

Take Me Somewhere Nice: Young and reckless energy

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Written and directed by Ena Sendijarevic

Take Me Somewhere Nice was written and directed by Ena Sendijarevic (born 1987), an Amsterdam-based Bosnian filmmaker and screenwriter. It is her first feature film.

A teenage girl, Alma (Sara Luna Zoric), living in the Netherlands with her mother, returns to her native Bosnia to visit a father, now seriously ill, whom she hardly knows.

Her cousin Emir (Ernad Prnjavorac) picks her up at the airport, but, apart from that, ignores Alma, including her requests that he drive her to her father's house in a town some distance away. He is too busy, Emir asserts, although he is unemployed. He seems wary of this visitor from a wealthier part of Europe, and the wariness makes him indifferent or aloof. Their relationship is something of an armed truce, at least to begin with.

Out of the blue, the extroverted Denis (Lazar Dragojevic), Emir's self-styled "intern," pops up, a bit of a "ladies man." Alma learns from Emir that Denis has a girlfriend. Denis makes no secret of the fact that he wants a way out of Bosnia. He flirts with Alma, regularly greeting her as "Holland." She tells him she hates the Netherlands, "Cold weather, cold people." Later, Emir derisively lets Alma know that to Denis, "You're a walking passport."

Eventually, tired of Emir's refusals, Alma sets out on her own by bus for her father's house. This does not turn out well. She manages to miss the bus after a rest stop, lose her suitcase, get herself picked up by a "politician" who offers to pay a hotel bill, and become the kidnap victim of her own cousin and his friend now determined to drive Alma to her destination.

That does not turn out so well either. The engine in Emir's car "melts" en route, and the trio end up walking some distance across the Bosnian countryside. They arrive at the hospital where Alma's father is supposed to be a patient only to discover that he has just passed on. After burying the man, they head back toward the city in his car. Unexpectedly, they make some money.

Tensions rise at a certain point. From the backseat, Alma yells at Denis that no one is "waiting for you in the Netherlands." There are already "too many foreign losers" in that country. In return, Emir angrily demands, "Why are you here?"

They make their way to the sea—Bosnia has only 12 miles of Adriatic coastline!—where new difficulties and pleasures, more or less simultaneously, await them.

Take Me Somewhere Nice is fundamentally a sincere and conscientious effort. It is one of those works whose mildly annoying—in this case, "quirky" and self-conscious—elements are secondary, almost accidental. Sendijarevic's film is a little like each of her central characters, unnecessarily enigmatic, a little irritating at times, but—to a certain extent against its better judgment—essentially good-hearted.

The weaker aspects include shots taken at odd angles, with heads or entire bodies either in the foreground or in the corner of the frame. The contents of the frame are sometimes off-balance, with numerous diagonals. For what reason? At such moments, the film is not unsettling, it simply calls attention to itself.

In the same "ironic" vein, Sendijarevic at times overemphasizes the kitsch, the tackiness of Bosnia's small-town hotels, restaurants, clubs. Will anyone who knows the conditions in such impoverished countries be surprised by any of this? But, more regrettably, this tendency sometimes spills over into a quasi-mockery of the people stuck in the middle of all this tawdriness, as though they were somehow partially to blame.

It is understandable that after all that has happened in Balkans, after all the tragedies of the 1990s and beyond, after all the hyperbole, demagoguery and politically driven emotionalism, Sendijarevic wants to avoid pulling at our heartstrings, she does not want to sweep her audience away. A certain coolness and distance prevail.

Sendijarevic told an interviewer, "I wanted to create an alienating world, which would focus on a construction rather than on reality. I think film has the power to show that the world around us is changeable, that we do not have to live with choices made by others. A stylized film world shows there are different views and by doing so that there are several possible truths."

This is interesting, and what the filmmaker went on to say was even more interesting: "I used [German playwright Bertolt] Brecht's ideas in order to make choices. He uses his *Verfremdungstechnik* [alienation or distancing technique] to

address problems in society. Another filmmaker who played a very important role in this matter is [German filmmaker R.W.] Fassbinder. There is a lot of truth in his approach to minorities and the weaker members of society. He shows how society corrupts them, instead of representing them as heroes.”

