

51st Sydney Film Festival—Part 4

The human cost of fratricidal war

Witnesses directed by Vinko Bresan

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Witnesses (Svjedoci), directed by the Croatian director Vinko Bresan and based on co-scriptwriter Jurica Pavicic's novel *Plaster Sheep* (Ovce od gipsa), is a brave and intelligently made film, but not without weaknesses. This is Bresan's third feature and a change in direction for the 40-year-old director. His first two features—*How the War Began on My Island* (Kako je poceo rat na mom otoku [1996]) and *Marshall Tito's Spirit* (Marsal [2002])—were comedies of a sort.

The film is set in a small town in Croatia sometime during the early 1990s, following the secession of Croatia from Yugoslavia, which marked the eruption of a series of bloody fratricidal conflicts throughout the former Balkan federation. The atmosphere is bleak and depressing, with rundown houses, dirt roads and constant rain.

Three Croatian soldiers, Josko (Kerseymere Mimic), Viejo (Marino Purge) and Baric (Began Navajo), have just returned from the front and decide to blow up the house of an alleged Serbian black marketer (Slave Kenotic), who is supposed to be away in Hungary on a business trip. The planned attack is to avenge the death of Josko's father (Ivory Gregurevic), who was killed by Serbian forces. But information given to the soldiers that the black marketer is absent is incorrect. While they are placing mines around the house, he comes out to check where the noise is coming from. The soldiers, surprised and nervous, open fire with their machine guns and kill him.

The only other witness to this brutal murder is the dead man's young daughter, who was inside the house. The soldiers kidnap the little girl and imprison her in their garage until they can decide what to do.

The film moves on to the next morning, as a detective

and police begin investigating the crime scene. However, it deviates from a traditional linear narrative structure. In fact, it moves back and forth between different versions of the event, depending on the perspective of each protagonist. This technique, while a little confusing at first, is effective and probes more deeply into the crime. Each version and perspective helps to provide a more concrete and complex examination of the characters, their motives and their situations.

Apart from a local journalist (Alma Prica), Barbir (Drazen Kuhn), the detective in charge of the case, confronts a very hostile response to his investigations. The town mayor and local surgeon, Dr. Matic (Ljubomir Kerekes), and a family friend of one of the soldiers, intervenes and gives the soldiers a green light to kill the girl. He cynically suggests that if nobody knows what happened, then no one can say that anything happened. Matic also succeeds in halting the police investigation after a chat with the local chief of police and by offering to operate on the detective Barbir's comatose wife, ahead of others on his surgery list. A victim of the war, she has shrapnel lodged in her brain.

In due course, one of the soldiers, out of complete despair and lack of any hope, commits suicide at a tavern where other soldiers hang out. Eventually, Kreso (Leon Lucev), one of the soldier's brothers, and the journalist, his girlfriend, save the young Serbian girl. Kreso is a wounded war veteran and has just been released from hospital after having his leg amputated.

Some of the more powerful moments in Bresan's film are flashbacks, graphically depicting the war and its physical, psychological and emotional impact on

those involved.

In one scene, Kreso and his younger brother participate in a Croatian military attack on a village. The brother ignores voices from inside a home and is about to hurl a grenade into the building when Kreso stops him and kicks the door open. The two soldiers are suddenly confronted with a room full of young children and an Orthodox priest.

Equally strong is the film's depiction of how the war creates an atmosphere of reprisal and revenge, not just among the soldiers but also the town's citizens. In this atmosphere, few have any regard for the lives of the alleged Serbian black-marketer and his young daughter.

Likewise, local bureaucrats treat their own townsfolk with contempt. The mayor, who is the town's best surgeon, is prepared to use detective Barbir's seriously wounded wife to persuade him to drop his investigations. Importantly, the film demonstrates that, apart from a handful of bureaucrats and political lackeys, there are no real winners in the war.

But *Witnesses'* blunt and honest portrayal of the soldiers' cold-blooded murder has made Bresan the target of right-wing attacks by sections of the Croatian media and political establishment.

Particularly venomous denunciations have come from the Croatian Party of Rights, which convened a special meeting in March this year to denounce the filmmaker for betraying the country and using taxpayers' money to falsely portray the Croatian military. Among the more outrageous allegations, Bresan was accused of collaborating with the Hague tribunal and its attempts to try a number of Croatian military officers for war crimes.

Bresan has rejected these contemptible claims, pointing out that they were not from serious film critics or artists, but from nationalist politicians and their supporters in the media. *Witnesses*, he told one interviewer, was an attempt to explore the character of war crimes and their driving forces. "In our society, our war crimes are not yet fully discussed or even defined," he said. "It is necessary to talk of a system of evil created within our own society. And it is something difficult to fight, even with laws. If the film's ending is optimistic, it is not our reality, but what we would like to wish for."

Witnesses' ending and the characterisations of Kreso and his journalist girlfriend, however, are the weakest

elements of the film.

At first, Kreso objects to the investigation and his partner's interest in the death of a Serb, but eventually changes his view and succeeds in dissuading his slightly unstable brother from killing the young girl.

The film concludes with Kreso, his girlfriend and little Serbian girl—after presumably driving for hours to reach the Croatia-Hungary border, where they plan to leave the girl—standing on the edge of a valley, looking into the sunset. Notwithstanding Bresan's decision to conclude on an "optimistic" note, this is not entirely convincing and at odds with the film's generally bleak tone. His counter-posing of Kreso and his girlfriend's humane actions against the brutality of the soldiers is also rather artificial.

Likewise, the director's attempt to expose a "system of evil created within our society" only goes so far and fails to explore the roots of the soldiers and villagers' racially-inspired actions. The message of hope Bresan seeks to convey is possible. But that would require some examination of the reactionary policies of the Croatian ruling elite and rival nationalist cliques in the Balkans.

Despite these weaknesses, *Witnesses* does challenge the Croatian establishment and its version of events during 1990s. According to its claims, the Serbian military were the aggressors, and guilty of war crimes, while the Croatian military was simply "defending itself". Bresan's film is not a landmark work. But it is a sincere attempt to examine aspects of the disastrous human impact of the fratricidal Balkan conflict and its consequences.



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