



Filareta Atanasova (left) as Gordana and Vesna Stanojevska as Menka in "Shadows", the 2007 film directed by Macedonia filmmaker Milcho Manchevski. "Shadows" finally makes its North American theatrical release debut this Friday, opening exclusively at the Cinema Village in New York City. (Photo ©Bavaria Film International)

CINEMA THIS WEEKEND IN NEW YORK CITY

Sex, Death, Eroticism And Psychological Horror Amidst "Shadows" From Director Milcho Manchevski

By [Omar P.L. Moore](#)/The Popcorn Reel
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Initially, "Shadows" filmmaker Milcho Manchevski said he wanted to make "just a scary film -- very visceral -- a scary film that was not political or complex."

The Macedonian director, born in the town of Skopje in 1959, said he loved scary movies but the kind that were innovative. It became clear to him however, that "Shadows", written and directed by Mr. Manchevski and shot in the small southeastern European country of Macedonia, wasn't going to be your average scary movie. "It became sort of a dialogue with the dead. And that's what made it personal for myself. And that, in itself at the same time it's quite universal, because it's one of the main concerns of most cultures, most civilizations. It's very archetypal."

Mr. Manchevski, who for 20 years has been living in New York City where he heads the Film Directing Department at New York University's Tisch School Of The Arts' Graduate Department, spoke via telephone yesterday to The Popcorn Reel about "Shadows", which was released in numerous countries back in 2007 and will finally make its North American theatrical release debut on Friday, opening exclusively at the Cinema Village in New York City. Mr. Manchevski put Macedonia on Oscar's cinematic map when in 1995 his debut feature "Before The Rain" (1994) became the first film from the country to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. "Before The Rain", a highly-acclaimed film, won top awards at the Venice Film Festival, the David di Donatello Awards (aka the "Italian Oscars") and the Independent Spirit Awards, among more than 30 awards.

The idea for "Shadows" literally came from a moment of great levity one night in New York City. "I was sitting with a friend of mine who was a diplomat in New York at the time. We're sitting at the Brooklyn Promenade and looking at the Manhattan skyline and we're laughing, 'would you imagine ghosts in this park?' And that's where it started."

While the director did say that "Shadows", an erotic drama about death, sex and psychological states of perception, was "a scary film seen through the eyes of European glasses", the film is also an absorbing and thought-provoking look at the willingness or lack thereof, to confront death and deal with concerns surrounding the departed, something that Mr. Manchevski said was reflective of contemporary society. "Shadows" stars first-time feature film actors Borce Nacev (pronounced "Bor-che") and Vesna Stanojevska, who is also a harpist in the Macedonia National Opera. Miss Stanojevska, said the director, only had the experience of appearing in one television commercial prior to being on the big screen in "Shadows". Miss Stanojevska plays Menska, a doctor's assistant who translates messages. In "Shadows" the actress bears a strong resemblance to Isabella Rossellini, a likeness that grows as the film moves along. Mr. Nacev, whom in a "making of" documentary for the film confessed that he was bothered by the fact that "Shadows" was shot out of sequence, revealed that he had to watch previous filmed scenes to get a sense of the emotion he had to bring to the present scene he was filming. Mr. Nacev plays the film's protagonist Lazar, a medical doctor at a hospital who survives a nasty car crash.

"Borce emerged as just really the best for this part," Mr. Manchevski said, citing that he had scoured the entire country of Macedonia, which is the size of the American state of Vermont, to find his actor and actress. He added that acting neophytes were "both a blessing and a drawback." There was also a naturalness to Miss Stanojevska that worked well for "Shadows".

Not surprisingly, Milcho Manchevski is a meticulous planner. He storyboarded "Shadows" with between 1,000 and 2,000 of his own drawings.

"I believe in doing my homework. I was a straight-A student."



Left photo: Vesna Stanojevska as Menka in Milcho Manchevski's "Shadows". Right photo: Borce Nacev as Lazar in Mr. Manchevski's film. (Photo ©Bavaria Film International)

Obviously the director was careful about the objectives and impact of "Shadows". "The key was not to make a film that's going to jolt you, but a film that's gonna creep with you and stay with you for a long time, like something you see from the corner of your eye," said Mr. Manchevski, who prior to the discussion was told that his phone was playing tricks on him. "I'll have to see about getting that fixed," he said. Not short of a sense of humor, he gave a wise piece of advice about not buying a particular brand of cellular phone. The director, who also directed the MTV Best Video of 1992 "Tennessee", by hip-hop artists Arrested Development, also likened "Shadows" to a nightmare you wake up from that lingers and won't leave you alone. "And to achieve that there's a lot of repetition. In a way, the idea was to make it feel a little bit like Ravel's Bolero. You take a theme or a few themes and then you keep repeating them and they grow bigger and bigger."

