52nd Sydney Film Festival

Yugoslav filmmaker at an impasse

Life is a Miracle (Zivot Je Cudo), directed and co-written by Emir Kusturica

Ismet Redzovic
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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the 52nd Sydney Film Festival. Parts one, two, three *and* four *were published on July 7, 12, 13 and 21, respectively.*

A new film by Bosnian-born writer and director Emir Kusturica is generally a welcome event. A popular filmmaker in Europe and perhaps the only Yugoslav director able to attract a large international audience, Kusturica's best work is endowed with a humanity and generosity of spirit that demarcates it from the generally cynical or pessimistic movies now being made in the Balkans.

After a seven-year absence from filmmaking, Kusturica's latest work, *Life is a Miracle* (*Zivot Je Cudo*), however, is a weak movie and indicates that he seems to have reached something of an artistic impasse.

Like his last two films—*Underground* and *Black Cat, White Cat*—a plot summary of *Life is a Miracle* is difficult because so much happens, very fast and very loud. The principal action occurs in a small Bosnian village in the early 1990s, just before the eruption of the fratricidal war that engulfed the region and ultimately led to the final disintegration of the post-WW II Yugoslav federal state.

Its central character is Luka (Slavko Stimac), a Serbian engineer running the local railway station and overseeing rail work that hopefully will transform the area into a tourist destination. Luka is married to Jadranka (Vesna Trivalic), a neurotic opera singer, and they have a 20-year-old son, Milos (Vuk Kostic), whose ambition is to play professionally for Partizan, the famous Belgrade soccer club.

A good-natured optimist, Luka is so preoccupied with his work and living life to the full, with lots of drinking, music and riotous behaviour, that he is unaware of the impending war or its disastrous consequences.

When the conflict breaks out, Luka's wife runs off with a visiting Hungarian musician. His son Milos is enlisted in the Yugoslav National Army but is quickly taken prisoner by Muslim forces. In an attempt to secure Milos' release, Luka is assigned the task of holding hostage Sabaha (Natasha Solak), a young Muslim woman believed to be from a wealthy family. Luka and Sabaha, however, fall in love and in the end he has to make a difficult decision: to hand over Sabaha in exchange for his son Milos.

This bare outline does not include the film's numerous sub-plots or its cast of madcap characters, cantankerous farmyard animals (among them a suicidal donkey), and other surreal proceedings. In fact, Kusturica frenetically piles on so many people and events throughout the more than two and a half hour film that it becomes mind-numbing.

The more convincing and positive elements in *Life is a Miracle* are those that demonstrate how ordinary Balkan people—Serbs, Croats and Muslims—had lived together peacefully and that the fratricidal war was not organic but externally imposed. For example, Milos's best friend Eso (Adnan Omerovic) is a Muslim and on the eve of the war, Milos eats baklava at his friend's home where the family is celebrating the end of Ramadan. Tragically, after fighting breaks out, Milos and Eso are in opposing armies.

Kusturica also lampoons the "patriot businessmen" or war profiteers as philistine opportunists and thugs. In one comic scene, the profiteers lie on the front of a moving train sniffing a line of cocaine put on the railway tracks by their cronies.

But unfortunately these insightful moments are few and far between. Most of the film's humour is stale, forced or infantile; the love affair between Luka and Sabaha borders on the banal; and Luka's dilemma over his son Milos is not convincing. And then one has to contend with the film's feverish pace.

Life is a Miracle, despite its title and the boisterous behaviour of its characters, has a strong undercurrent of pessimism and uncalled for violence.

A violent brawl erupts during a soccer match, for instance, and everyone eagerly joins in. The brutal fighting is too gratuitous to be taken lightly, and, if anything, perpetuates the so-called Balkan stereotype—an inherently cruel and irrational people.

Another disturbing scene is the murder of the town's mayor who is shot while playing the trumpet as local villagers sing and dance before heading off on a bear hunt. He tries to keep playing but only succeeds in producing a muted sound as blood trickles from the instrument. This is unnecessary, macabre and in bad taste.

What is to account for the noisy and superficial character of this work?

Much of it lies in Kusturica's limited appreciation of the political and social background in which his film is set. This, in turn, is connected to his lack of understanding of the real character of the Stalinist federal state of Yugoslavia in which he grew up and worked, and the reasons for its disintegration in the early 1990s. This has left him, and many others from his generation, disoriented and his artistic work increasingly frantic.

Born in 1954, Kusturica grew up in a poor area of the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo. Bosnia had long been one of the more backward areas in the Balkans. Under the new state created by the Stalinist Yugoslav Communist Party led by Marshall Tito following the defeat of the Nazis and local fascist forces in 1945, new resources were provided for the region. Bosnia quickly became the most multi-ethnic of all the Yugoslav states, a place where Serbs, Croats and Moslems mingled, intermarried, and co-existed in relative harmony.

Kusturica revelled in this environment and his early cultural influences were rich and varied. He was fascinated by the apparently free and

romantic traditions of local gypsies in nearby areas and attracted to their semi-nomadic lifestyle.

An uninhibited, rebellious and inquisitive individual, Kusturica was also inspired by the poetic realism of French filmmaker Jean Renoir and the early neo-realist work of Italian director Federico Fellini and decided to become a filmmaker. He studied at the famous Prague Film Academy and, after an acclaimed student film, went on to direct a series of prize-winning movies. Much of his early work has an anti-authoritarian element, combined with a cheeky sense of humour.

