The “100 percent American store” is destroyed, down to its last neatly stocked shelf.

The director reveals that several years ago he thought up “a story that would champion love between two lonely people,” set in a supermarket, among “the lights, the shelves lined with food and cosmetics, the fish and the meat, the fridges and the ice, among the prices. Among the Coca-Cola and the chewing gum.” The comment is perfectly sympathetic, but a bit banal and not sufficiently substantial to support a major artistic effort. How much does *Jagoda in the Supermarket* reveal to us about the loneliness, psychological desperation and seething social frustration that must exist in Serbia that we didn’t already know, or imagine? Not enough, in my view.

And, I have to confess, after a certain point yet another dose of “madcap Balkan black comedy” wears on my nerves a bit, particularly when the frenetic carryings-on seem a substitute for a more reflective and sober analysis. The region and its inhabitants have undergone terrible, traumatizing events, with vast implications. The artists have a responsibility to help the population understand what it has gone through and to arouse critical attitudes not only toward somewhat easy targets (American-style entrepreneurs and militarist thugs). The director’s heart may be in the right place, but he’s drifting farther than he ought to along the line of least resistance.

The director of *With Love, Lilya*, Larisa Sadilova, has gone qualitatively farther down that road, to the point of having produced an essentially innocuous work. This story of a Russian woman in her 30s, desperate to find a mate, has nearly all its edges rounded off. A film that might be summed up as “whimsically unpredictable and endearing” is somehow out of place in view of the present Russian social catastrophe.



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