

"In His Homeland, Filming War Is Itself a Battle"
by JOAN DUPONT

STAVICA, Macedonia - Hemmed in by Kosovo to the north, Greece to the south, Albania to the west and Bulgaria to the east, and lacking any outlet to the sea, Macedonia swelters in the sun, a dust basin.

It is late July, a few miles from the Greek border; nothing moves; tobacco crops wilt in the fields. Behind a Byzantine church, men, their shirts caked in blood, are strewn on the bald mountainside. Shots ring out. Orders are shouted in English, Italian, Serbo-Croatian and Macedonian. Milcho Manchevski, the Macedonian director of the acclaimed, Oscar-nominated 1994 film "Before the Rain," is at it again, putting the tortured history of his homeland on the screen.

A country of two million, Macedonia is notorious for its bloody war of liberation from the Ottoman Turks in 1912 and remembered for a devastating earthquake in 1963. It is not known for filmmaking. But prowling the set wearing red running shorts and headgear fit for a desert field commander, Mr. Manchevski is marshaling his multinational cast and crew of 200 for the final push on his second film, "Dust," which he hopes to have ready in time for next spring's Cannes International Film Festival.

Mixing the western film genre and Balkan history, "Dust" tells the story of two brothers at war over gold and a woman in turn-of-the-century Arizona.

But like "Before the Rain," which traveled between London and Macedonia in an elegantly circular plot, "Dust" plays subtle games with time and geography. The brothers, portrayed by Joseph Fiennes (the Shakespeare of "Shakespeare in Love") and the Australian actor David Wenham, find echoes of their personal war in the Balkan violence of 1912-13. "I call it an Ottoman eastern," Mr. Manchevski says.

The story opens in contemporary New York with an encounter between an elderly woman (Rosemary Murphy) and a robber (Adrien Lester), whose stories merge with the saga of the brothers: In the West at the start of the century, Elijah (Mr. Fiennes) and Luke (Mr. Wenham) fall in love with Lilith, a woman from the brothels played by the French actress Anne Brochet ("Tous les Matins du Monde"). The three resurface in war-torn Macedonia, where, as one character says, "centuries don't follow each other; they coexist;" and Elijah and Luke must fight it out with the Turks, interfering neighbors and assorted bounty hunters.

Like "Before the Rain," "Dust" has a dense script, mapped with conflict and carnage. But, says Mr. Manchevski, "We're not showing the worst of what went on during the Balkan wars -- violence that continues even now."

Mr. Wenham, whose Luke wins and loses everything -- the girl, the gold -- was struck by Mr. Manchevski's pursuit of historic truth. "One night, I was home in Sydney and about 3 a.m. this fax came in," he says. "He was sending me a reading list of books on the Balkans -- 97 books." "He got the short list," Mr. Manchevski says with a laugh. "Here in Macedonia we have an obsession with history. My obsession was to make this movie; now I'm less obsessed because I'm making it." A co-production among Britain, Italy and Germany, with some financing from Macedonia, "Dust" started out more than five years ago as a project of Robert Redford's Southfork Pictures. But a distribution deal never materialized, and Mr. Manchevski called his travails with "Dust" "crime and punishment."

"We built the film," he recalls, "piece by piece, got people interested, and then it collapsed. At the heart of the issue, Americans were scared of the script. I don't see this script as challenging -- maybe a little more adventurous than most. But it's not 'Last Year at Marienbad.' "

If Mr. Manchevski's narrative style is not quite as oblique as that famously mysterious movie by Alain Resnais, he does admit to a certain desire to surprise the audience. "I want the viewer to feel as people felt when they first saw a Cubist painting," he says. "I want them to put the puzzle together. Filmmaking is

story-telling, but compared to the novel, movies are still stuck in the early 19th century. We haven't made it to James Joyce yet."

While Mr. Manchevski's unorthodox storytelling style may have scared potential investors, it had the opposite effect on Mr. Fiennes. "I committed to 'Dust' early," he says, "because of the quality of the director -- Milcho breaks formats -- and the incredible script. I love the theme of dust; we all end up as dust."

With a schedule that took cast and crew from funky Manhattan to dusty Macedonia, it's been a tough 70-day shoot. And now, with the heat wave, there have been frayed nerves and collapse from sunstroke. The crew works 13-hour days, 6 days a week; in 100-degree heat, they down water and munch watermelon -- and suffer stings from bees attracted by the fruit. This particular day's shoot, of a battle scene, "is one of our easy locations," Mr. Manchevski says with a grin.

