

Cubist of the silver screen

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To say that *Dust* is too brutal is to miss the point about Milcho Manchevski's much-anticipated second feature film. Yes, it seems as if he might have had a helping hand from George Romero (*Day of the Dead*) this time around, but there is so much more to enjoy in *Dust* than the violence (which is first-rate, however, it must be said).

"In many ways, this is a film about finding the affection in yourself, finding affection for a neighbour, for other people, people you don't know. And that is contrasted with brutality," says the slender, blue-eyed Manchevski, who showed up for an interview dressed in jeans and a flowered T-shirt. "The world is often very brutal. But I thought that these two should be contrasted so that we are faced with these two extremes."

Manchevski's first feature, *Before the Rain*, won the Golden Lion at Venice in 1994 and was nominated for an Oscar for best foreign film. After such international success, it might be expected that his second feature would succumb to sophomore jinx and fail to miss the mark. But *Dust* actually marks an advance in Manchevski's development as a filmmaker.

"In this film, I set the bar very high. It needed to feel very free and very loose, but actually there was a lot of meticulous work in constructing the story, the relationships and the absurdities of the story," he says. "There is a danger that some people, specifically critics, will probably miss on that one because they want things to fall into particular, neatly classified drawers so it makes their job easier."

Dust is indeed hard to categorize. It is a story of a story. An old woman (Rosemary Murphy) in present-day New York holds a would-be thief (Adrian Lester) at gunpoint, and forces him to listen to her tale of two Oklahoma cowboy brothers, Luke (David Wenham) and Elijah (Joseph Fiennes), and their violent estrangement over the alluring Lilith (Anne Brochet). Most of the Wild West portions of the story are set in early 20th-century Macedonia, when it was still part of the Ottoman Empire.

But Manchevski sees no obstacle in mixing such disparate themes and settings. In fact, the interconnection between the seemingly unconnected is a central part of his vision. "We think this belongs to one century, and that belongs to a completely different period in history," he notes, "and actually they happened more or less simultaneously, such as the Wild West, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, cubism, Sigmund Freud, the invention of the airplane, cinema."

Manchevski's interest in non-linear time partly comes from dissatisfaction with prevailing modes of filmmaking. "I feel that mainstream narrative film has been stuck in a rudimentary stage in terms of what stories it tells, and more importantly, how it tells them," he says.

"I was interested in exploring how we can tell stories in a different way -- without going completely crazy about it -- but still keeping the film very playful, very alive and entertaining. I don't think you need to suffer as you go through art. But at the same time, I don't think bubble gum for the mind is very entertaining either," he says.

"The films we see, the mainstream Hollywood films, are very pagan in what they teach me as a viewer. It's all about victory, revenge, about getting the girl, getting the money. Very little of it is about giving and sharing in the true sense of the word. Very little of it is about real sacrifice."

Recent events in Macedonia have tempted some to see *Dust* as a metaphor for what is happening there now, but Manchevski categorically denies that. "It's not really a film about Macedonia," he says. "I could have set it somewhere else and it would have been pretty much the same film. The film was fully shot and most of it edited before what's happening now started happening. If there are any parallels, they would only be because the film touches on some universal themes that are as valid in the middle of a war as they would have been five years before."

The situation in Macedonia has prompted Manchevski to write open letters expressing his political views, but he is unequivocal about the role of politics in art. "I subscribe to Kurt Vonnegut when he says that if an artist tries to bring his political opinion into his work, he ends up making crap," the director says. "I think art should be telling a different kind of truth, not the CNN op-ed kind of truth. We looked at the story we wanted to tell as a cubist painter would look at an object, and then picked it apart to its basic elements and put it back together in a slightly different way, where it has resemblance to the original object, but it's also much more creative, much more playful, much more vested with intellectual work."

In an earlier life, Manchevski had established a reputation as one of America's top music-video directors, winning an MTV best-video award for his work with rap group Arrested Development. Making music videos taught him two important things relevant to feature films; one was very practical, the other had more to do with aesthetics.

The practical aspect involved how to work fast, how to plan and to prep shots, to execute in the very little time you have. Aesthetically, he learned how to tell a story in visuals. "Music video doesn't have much dialogue," he says. "Sometimes people get trapped into a spiffy image, into quick editing and they end up sometimes with a film, but they've never worked with actors before. The performances end up being wooden."

Working with actors is, along with writing and editing, Manchevski's favourite thing about making movies. "I've heard stories about his being difficult in other areas, but working with actors, he is the best director I have ever worked with," Murphy says. "He treats actors the way they should be treated. He treats them as if they are important. Directors often push you around as if you were furniture, but with Milcho you felt you were flowering."

Which is apt, really, because in the end *Dust* is about how love can blossom even in the hardest of hearts.

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