

San Francisco International Film Festival 2013—Part six

Two very different documentaries: *Sofia's Last Ambulance* and *Sing Me The Songs That Say I Love You—A Concert for Kate McGarrigle*

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4 June 2013

This is the sixth and final part of a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 25-May 9. Part one was posted May 16, Part two on May 22, Part three on May 24, Part four on May 27 and Part five on May 30.

Sofia's Last Ambulance is a full-length documentary by Bulgarian director Ilian Metev (also, co-producer, cinematographer and editor), which won an award at the 2012 Cannes film festival. The modest film follows a three-person paramedic crew in the course of their duties over a period of two years.

Their vehicle is not literally the “last” in Sofia, but there are only a dozen or so ambulances servicing Bulgaria’s capital city, the 15th largest in the European Union, with a population estimated at 2 million people. This is one of the many catastrophic results of the re-introduction of free market capitalism in Eastern Europe in the 1990s and resulting cuts to social services.

The trio are Dr. Krassimir Yordanov, who has worked in the emergency services for a quarter of a century, nurse Mila Mikhailova, and the ambulance driver, Plamen Slavkov.

The camera follows Yordanov and Mikhailova as they tend to the sick and the injured, in workplaces, tenement apartments, out in the bleak suburbs. “Krassi,” as the doctor is called, has white hair, glasses, a worried, lined face. He sighs now and then, but proceeds tirelessly, professionally with his work.

Mikhailova is the most outgoing personality. She talks the most, she commiserates, she wonders about her workmates. “Why did you sigh, Krassi?” A little girl is in the ambulance, a wardrobe has fallen on her. All she can mutter is “No ... no ... no ... no ... no.” Mikhailova talks to her gently, as she does to her own child on the telephone.

The ambulance gets hit by a taxi. We find out that Plamen has another job, when he tells the other driver, “You make me embarrassed to be a taxi driver.” They get lost in the country amidst shacks and appalling poverty.

The crew is called in when a dead body is found, partially decomposed. “The woman was all alone.” Krassi talks to a junkie, five of whose friends have died and who is shooting up “trash,” with horse tranquilizer mixed in. A pregnant woman has tried aborting by swallowing something. In another case, the ambulance doesn’t arrive for four hours. “It’s too late,” they are told sadly.

There are lighter moments occasionally, and big smiles. “How’s your love life?” “Rubbish.” “Same here.”

But mostly there is too much work, too little pay, a ridiculous and inefficient bureaucracy.

They explain to the camera: “Our squad’s been completely destroyed. ... Nobody’s stayed.” Many of the trained personnel who could do so have left Bulgaria. An estimated 1,200 nurses are departing the Balkan nation each year.

Thirteen—or sixteen—ambulances, depending on the report you read, for a city of two million people. A social crime. So big European banks can be repaid and thrive.

Since the beginning of 2013, six people have set themselves on fire in Bulgaria, the poorest country in the European Union, to protest the levels of social misery.

The BBC reported in early May, for example, that “Dimitar Dimitrov did not just want to die. He wanted to sacrifice himself for his country. On 13 March, the unemployed 53-year-old set off from his apartment in the capital, Sofia, and headed for the presidential offices in the city centre. When he arrived, he doused himself in petrol and set himself alight.” He survived, despite the “excruciating” pain and after numerous operations.

In the town of Radnevo, Vechislav Arsenov, also 53, also unemployed, set himself on fire after social welfare payments dried up. On the day he died, Arsenov telephoned “each of his five grown-up children to tell them he was sorry for what he was about to do. Then he went to the mayor’s office to ask for money. He insisted that the mayor come and talk to him, shouting to the receptionists that, if no such meeting were

granted, he would light a match.”

“‘We were desperate,’ his son, Txumir, explains. ‘My father had recently lost his job. We could not pay our bills or our debts and he could not afford to buy food for us.’” The BBC adds, “Txumir is now trying to keep his impoverished family alive. He, too, is unemployed and relies on summer work as an agricultural labourer. Eleven of the family (six children and five adults) share Txumir’s two-bedroom flat.” This is modern-day Bulgaria.