On some days, he points out, "We've had to helicopter people onto mountain tops."

Wiry and intense, Mr. Manchevski comes by his toughness naturally. He was born in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, 40 years ago. "I was a real urban kid with a Mohawk haircut," he says. "My mother died when I was 7, my father when I was almost 14. Things happen in my life every seven years. By 18, I wanted to get out."

Raised on comics and American movies -- "the best period, Coppola, Scorsese, Milos Forman" -- he recalls having seen Kurosawa's "Rashomon" on television. "My father said: 'Check out this film. You'll appreciate it when you're older. It's art.' There's a tracking shot of a woodcutter's axe, and I thought, 'This is boring.' I still feel the same thing with art films. They're a little boring, but you take home much more. It's interesting that we bring up 'Rashomon' here, because 'Dust' is made to reflect the way each character tells his story, his truth."

At 18, Mr. Manchevski won a scholarship to the University of Southern Illinois Film School in Carbondale. "The move was devastating," he says. "The sky was so big in Illinois; I couldn't understand people; they couldn't understand me. I was homesick."

Once back home, he had trouble reinte-grating: "There was lots of back stabbing. I moved to America, and if I make films that move between different locations, it may be because in a nice way I have a split personality."

In the United States he took jobs as a house painter and a court interpreter, worked on industrial videos and made a name as a still photographer. He got his break in music videos.

"Arrested Development," which he made with the rap group of the same name, was a hit. "The climax included a photo of a lynching in the South," he says. "For me, violence is like a particular note of music. I deal with it."

Now he has spent half his life in America, and he speaks and writes an original, hyper-real New Yorkese. "They kicked me out," he says, alluding to his early attempts at directing here in his homeland. But these days he is a local hero who splits his time between Skopje and New York.

With the striking success of "Before the Rain," which won the Gold Lion for best film at the Venice Film Festival in 1994, he had every reason to believe making a second film would be a breeze. But with the problems getting it off the ground, and its multiple locations (in addition to the exteriors in New York and Macedonia, interiors were to be shot in Germany), "Dust" has proved to be a hard slog. Even today, as he fiddles with the dials on his video assist monitor, which has stuttered to a stop, he chants, "Shake it up, baby." Suddenly the scene he has been shooting comes into focus. "This is high-precision work," he says. "You have to coordinate what goes on at every level, otherwise the complexity doesn't register."

Indeed, the complexity registers. Above the bloodied "corpses" and crimson

Ottoman flags, backed against a cliff, a woman is giving birth; between the rocks, a mercenary shoots his way out.

The woman is the Macedonian actress Nikolina Kujaca ("Welcome to Sarajevo"); the mercenary is Mr. Wenham, whose Colt pistol has just come unhinged in his hand. The filming comes to an abrupt halt.

Mr. Manchevski yells out to the producer, Chris Auty: "Houston, we have a problem. This gun has to be repaired!"

"Milcho wanted antique guns and they're fragile," Mr. Auty says. "He's decided I'm the one to solve these problems. It's his way of saying we don't have enough money. A \$12 million budget may seem small by U.S. standards, but it's the biggest in the Balkans."

Mr. Auty started preproduction on "Dust" in the spring of last year. "Then, the Kosovo crisis broke out across the border, and no insurance company would cover us, so we came to a standstill. Milcho said, 'You've betrayed me,' which is something he says often," Mr. Auty says, sighing. "Everybody knows Milcho is difficult. He's sophisticated, literate; he has a fantastic eye and a gift for communicating his vision, but he believes in fighting."

Mr. Manchevski's collaborators seem willing to make allowances, however. "Milcho is under pressure to finish, and people are working slower due to exhaustion," the production designer, David Munns, says. "He does have a reputation for being difficult, and I don't think he is; but why shouldn't he be? You have to go a little bit further to make something special happen, and that's Milcho: he takes things a little bit further."

To Ms. Brochet, he is the embodiment of his two main characters, Elijah and Luke.

"He is a man at war," she says. "That's what gives him his vitality."

As for Mr. Manchevski, he concedes that making "Dust" had had some of the elements of a war. "But," he adds, "actually, being on this set is much quieter than living in New York."

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