Mr. Manchevski shared an observation that reflected the type of effect he was aiming for in his latest film. "Bergman's films were scary films for me. Even though you wouldn't find them on the horror shelf." Films like "Autumn Sonata", "Persona" and "Cries And Whispers" were cited by the director and his interviewer for their scare factor. "So creating that visceral dialogue, that visceral reaction, in a way is sort of the basic but also the most difficult task an artist can have. If you're doing a comedy people are laughing or they're not. If you're making a scary film people are scared or not. There's no middle ground."

Today's horror films and psychological thrillers are a long way from the imagination and power of past classics like "Psycho", "Rosemary's Baby" or "The Exorcist", with what is termed "torture porn". That type of filmmaking is "not lazy but it's easy", according to Mr. Manchevski. "It depends on what kind of film you're making. Even in doing a gore film . . . there [are] various degrees of how well you do that. I remember seeing the first "Halloween" in film school (at the Department of Cinema and Photography at Southern Illinois University, where he graduated in 1982.) And I was working at the theater [in Illinois] at the time. I saw the film and everybody was screaming. Virtually hanging from the ceiling. So I was like, 'I better see the next screening to see why it's so effective and why is it that it worked so well.' And then I realized that . . . the craft was definitely there. There was something very direct about it. If you recall, the first "Halloween" (directed by John Carpenter) had almost no blood at all in it."

Though he has made just three feature films (including "Dust" in 2001), with an interval of roughly seven years between films Milcho Manchevski has a very good reason as to why more features aren't on his resume. "I handcraft the films," he said. "And I don't know if it's good or bad. It has its pluses and its minuses," said the director, who mentioned that just the physical work on a film takes a year to two years of his life. "I don't like doing industrial films. I don't like just rushing them through the assembly line and then into the theater and then out. I believe that by investing a piece of yourself in the work in general that will somehow resonate from the screen and stay with the viewer." The director finances all of his films in Europe even though he lives in the Big Apple. He mentioned that "Europe is a funny place for financing films", citing the balance between "half-distributor, half refugee", although in Europe "there is much more of a respect for the author." Still, he noted that "Europe is slowly becoming a little more Hollywood-ized." Mr. Manchevski lamented the Hollywood way, saying that "granted there are films that you need this kind of industrial approach but there are also films that are created by one or two or several filmmakers expressing a particular point of view that get ruined by the money, the suits, the studios or the producers changing, tinkering with the films too much."



Filmmaker and commercial director Milcho Manchevski. (Photo from Mr. Manchevski's Facebook photo album)

Mr. Manchevski joked about having his films remade, hinting that he would disengage himself from the remaking process. He said that at one point there were discussions about remaking "Shadows". Earlier in the conversation he had observed that "in development, scriptwriting, script doctoring in Hollywood in general there's so much emphasis put on [explaining] things and, 'do people get it?', and I think it's just overrated. The relevant consideration, he said, is "'do I like the film' -- not 'do I understand the film.'" There are a number of wonderful films where I'm not quite sure what happened one hundred percent but I'm really glad I saw the film. And vice versa, there are like some films where everything is clear but I couldn't care less. So I think that understanding has been

overrated at the expense of feeling and liking the film."

Another reason for the sizable interval between films is that Mr. Manchevski has his hands full with many other more interesting projects which he prefers working on, such as his direction of short films, long-form works, art and experimental cinema pieces. He has directed numerous television commercials, the most recent of which can be seen [here](#). He is currently working on a photo exhibition art project entitled "Five Drops Of Dream", five photos in a film strip. The photo exhibition has some one hundred film strips, or a total of five hundred frames. The artwork exhibition will be completed for display later this year.

The director is asked about the sex scenes in "Shadows", each of which is distinct and not without meaning in the film's context. If comedy is difficult to film and convey so too are love or sex scenes. "It's difficult because it's such a personal moment and here you are doing it first, in front a lot of people and second, in front of a lot of people who are going to see you in the future. And you need to make it look very intimate, like only two people together. I just put everything on the table, discuss it. First of all, everything was described in the script in detail so the actors knew what they needed to do, so they spent a lot of time preparing for it. And they had their own little dynamic going on as we were shooting," the director said.

Mr. Manchevski then remembered something that happened during filming. After rehearsals with a partially-clothed Vesna Stanojevska, the director recalled that "we were filming the scene where [Miss Stanojevska] is showing her breasts . . . and then as we were preparing to roll again, the microphones were on but we weren't rolling yet and you hear Vesna saying, 'Well, why are you being that way? Just *look* at them before I show them to everybody.' Which I thought was really sweet and very funny."

One of the sex scenes, Mr. Manchevski revealed, "that is particularly important and dear to me . . . is where they're having sex and laughing. Which is something that you know, you very seldom see in films. And I think it's, it's a great way to deal with it, a great way to approach . . . love and sex."

"Shadows" opens exclusively in New York City at the Cinema Village this Friday, January 30. The director hopes that the film will get a wider theatrical run, spreading to other major U.S. markets. Cinema Village is located at 22 East 12th Street in New York City. For tickets, telephone 212-924-3363 or visit www.cinemavillage.com. A written film review of "Shadows" and a [Popcorn Reel YouTube](#) review of the film will appear here on Friday.

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