

Toronto International Film Festival 2009

An interview with Asli Özge, director of *Men on the Bridge*

David Walsh
10 October 2009

Asli Özge is the director of Men on the Bridge [see accompanying article], screened at the recent Toronto film festival. We spoke during the festival.

David Walsh: Where did the idea for this film come from?

Asli Özge: I was living on one side, and my father was living on the other side, of the Bosphorus Bridge, which separates Asia from Europe in Istanbul. I was traveling across the bridge a lot. And sitting in traffic jams for hours. Then I began to photograph illegal street hawkers and I did that for a long time. I decided I'd have to go home with one of them, to see how they lived, where they were coming from.

And then I decided on three major categories of people who are most present on the bridge—police officers, taxi drivers, flower sellers.

It's also a metaphor for Asia and Europe. There are always traffic jams on the bridge, and Turkey wants to join the European Union, and we are waiting and waiting for that too. An uncertain future, waiting. These young people's futures, which are also uncertain, are connected to that too.

And I'm afraid of increasing nationalism, so I thought I had to put that in also.

I've been living in Berlin too since 2000, so I come and go between Germany and Turkey, I don't know if the nationalism was as intense before, or living in Europe gives me a different view, but suddenly I saw Turkish flags everywhere. It was so obvious, and troubling. There is a polarization. More understanding and tolerance from some people, and more nationalism from others.

DW: These were non-professionals in the film?

AÖ: Two of them, the driver and the street hawker,

are playing themselves. The police wouldn't give permission to shoot a policeman, so then we used his brother. The brother wanted to be a policeman too, but they rejected him from the police academy, and I thought now he could have the chance, in a film.

DW: Economic pressure, money worries are omnipresent in the film.

AÖ: Economic pressure is a major question. When I talked to these people, that was the first thing they talked about. Among my friends too. Public servants, private sector, people who do illegal work, all of them talk about the economic problems.

I saw that the second problem for them was sexual. These are the two major problems of the young people in Turkey, and so I thought a film should be about them. And it would perhaps be interesting for a worldwide audience. It's not specifically Turkish.

Take the wife of the taxi driver. There are some women like that, they don't have any education, and because of that they are dependent on their husbands. Maybe she got married in order to have a better life, not because she's in love. She can't divorce, although she's unhappy, because she's dependent.

It might seem she's a bit of a monster to her husband, but this is the result of problems she cannot deal with. Our sympathy goes back and forth from husband to wife. Neither is a monster. Many couples are like this, all the people with these problems.

I don't want the spectator to blame anyone, but to see their reasons, to see why they act this way. I think her husband, the taxi driver, is in love with her, he wants a better life for her, but he's passive. This is his character.

His boss? He's the owner of the house. They are

dependent on him. They want to change houses, but he keeps the taxi driver almost like his slave. He tells him, 'Hit your wife,' when she complains, which the husband doesn't do.

DW: Can you speak a little about social conditions in Turkey?

AÖ: The conditions are bad for those who are not rich. For example, Fikret. He doesn't have any identification, he doesn't exist, he has never been to school, not for a day, so if he is ill, it is hard for him. Poor people have some kind of card, so the hospital will take care of them.

His brother's wife was pregnant, and they called me, and said, 'We are going to the hospital, do you want to come?' So we took the camera, she was going to have a baby, but the hospital wouldn't take them. 'Oh, it's a risky birth, go to that other hospital.' Three hours they were going from one hospital to another. It's not easy.

Fikret is Roma. It is bad for them. Mostly they get accepted if they are singers. Otherwise, they sell flowers and so on. They live on the street I showed in the film. Of course the living conditions there are terrible. One toilet for the entire street, they don't have any showers.

The shop where they are stopped and searched by the management, and told not to come back, that really happened. Fikret told me the story. They were looking at cell phones, but the store security picked on them, because of security cameras. They weren't doing anything. I shot in the actual shop, with my actors. The same shop! I think at the end they began to recognize what we were doing.

It was difficult to open Fikret up. He didn't talk, but his face is very expressive. He doesn't have to say too much. Those were his friends, they live together. They have never been to the cinema before, because of money. In general, they are like tourists in their own city. I took them to the Asian side. They don't know anything about it. They live and stay on that one street.

DW: What is the role of Turkish nationalism?

AÖ: Nationalism is a big distraction. Take Murat, for example, the policeman. He is very passive too, but the moment he speaks about nationalism, he is suddenly very aggressive, he poses with his gun. I think it's a way of getting hold of something reassuring and feeling better.

The man who played him, also Murat, told me when

we met, 'I like Hitler.' 'Oh, really?,' I said. 'Yes, I've read him a lot and I agree with it.' 'So you don't like Jewish people.' 'No.' 'I'm Jewish,' I said. He went, 'Oh,' in surprise. He went home and the next day he called me, saying 'I'm so sorry, I never thought I would meet someone who was Jewish and like her. I'm really sorry.' He doesn't know what he's talking about.

DW: Why do you make films?

AÖ: That's an interesting question. I make films to express myself, to say something. Not to hand a message to people, but I have an opinion and I want it to be discussed. I'm interested in telling something new, from another point of view. How you tell a story is important, form is important, but form alone doesn't interest me.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact