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DVD SCANS

It's been a long wait for 'Before the Rain'

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"I believe that once the work is completed, the artist has nothing more to say," reads a statement from director Milcho Manchevski on the DVD of his 1994 debut film *Before the Rain* (Criterion Collection, \$40). But the Macedonian filmmaker then admits he is going to go ahead and talk at length about his film anyway, "simply to keep a few things from being forgotten."

Manchevski has fallen out of sight since his debut, but that takes nothing away from the movie, which remains as powerful and beguiling as it was 14 years ago. On a commentary track accompanying the film, Columbia University film professor Annette Insdorf calls *Before the Rain* "one of the greatest first features in this history of cinema," and she's not exaggerating.

Told in three segments titled "Words," "Faces" and "Pictures," the movie intercuts the stories of three separate characters -- an orthodox Christian monk (Gregoire Colin) who has taken a vow of silence; a photographer (Rade Serbedzija) covering the Bosnian war and a London magazine editor (the late Katrin Cartlidge) -- to create a circular narrative about the futility of violence and the perpetual cycle of reprisals it generates.

Manchevski, who has only directed two films since *Before the Rain* (along with an episode of HBO's *The Wire*), joins Insdorf on the commentary and talks about the comparisons to *Pulp Fiction* that greeted the film, which used a similar narrative structure that folds into itself at the end. The director says he purposely avoided trying to explain the conflicts behind the Bosnian war or even identifying which characters were Macedonian or Albanian, saying that the movie was not meant to be a documentary, and nobody cares about the differences between the Montagues and the Capulets either. The tragedy is that both sides end up killing their own.

Insdorf points out the numerous circular symbols scattered throughout the film, as well as the devices Manchevski uses to link the three stories, from Beastie Boys music to the repeated act of swatting a fly. She also points out that Manchevski's script is so well thought-out that the three segments can be viewed out of order, and the movie still works perfectly.

The typically fine video transfer from Criterion is accompanied by several featurettes, including a recent interview with Serbedzija, who has developed a nice career playing bad guys in Hollywood films, along with a 1993 documentary about the making of the film and a collection of stills, storyboards and trailers, including an alternate trailer Manchevski cut when the one Universal Pictures came up with did not please him. For some curious reason, Universal never got around to releasing *Before the Rain* on DVD, even though it was an Oscar nominee for Best Foreign Film. The Criterion Collection's excellent disc finally corrects that problem.