For a contemporary filmmaker to refer positively to Brecht and Fassbinder is unusual, and promising. Good intentions and references by themselves, however, do not solve all the problems. If one were to draw out what was common to Brecht and Fassbinder *in their best work*, and these were two very different artists working under very different conditions, with different political histories and outlooks and different artistic methods, one might point to their strong concern with making *existing, bourgeois* social relations “unnatural,” “strange” and thereby something that could be criticized and altered. That is to say, they proceeded from a definite partisanship, with a distinct interest in the oppressed and the progress of their consciousness.

That is not the same thing as a rather arbitrary and even occasionally misanthropic “stylization” intended to show that “there are several possible truths.” When one registers the obvious influence of Jim Jarmusch (*Down by Law, Stranger Than Paradise*) and also that of—by Sendijarevic’s acknowledgement—Finland’s Aki Kaurismäki, New Zealand’s Jane Campion, Mexico’s Carlos Reygadas and Taiwan’s Tsai Ming Liang, all problematic and, as it were, “postmodern” figures, one derives a better sense of the contradictory and even opposed impulses at work in *Take Me Somewhere Nice*, and why it has a certain “push me/pull you” effect.

In any event, in the end, and this also perhaps has something to do with changing, more favorable political and ideological conditions, Sendijarevic’s better instincts prevail. The film sheds some, although not all, of its eccentricity and takes on a warmer, more sympathetic quality.

What the director has to say about shooting her film in Bosnia and about the younger generation there is worth citing. Sendijarevic explains that it was “tough” to be in Bosnia and that “it hurts me to see Bosnia’s current state. It looks like the world has turned its back on her. Sixty percent of the youth is unemployed, nothing is functioning as it is supposed to, the governmental system, that has been set up by the Dayton agreement, is encouraging segregation and corruption.”

Sendijarevic traveled to many parts of Bosnia during the making of the film and it was “heartbreaking,” she said, “to see how many people are struggling to survive. I really wanted to help them, but I felt powerless. For me, this sense of powerlessness has become part of the film.”

Young Bosnians, she asserts, “have little awareness of the stifling world in which they live. They grow up with the idea that they have no influence on anything and that they are inferior, because they are war children. Through the internet, they have access to the world outside of Bosnia and so they always refer to their own world as absurd. They are always

repeating what their nostalgic parents say: In the time of Yugoslavia everything was better.”

The filmmaker says, “I was constantly confronted with the scars and wounds of a nonfunctioning country in which the young generation has been let down.”

Further, Sendijarevic, referring to Alma as “an Alice in Wonderland-like character,” observes that her protagonist “finds herself constantly navigating between opposites: New or Old, Mother or Father, West or East, fast sex or everlasting love, Masculine or Feminine, Dutch Calvinism or Bosnian Islam, iPhone or wild nature, European passport or Yugoslavian soul.” She asks, “What does it mean to be in-between in our ever-globalizing world?”

No doubt there are bitter and frightful particularities in Alma’s situation (and that of Denis and Emir, for that matter). The Bosnian and Balkan population generally has been traumatized over the past three decades, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bloody civil wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which were fueled and incited by the US and Germany. There is no secure, much less popular government in the region. Corruption and crime are pervasive, and the social conditions for the overwhelming majority, as Sendijarevic points out, are simply horrendous. The political-military situation remains a powder keg.

(In the one amusing scene in the film that refers specifically to geopolitics, a couple of Bosnian men are discussing things. “What has Europe ever done for us?” “Nothing.” They go through the list of powers and major countries one by one. “Russia?” “Nothing.” The Americans, the Turks, etc., nobody has done the Bosnians much good, it turns out.)

But it also may be that Sendijarevic underestimates the extent to which the younger generation *globally* is still at sea, looking for a new orientation, for some stable, coherent political and moral reference point. Many young people, refugees or not, from the Balkans or not, are “in-between” at present, disgusted by the existing set-up and not yet having found an alternative. This “in-between-ness” is bound up with the “on-the-eve” quality of the present moment.

In any case, in *Take Me Somewhere Nice*, Sendijarevic has accomplished much of what she set out to do, “to make a young, playful film, to translate the young and reckless energy of the trio in a fresh and energetic cinema language.” And that genuinely counts for something.



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