

I Never Cry: Developing a thick skin in the new Europe

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Written and directed by Piotr Domalewski

The restoration of capitalism in the USSR and Eastern Europe in 1989-91 brought about a social, cultural and intellectual regression of immense proportions.

The decades of Stalinist crimes and the confusion they generated in the population about socialism, combined with the greed, ambition and stupidity of the newly “liberated” bourgeois and petty-bourgeois layers, produced a culture that was largely as backward and empty as it was ignorant and unfeeling.

As if emerging single file from a dense fog, interesting films have appeared from Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia in particular. The best of the new films exhibit telltale signs of disillusionment with the lies about capitalist restoration and begin to confront the new social realities, although many issues remain.

Polish writer-director Piotr Domalewski’s *I Never Cry* (*Jak najdalej stad*) tackles the subject of Polish migration to more prosperous European Union countries and the difficulties encountered by the families they leave behind.

The movie follows Ola (Zofia Stafiej), a tough 17-year-old Polish teen obsessed with passing a driver’s test after several unsuccessful attempts. After failure number three, she explains, she feels “like a whore in the rain.” Her father, who has been working in Ireland, promised her money for a car once she obtained her license. For the rebellious girl, a vehicle means potential escape from the poverty she shares with her mother (Kinga Preis) and severely disabled brother (Dawid Tulej). In their cramped, dingy flat, the three can barely take a breath.

Ola’s father left Poland “half my life” ago. She chain-smokes, cuts school and has a “F-----g police!” ring

tone that blares at top volume during the most inopportune moments. Eventually, hearse-stealing will be added to her résumé.

When her father dies in a work accident, Ola is charged by her mother, who does not speak English and is the sole caregiver of her son, with bringing the body back from Dublin. Despite her age, she is (too) easily able to thwart officious bureaucrats in the Irish capital, including the job agency agent (Arkadiusz Jakubik), her father’s employer and the coroner. So unfamiliar is Ola with her father, that she cannot identify his body without calling her mother to inquire about birthmarks.

Ola’s street smarts work to her advantage as she effortlessly breaks into company offices, ransacks her father’s locker and confronts the latter’s pregnant mistress, Sara (Cosmina Stratan), a Romanian immigrant. In fact, Ola ends up helping Sara, who is the victim of sexual harassment in her workplace.

Due to a technicality and the difficulties in proving poor working conditions, there is no money resulting from the accident, but Ola learns her father has put cash aside for her. This contributes toward Ola’s emotional coming to terms with his absenteeism.

When she accomplishes her mission, Ola discovers that her tear ducts do indeed function!

I Never Cry is relatively clear-sighted about economic and social realities in the “new” Europe. There is not much room here for nonsense about “freedom” and “democracy” and the wonders of the “free market.”

However, the film exhibits an undue and unnecessary chilliness. Various factors feed into this phenomenon, which is widespread. Particularly in eastern Europe, the artists have a terror of anything that smacks of “social realism,” because of the mistaken association of artistic and psychological realism with Stalinism. In addition, there is the unhappy influence of various trends at

present that identify coldness and brutality with getting to the “heart of things.” Director Domalewski works a little too hard at being “hip” and “cool,” causing the film to lack a certain subtlety and warmth. These are indications that the filmmaker is still under the sway of a difficult cultural situation—and that includes his obvious nod to identity politics: Ola is an unconquerable heroine.

All the actors perform well within the confines of their narrowly defined roles. *I Never Cry*, to its credit, does point to the phenomenon of “Euro-orphans.” In Poland and elsewhere, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of children grow up without one or both parents, as the latter have been forced to emigrate out of economic necessity. Ola’s hardness is the result in part of the undigested pain of her orphan status. She has suffered an emotional short-circuiting, which cannot be easily worked through because of her stunted, stifled existence.

NGOs estimate that in European Union member states like Romania, Bulgaria and Poland, for example, 500,000 to 1 million children have been affected. Since joining the EU in 2004, Poland has experienced one of the largest emigrations in its postwar history. In addition, Polish migrant workers in Ireland face serious levels of exploitation, characterized by “zero hour” contracts, wage theft, discrimination and often hazardous working conditions.

As Ola discovers, her father’s life meant nothing to his employer, who threw a few euros at her after the Personal Injury Assessment Board Report denied any compensation. The Polish worker could be legally considered a non-person because he had switched shifts with a colleague. “Hard to get to know someone when they’re not here,” gloats his boss. A dead body in the workplace was barely an inconvenience, as apparently no serious investigation as to the cause of the accident was performed. Another migrant worker becomes a faceless statistic.

Domalewski provides a snapshot of a specific condition. The film gives no indication of much insight or even interest into the source of the eastern European malaise. Many Polish artists no doubt despise the foul Law and Justice Party (PiS) government, which is ferociously authoritarian, anti-communist and anti-cultural, but they don’t yet see a way out of the present impasse.



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