His first feature, *Do you Remember Dolly Bell?* (*Sjecas li se, Dolly Bell*) (1981), a comedy-drama set in post-war Sarajevo, won the Venice Golden Lion. It deals with a teenager's rite of passage—his self-image, infatuations and music—and included intense political discussions between the boy and his alcoholic father, sensitively exposing the father's bureaucratic mind-set.

Unlike most of the state-sponsored projects at that time, which tended to glorify the Yugoslav Stalinist leadership or artificially endowed the partisan movement with superhuman heroism, *Do you Remember Dolly Bell?* captures the essence of ordinary people struggling to survive and make sense of the new post-war order

His second feature, *When Father Was Away on Business* (1985) (*Otac Na Sluzbenom Putu*), won the Palme D'Or at Cannes. In this film he developed his most overt criticism of Tito's post-war regime.

Also set in Sarajevo, between 1948 and 1951, the movie is about a working class family and told from the standpoint of a six-year old boy, whose father is an aspiring bureaucrat. His father, however, makes a joke about Marx and Stalin to his mistress, who reports him to the party leadership and he is sent to a labour camp. The son is told that his father is away on business. In order to be readmitted to the party after his release, the father has to assume rather unsavoury characteristics to prove that he is fit and worthy of being a Stalinist apparatchik.

While *When Father Was Away on Business* sharply lampoons party officialdom and retains the same sense of innocence and hope for the future of his first film, it displays no real political understanding of the nationalist character of Tito's regime or Stalinism. Although Kusturica's satire is often bitterly funny, it always just skims surface.

After attempting to deal with the party bureaucracy in 1989, Kusturica returned to his fascination with gypsies in *Time of the Gypsies* (*Dom Za Vjesanje*). Infused with gypsy spirituality and magic symbolism, it explores the gypsy child-slave trade from Yugoslavia to Italy. This was followed by *Arizona Dream* in 1993, his first, and, to date, only English language film.

Shot in the US, Kusturica claimed *Arizona Dream* was an exploration of the American dream and American values. It centres on the relationship between an uncle who owns a Cadillac dealership in Arizona and his aspirations for his nephew, who lives in New York City, to take over the business.

Kusturica later said the film represented a meeting point between "dreams and reality". It included unlikely and unconventional romances, a depressive character that plays the accordion to turtles and other oddities.

The film was a box office failure and Kusturica turned back to the Balkans and in 1995 released *Underground*, his fourth feature. His most ambitious project, the film attempts to deal with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The movie is subtitled, "Once upon a time there was a country".

A complex and at times surreal story, it begins in 1941 when two underworld figures realise that Belgrade is about to be bombed and decide to wage a national liberation struggle. Forced to carry out the struggle underground, their families and friends have hidden in the cellar of a friend's house where they build a munitions factory from which the partisans are supplied.

Following the war, one of the friends and his wife, who now live above ground, begin an elaborate and outrageous scheme of lies and manipulation to keep the partisans and workers underground and ignorant of the war's end. The couple have enriched themselves smuggling arms while everyone else underground lives a strange existence chanting revolutionary slogans, holding elaborate weddings and other strange events.

Underground has some genuinely funny moments, but the film is seriously flawed and suggests that crooks and thugs with sinister motives led the anti-fascist struggle in Yugoslavia during WWII. This seems to be the point at which Kusturica's unresolved questions about Titoism begin to find artistic expression. He later said that he wanted *Underground* to preserve Yugoslavia's "history, idealism, beauty and absurdity" but instead it revealed his cynicism about the genuinely heroic character of the partisan struggle and confusion about the political nature of the Yugoslav state.

Underground ends with the country's disintegration, as all the characters, dead and alive, gather for a wedding. But the land on which they are celebrating begins to separate from the mainland. This is poetic and affecting, but raises more questions than Kusturica is able to answer.

With his somewhat idealised vision of Yugoslavia—the source of his earlier, more poetic and sensitive films and his witty barbs against the Stalinist bureaucracy—no longer in existence, the challenge confronting Kusturica is a profound artistic reinvention.

Instead, his next film *Black Cat White Cat* (1998), which won the Silver Lion for best director in Venice, avoided any exploration of these complex issues. The movie was another fast-paced farce, full of eccentrics and slapstick, with gypsies once again as the main protagonists.

David Walsh, *World Socialist Web Site* arts editor, commented on *Black Cat, White Cat* in 1999: "What's happened in the former Yugoslavia is still monstrous and Kusturica's response—'Everything is crazy and beautiful no matter what!'—seems to me to fall terribly short. I'm willing to go out on a limb and suggest that one wouldn't have to scratch this particular instance of 'typical Balkan gaiety' too deeply to come across deep despair. The danger always exists that one frenetically whoops it up as a substitute for and a means of not thinking about difficult, intractable problems ..."

Life is a Miracle confirms this prescient assessment.

In production notes for *Life is a Miracle* Kusturica writes: "I would say that it's a sadly optimistic movie because Luka opens up the perspective of love. Everything else is f—-ed up today. We don't have to be pessimistic but we do have to be realistic about what we see. The last century was the century of wars and conflicts but there was more hope than now, I think ... In the world we live in, with no utopia, we have to build our personal utopia because with every spirit that is saved, every soul that is saved, we gain something."

Emir Kusturica is a talented filmmaker and no doubt genuinely feels for ordinary people but to propose some "personal" solution to the serious issues that lie ahead is a dangerous retreat. He can continue running around in artistic circles, as he has done since the liquidation of Yugoslavia, or attempt a new artistic orientation. This will obviously not be easy, but can only occur through a deeper appreciation of the complex historical and political origins of the Balkans tragedy.