

FEAR EATS THE SOUL

By Marina Kostova

Milcho Manchevski's *Shadows* is a beautiful and tormenting film. It moves you, as if your blood is aching, and it seems you could cry for days. It has the emotional power of *Before the Rain* (with the effect of a hard blow to the stomach) and the complexity of *Dust*. With his third film, Manchevski establishes himself as a mature auteur who has a superior control over form and a masterful skill in dosage of emotion.

Shadows is about the fear of intimacy with the other (but actually fear of death) which permeates human existence to such a degree that it makes any complete intimacy impossible. Neither the mother with the child, nor the child with the mother, nor the husband with the wife. You cannot defeat the fear. The only thing left is to summon up the courage and try to get closer to the other, even if you lose him. Because that is the only way to have a smile along with fear at the end of the day. Life is, says Manchevski, what happens between "How are you going to live without me" and "Smile, one day you'll be gone."

And it is not a coincidence that Manchevski has picked the horror genre as a template to tell the story. Immanent human fear is most clearly articulated through this form.

Shadows is a story of Lazar Perkov (Borce Nacev), a young doctor with a seemingly happy life, an attractive wife (Filareta Atanasova) and a sweet boy, with a strong mother (Sabina Ajrula-Tozija) and a gentle father (Dime Iliev). He survives a car crash and begins to encounter strange characters: Kalina, an old woman with a wolf (Ratka Radmanovic), Gerasim, a middle-aged grumpy neighbor with a baby (Salaetin Bilal) and the beautiful Menka (Vesna Stanojevska). They all want him to return that which is not his, even though he does not know what that is. His nightmarish search for himself takes him to his ancestors' debts, which he will have to repay himself - to redeem them, but also himself. The shadows of forgotten ancestors will pull Lazar out of the sterile world where Lazar's mother keeps him; he will start to live for real.

It is almost impossible to watch Lazar and Menka separately in the film. Borce Nacev and Vesna Stanojevska are an exciting couple; they establish a connection that is both warm and sexy, funny and touching, and you cannot help loving them. They are our two new stars, new heroes.

Sabina Ajrula-Tozija has a monumental role as Dr. Vera Perkova, a rock of a mother who overshadows everything in front of herself, most of all her own child. She is the ghost mother who freezes the child in all of us in fear. At the same time, she projects the biggest fear of any woman - the fear of her own child. One of the cathartic moments is when Vera curses at her own son and throws him out. Sabina plays it as an eruption of suppressed energy - all the ambivalence of motherhood comes out, all the love and fear, possessiveness and anger, and after all that - tremendous relief. A counterpoint to Sabina-Vera, as if a masculine principle, is Dime Iliev as the husband Ignyat Perkov. He

is gentle and pragmatic, a man who has understood the wisdom that his son has yet to understand - take from your dearest only what they can give you and be content with it.

Salaetin Bilal as Gerasim and Ratka Radmanovic as Kalina are iconic presences, archetypes for all our grandfathers and grandmothers, they are the pillars upon which the film rests.

Sex is connecting tissue in *Shadows*. And it is not a coincidence - it is only through sex that one gets an immediate (even though short-lived) confirmation that intimacy with the other is possible.

Skopje is portrayed in *Shadows* as a metropolis with all the virtues and vices of urban living anywhere in the world. The pictures of our daily life, the habits, the conditions we live in have all been conveyed as in an anthropological study - Manchevski does not judge (the way a Westerner would, or even the way one of our own living abroad would), he only states the facts. This metropolis is part of us, it is part of our family. We are ambivalent towards it, the way we are ambivalent towards our family - we both love it and are suffocated by it, we want to run away, and we always come back.

In a masterly way Fabio Cianchetti expresses the suffocating quality of the big city with his camera, a suffocating quality which at the same time is a reflection of the inner turmoil smothering Lazar. The production designer David Munns, who knows Macedonia better than most Macedonians do, should be credited with giving the images in *Shadows* a cosmopolitan spirit. He has worked with Manchevski on all three of his films, and is capable of perfectly transforming Manchevski's story into a multi-layered image. Elisabetta Montaldo's authentically realistic costumes are an inseparable part of the image; Montaldo captures every character with her clothes, including the extras. Ryan Shore's music and the soundscape are so rich that they become another character in the film.

Shadows is told the old-fashioned way, unrolling slowly as the tension grows through small details. This is precisely what makes the film rich and complex - and at the end it leaves you with the feeling of being completely wrapped within it. Manchevski has a rare gift of articulating his emotion in his work and sharing it with the viewer. This matters to the viewer, he trusts Manchevski. As in any true art.

After the Skopje and world theatrical premiere of the film last Friday, there was a long applause that went on and on. With *Shadows*, Manchevski finally and truly returned home.