In *Sofia’s Last Ambulance*, Metev concentrates on the faces of Yordanov, Mikhailova and Slavkov. Whether out of respect for the privacy of those being treated, or a desire to avoid sensationalism, we never directly see the sick and injured.

The final shot of the film (from a dashboard camera), which lasts several minutes, is simply the three of them driving, silently.

At the film’s premiere in Sofia in November 2012, Bulgaria’s Health Minister Desislava Atanasova acknowledged, “*Sofia’s Last Ambulance* reflects the reality of things.” The government has opened up two new emergency response centres in Sofia since the film’s making. Yordanov told Agence France Presse, “‘The shortage of medical personnel is what poses the real problem’ ... adding that the new centres have changed nothing in practice.”

Sing Me the Songs: Celebrating the Works of Kate McGarrigle

Sing Me the Songs: Celebrating the Works of Kate McGarrigle is a documentary film made of concerts at New York City’s Town Hall in May 2011 in tribute to Canadian singer-songwriter Kate McGarrigle, who died of a rare form of cancer in January 2010.

The concert includes performances or comments from Emmy Lou Harris, Teddy Thompson, Antony, Krystle Warren, Norah Jones, Jimmy Fallon and writer Michael Ondaatje, as well as Kate McGarrigle’s children, Rufus and Martha Wainwright. Kate was married to singer-songwriter Loudon Wainwright III from 1971 to 1978.

Anna and Kate McGarrigle, born in 1944 and 1946, respectively, formed a duo that produced some remarkable music in the 1970s in particular. Born in Montreal of Irish and French-Canadian descent, the McGarrigles began performing as teenagers in the 1960s. Their reputations as songwriters (Linda Ronstadt had success with one of their most famous songs, “Heart Like a Wheel,” in 1974) led to a recording contract and their first, and finest album in 1975. [Available in its entirety here.]

The 2011 memorial concerts in the film, supplemented by interviews, are highly uneven, with heartfelt performances

alternating with rather overwrought performances. There are unquestionably moving moments, including the presence of Anna McGarrigle, looking lost without her younger sister.

A highlight of the film, oddly enough, is Fallon’s lighthearted and unpretentious version of Loudon Wainwright’s “Swimming Song” [from the McGarrigles’ first album].

The McGarrigles, in their early work, brought a brightness, lyricism and emotional depth, much of which holds up forty years later. Something perhaps about the combined (and aggrieved) national heritages, the social explosiveness in Quebec at the time (although the sisters never make a reference to such affairs and as English-speaking Canadians were somewhat distant from the nationalist extravagances in particular) and their own musical training at the hands of nuns in Saint-Sauveur-des-Monts, northwest of Montreal, created a very distinctive style and sound. Their voices were saucy, irreverent, occasionally heart-breaking.

Following their first concert in London in July 1976, Michael Watts in *Melody Maker* described their music as “a holy marriage of strong sentiment and brilliant, pure singing ... Anna’s, lilting and airy, Kate’s, deeper and fiercer—these are amongst the very best voices to be heard in popular music today.” The comment was just.

Unfortunately, as sometimes happens, the pent-up feelings and desires they conveyed in their first recordings and performances proved to be their most important and enduring. The McGarrigles continued recording into the past decade, but never recaptured or equaled the freshness and sharpness, or sense of fun, of their early work.

A rehearing of the sisters’ music brings back not simply a sound, but a complex and volatile era, as reflected in one of its most musically pleasing expressions.

All one can do is recommend to the reader such songs as “(Talk to Me of) Mendocino,” “Foolish You,” and the irrepressible “Complainte pour Ste-Catherine”: “Moi, j’m promene sur Ste. Catherine, J’profite d’la chaleur du métro.”

Anyone unmoved by the harmonies and sentiments here is not someone in whose company I would want to spend much time.

Concluded



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