

53rd Sydney Film Festival--Part 5

Three serious, but unchallenging, films from Eastern Europe

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This is the fifth part of a series of articles on the 2006 Sydney Film Festival, held June 9-25. The first part was posted July 17, the second on July 19, the third on July 22 and the fourth on July 25.

In line with its trend towards more English-language films, this year's festival screened only three features from Eastern Europe. All three—from the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Poland—offered sensitive portrayals of their characters and situations. Unfortunately they were generally pedestrian works, which, notwithstanding the undoubted skills of their directors, failed to rise above a mere mirroring of life.

Something Like Happiness was written and directed by Bohdan Slama and has won numerous awards, including best director and best actress for Anna Geislerova at last year's San Sebastian International Film Festival. The film explores the interconnected lives of a group of young working class people in a cramped, depressing block of flats in a mid-sized northern Bohemian town in the Czech Republic.

A former heavy industrial centre, the ugly and imposing remnants of the town's former glory provide a backdrop to the personal dilemmas facing the movie's central characters—Monika (Tatiana Vilhelmova) and her childhood friends Tonika (Pavel Liska) and Dasha (Ana Geislerova).

The film opens with Jara, Monika's boyfriend, emigrating to the US. Monika, who is in her twenties and still lives with her parents, hopes to one day join him and escape the drudgery of her life. Various conflicting social pressures, however, are playing on her mind.

While Monika's father (Bolek Polivka) does not want his daughter to leave the town, her mother (Simona Stasova) thinks she should pursue Jara in America. At the same time Tonika, a likeable young man who lives outside the town on a family farm with his eccentric aunt, is secretly in love with Monika.

To complicate matters further, Monika's friend Dasha (Ana Geislerova), an unstable single mother with two little boys, is having an affair with an insensitive, middle class married man. Dasha becomes increasingly disoriented, suffers a mental breakdown and is unable to care for her two children. Monika and Tonika assume the role of foster parents.

Monika is torn between her sense of duty towards the two children and the possibility of joining her boyfriend in America. The kind-hearted Tonika, whose simple life on the farm has drawn Monika closer to him, however, never consummates the romance. The movie ends rather conventionally with Monika abandoning hopes of joining her boyfriend in the US.

In line with its title, *Something Like Happiness* effectively creates the mood of sadness, emptiness and even despair that pervades the grim town. Slama also skillfully interweaves the various emotional problems of the movie's protagonists, evoking genuine sympathy.

But the film's fundamental flaw is that the director seems satisfied with too little. This is perhaps bound up with the movie's failure to more effectively source its characters' malaise in the social disaster produced by capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe, which has produced widespread poverty and job destruction, including an official 20 percent unemployment rate in Bohemia itself.

For all its sympathy and sensitivity, *Something Like Happiness* is a kind of "slice of life", frozen in time and lacking in dynamics and contradictions, offering no real sense of anger or protest against the bleak situation facing its characters.

Actor and director Jan Cvitkovic's second feature *Gravehopping* is set in a small Slovenian town. Billed as a dark comedy, the movie revolves around Pero (Gregor Bakovic), a professional funeral orator, and his eccentric family and various friends, including his mechanic buddy Shooki (Drago Milinovic).

Beyond their obsessions for oration and a treasured car (an old mini Fiat), Pero and Shooki have love interests. Pero is attracted to Renata (Mojca Fatur), a young, seemingly better educated and more metropolitan villager, who keeps evading his awkward advances. Ida (Sonja Savic), Pero's autistic sister, enjoys mutual affections with Shooki.

The film has a number of amusing characters and moments. These include a series of comic suicide attempts by Pero's grandfather (Brane Grubar) and the unstable marriage of Pero's

second sister (Natasa Matjasec).

While *Gravehopping*'s story unfolds in what appears to be an idyllic village, there is a sense that something is deeply wrong. Cvitkovic obviously feels that things are not so rosy in Slovenia since it broke from the Yugoslav Federation in 1991.

