Sydney Film Festival 2010—Part 4: If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle and How I Ended Last Summer

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the 57th Sydney Film Festival. See: Parts 1, 2 *and* 3.

If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle, a low-budget first feature by the director Florin Serban, is a sympathetic portrayal of the plight of youth in contemporary Romania.

A number of interesting films have been produced by young directors in Romania during the past decade and point to a revival in that country's cinema. These include Titus Muntean's *Exam (*2003), Ruxandra Zenide's *Ryna (*2005), *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu by Cristi Puiu (2005),* Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue (2006)* Mitulescu's *How I Celebrated the End of the World (2006)* and Tudor Giurgiu's *Love Sick (*2006).

If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle is perhaps not as strong as the better of these films. Its approach to the subject matter is rather simplistic on occasions and there are a number of plot inconsistencies. Nevertheless, it was a worthwhile contribution to the film festival and provided a picture of the situation facing young people in Romania. In the context where youth have no future and are by and large demonised and/or exploited, this is not a small question.

Silviu, played by George Pistereanu (a non-professional actor), has been in a reform school for almost four years, although the film never explains why he has been incarcerated. The teenager has only five days before his release but learns from an unexpected visit by his younger brother (Marian Bratu) that their mother (Clara Voda) has just come back from Italy. She doesn't plan to stay in Romania but will quickly return to her job in Italy and take the younger brother with her, leaving Silviu to face freedom alone with no real prospects in sight.

This deeply troubles the young man and sets in motion a chain of events that culminate in his violent eruption during a session with some social workers. Silviu takes Ana (Ada Condeescu), a pretty young social worker to whom he is attracted, hostage and issues a series of demands. He wants a promise from his mother that she won't take his brother back to Italy and for the reform school to provide him with a vehicle so he can take Ana out for a cup of coffee.

Silviu first meets Ana when she helps him fill out a questionnaire. Knowing that this is a routine formality, he asks whether she really cares about what he's feeling. This is a poignant moment and effectively captures the fact that no one in the repressive reform school has ever really tapped into Silviu's feelings or expressed any genuine interest in him as a human being. Ana, perhaps because she's also young, can relate to him or is simply attracted to his openness. She responds with a warm smile and says she is interested in the teenager and wants to hear him out.

When Silviu and Ana are eventually given a car and drive off to a nearby café, the reform school inmates cheer, expressing their own unfulfilled hopes.

If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle, has a dark, almost Dickensian tone. While the inmates do farm work during the day, life in the reform school is bleak, depressing and dominated by bullying and petty intrigues. The films' recurring theme is that no one listens to oppressed youth or what they actually feel about the situation they confront.

Producer Catalin Mitulescu, who attended the Sydney Film Festival, told me that the reform school chosen for the film was not as bad as most of those in Romania. The movie, he said, aimed to appeal to ordinary people and had been very successful in Romania, particularly among youth. "I've received numerous emails from young people with suggestions for a sequel. That's because young people can identify with Silviu; they have a lot in common," he said.

I asked Mitulescu whether it was deliberate that the film didn't explain why Silviu had been incarcerated. "Yes, that was intentional," he replied, "because that's not the point, the movie is about something else."

Mitulescu pointed out that Romania had "passed through some very difficult phases" following the overthrow of the Stalinist regime of Nicolai Ceausescu in 1989. He claimed that the key

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problem was that the country “didn’t have a natural elite that could lead us to a better model of society”.

“It’s difficult to pass from a communist to a capitalist model when the major part of the society doesn’t understand what is happening,” he added. “A large proportion of the Romanian population is the elderly and what we tried to show in the movie is this separation between parents and children. Due to economic hardship, many Romanians are forced to go overseas and they leave their kids behind. This creates a lot of problems, as the kids are raised by their grandparents …”

But the situation facing Silviu and millions of other Romanians is not a generational problem, nor does it arise from the lack of a “natural elite”. It is a direct result of the profit system. The hated Ceausescu Stalinist regime, which paved the way for the imposition of the capitalist market, has been followed by various social democratic and right-wing formations that liquidated the state-owned industries and enriched themselves at the expense of millions of ordinary Romanians. In fact, the poverty and bleak future facing Silviu—and pointed to by other recent Romanian movies—is an outcome of that process, with worse to come.

Despite these problems, the movie does allow Silviu’s voice to be heard, not as a raw statistic but as a young adult with desires and strivings.

In the film’s most moving scenes, Silviu and Ana are seen sitting drinking coffee in an empty café. Even though Ana is a hostage she doesn’t appear to be afraid. After giving Ana a kiss and asking her to order him another coffee, Silviu leaves the table and walks outside to face reality. For the first time it appears that he has made a genuine connection with another human being, having achieved something that most of us take for granted.

A Russian thriller

How I Ended Last Summer is set in a run-down weather station on an Arctic island during the summer. Written and directed by Alexei Popogrebsky, the movie has only two characters: Sergei (Sergei Puskepalis), a hard-bitten rather unapproachable weather station veteran, and a youthful Pavel (Grigory Dobrygin), who is fresh out of school. The two men measure the radioactivity of the island’s isotope beacon and report the data via a two way-radio. The film never discloses what may be buried on the island.

The first part of the film sets up the dynamics and routine of Sergei and Pavel and convincingly dramatises a developing tension between the men. The latter is serious, professional, intolerant and taciturn; the former a bit careless, prone to making silly mistakes with the readings and naively looking for some adventure which he can brag about when he returns to the city.

When Sergei goes off fishing and Pavel (now in charge) is given the difficult task of informing his colleague that his wife and child have just been killed in a car accident, things go awry. The nervous young man delays telling Sergei the news and then in order to conceal the tragic news from him sabotages the two-way radio. Pavel finally blurts it out in an angry confrontation with Sergei. The film’s second half consists of a bizarre chase between the two men with Pavel convinced that his colleague is out to kill him.

How I Ended Last Summer is a technically proficient work. Both actors and the cinematographer, Pavel Kostomarov, won Silver Bear prizes at the recent Berlin film festival.

Director Popogrebsky has said that he decided to make the film after reading a wide variety of literature (including diaries from weather station technicians from early parts of the twentieth century) on people enduring harsh conditions. From this standpoint the movie is a success and competently captures the striking natural scenery, psychological tedium and the characters’ generational clashes.

According to Popogrebsky, however, the most important difference between the two characters’ is their attitude to nature: “The older man has been there for 8 to 9 years and he’s in union with nature ... he’s still an individual entity but he’s part of nature. The younger man, comes there as a consumer from the city. He wants to get excitement, experience, something to put up in his blog. So we have a clash of two people with a completely different attitude to and relationship to nature. So in a way, it’s a triangle.”

While this is mildly interesting, *How I Ended Last Summer* is unsatisfying and leaves one puzzled as to why it has been so widely praised by various film critics. This year’s jury for Sydney film best picture prize, for example, decided to award the film an honourable mention, without providing any real reason. Why is the obvious talent of everyone involved in this production wasted on such minor concerns? Surely there are more interesting and pressing issues in Russia that should be dramatised.

To be continued

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