In one symbolic scene, Pero tries to hoist the Slovenian flag on the roof, explaining to his nephew the significance of the national holiday celebrating Slovenia's "defeat" of the Yugoslav national army. Pero then plummets to the ground and injures himself, thus foreshadowing a series of gruesome and disturbing events.

Without any real warning the movie takes a dark turn, featuring three frustrated single male villagers plotting a gang rape. Not long after, Pero's autistic sister Ida is brutally raped. This is followed by the even more vicious revenge murder of the rapists by Shooki, Ida's boyfriend.

We then learn that Renata has been having a violent incestuous relationship with her father and, as a consequence, is unable to be involved in a normal relationship. Ironically Pero, the professional funeral orator, turns out to be *Gravehopping*'s most stable character.

Cvitkovic no doubt recognises that there are two Slovenias—the idealised façade of an independent, democratic and socially stable nation as claimed by its ruling elite and the portrait he has created of a dysfunctional, disturbed and chaotic place. His cinematic shock tactics, however, are self-defeating and fail to enlighten anyone about the social reality confronting ordinary people in Slovenia.

My Nikifor, directed by director Krzysztof Krauze, is about Nikifor (played by actress Krystyna Feldman), an acclaimed but eccentric Polish folk artist who lived from 1895 until 1968.

Nikifor, whose real name was Lemko and his surname probably Drowniak, was a somewhat mysterious figure and the source of many legends. A self-taught artist with extraordinary visual intuition, he produced at least three works a day for more than 60 years. Some of his work was exhibited in Paris during the 1930s and, by the end of the 1940s, Krakow-based patrons began to popularise his art. According to experts, his most outstanding works were his watercolours, in particular his "Beskid landscapes with little stations". He left behind around 40,000 works when he died.

Set in the 1960s, Krauze's film explores the complex and uneasy relationship between Nikifor and Marian (Roman Gancarczyk) a state-funded artist paid to produce Polish Communist Party banners and uninspired socialist realist portraits.

One day the dishevelled, diseased and virtually incoherent Nikifor, a beggar and social outcast, stumbles into Marian's studio in Krynica and begins drawing and sketching. Nikifor refuses to leave, much to Marian's irritation. And yet, as the weeks go by, the old man's naive and vibrant art increasingly fascinates Marian, whose work looks sanitised and insipid by comparison. Marian reluctantly starts to take interest in the old

man's well being.

Marian begins to abandon his own artistic work and his place in the Stalinist-controlled cultural pecking order in the town. He also finds it increasingly impossible to reconcile his wife's desire for a better life and a bigger flat with his own artistic ambitions, now played out through Nikifor. When it is discovered that Nikifor has tuberculosis, Marian sacrifices his own marriage to look after the old man.

At one point in the movie, Marian and Nikifor attend a special retrospective of the folk artist's work in Krakow. When political dignitaries and art bureaucrats are assembled for a photograph with the artist, Nikifor is nowhere to be found. He has no interest in schmoozing with the crème of the cultural and bureaucratic elite and is found outside the gallery trying to sell some of his small pencil and crayon sketches for a few pennies to tourists and other passers-by.

My Nikifor is a fairly sensitive work and makes some general points about the eternal conflict between art and official culture. And, of course, there are some references to the difficulties in the culturally stifling atmosphere under the Stalinist bureaucracy in Poland. But overall the film lacks emotional power and there is no real indictment of the Stalinist regime.

Another of the film's essential problems is that audiences are never really allowed to understand Nikifor and his work deeply enough to feel any compassion or anger about the bureaucracy's indifference towards him. This is because director Krauze concentrates almost entirely on the external and banal. Nikifor is certainly presented as an obstinate, difficult and often repulsive man, but no serious attempt is made to delve into the environment that produced him and his psychological make-up. This focus on secondary details accounts for the film's tedious and, at times, glacial pace.

To be continued



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