



Just "Before the Rain"

War hits close to home for Macedonia's most celebrated filmmaker.



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Last spring, Benny Castrati used to sit late at night at Pristina restaurants and at his family's large white stucco home with wood trim, entertaining guests over glasses of wine and too many cigarettes with tall tales about his encounters with the glamorous and the celebrated. He would, for instance, frequently remind dinner guests of his friendship with actress Vanessa Redgrave, and their plans for a major film festival in Kosovo's modest provincial capital. Castrati, a 30-year-old Kosovar Albanian actor with a thick head of dark hair, a goatee and a mischievous, cocky charm, had a minor role in the award-winning film "Before the Rain." The film is an aching beautiful story about a photojournalist covering the Bosnian war who comes home to his native Macedonia only to witness its dissolution into civil war.

One month ago, Benny Castrati, his wife and five-month-old baby daughter crossed the frontier between Kosovo and Macedonia as refugees. They are now living in a borrowed house in the southwestern Macedonian city of Struga, on the northern shore of Lake Ohrid, not far from the Orthodox monastery -- Sveti Jovan Kaneo -- that serves as the backdrop to the film that made Castrati a local celebrity.

Five years after it was released, "Before the Rain," directed by the Macedonian-born Milcho Manchevski, has never seemed closer to reality. In the past six weeks, hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanians have fled Serbian forces for safety. More than 160,000 have ended up in Macedonia, causing ethnic tensions between Macedonia's own Slavic and ethnic Albanian population to flicker. It's not hard to imagine those tensions igniting into civil war. The fact that one of the film's own actors has become a refugee of the latest Balkan ethnic conflict is only one of many ironies that surround the film. Its star, actor Rade Serbedzija, who played the photojournalist, is also a refugee -- from the Serbian capital Belgrade, which he fled for London during the war between Croatia and Serbia (1991-1995). Serbedzija, a Serb born in Croatia, has two children with his Croatian first wife. He told me in an interview in 1997 that, given the fact his own children were half-Croat, he couldn't generate enough nationalist zeal to please the Serbian authorities. Having received death threats, he felt he had no future in Serbia, so he left.

"Before the Rain" is moving because it transcends the "war is hell" genre by decoding the real tragedy of civil war: the interconnectedness of the people who find themselves killing each other. The film opens on the lush vineyard steppes of the Saint Jovan Kaneo monastery, when a young, dark-eyed Orthodox monk (played by Gregoire Colin) finds himself unexpectedly sheltering a Macedonian Albanian teenage girl (played by Labina Matevska) in his Spartan monk's cell. She is fleeing some sort of trouble -- it's not clear initially what. A roving band of drunk paramilitary soldiers armed with Uzis comes to the monastery looking for her. As they tear the place up in an orgy of violence, the Slav monk and the Albanian girl flee for the hills. (It turns out the paramilitaries think the girl is responsible for killing a young shepherd, although it never becomes clear who really did it.) Meanwhile, a celebrated Macedonian-born war photographer, Aleksandar (played by Serbedzija), has just returned from the war in Bosnia to his base in London. He tries to convince his married British lover, a beautiful photo editor played by Katrin Cartlidge, to go back to Macedonia with him. We see her flipping through photographs he's taken -- including some of the young monk. She can't make up her mind if she should go, and he returns to Macedonia without her. Shortly after, we discover she's pregnant with the

photographer's child. (In one scene, we see how the war in the faraway Balkans somehow stretches to claim lives in a London restaurant.) Back in Macedonia, Aleksandar returns to his small village, where his childhood love, Hana, an ethnic Albanian, asks him to help protect her daughter -- the same girl we saw hiding in the beginning of the film. Each individual's story comes together in the devastating final scenes, shot on a hillside not far from where the Kosovars are now sheltering in [refugee camps](#).

"I feel that any civil war is killing your own," Milcho Manchevski, the film's 40-year-old director, said by telephone recently from a hotel room in Florence, Italy. "It's the evil from within. You don't realize at first that you are killing your own kin. It's how the war started in what used to be Yugoslavia."

Manchevski grew up in Macedonia [when it was part of Yugoslavia](#), studied architecture, and then went to film school at Southern Illinois University. He made music videos in New York for MTV, and then began writing "Before the Rain" in 1991, the year war broke out between Croatia and Serbia. His first and only feature to date, "Before the Rain" won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1994, was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1995 and won the Independent Spirit Award in Los Angeles in 1996. Manchevski now divides his time between New York and his house in Skopje, where he says the war in Kosovo and the NATO air strikes have come within earshot.

"I heard planes and explosions every night," Manchevski says of his recent visit to Skopje, where he is organizing an exhibit of his photos at its Museum of Contemporary Art, on a grassy hill near the ruins of an old fortress. "My house is 15 miles from where there is a war. Of course everyone is scared."

While the film deals with tensions and friendships between Macedonia's Slavic Orthodox population and its Albanian Muslims, Manchevski says "Before the Rain" is not really about the Balkans at all.

"It's not a documentary," he insists. "It's not even about Yugoslavia or Macedonia. It's about the feeling of waiting for something to explode. Waiting for something terrible to happen. Someone came up to me at a showing in Seattle once and said this very same story could have happened in India. I think that's right -- it's universal, the human condition."

Manchevski says he left some things in the film ambiguous on purpose.

"I left the first killing off-screen, because it really doesn't matter who started it. Whoever did it, it is not a reason to start a war."

Despite the ever-increasing proximity of the war to Macedonia, Manchevski says he does not think the war will come here.

"The people I know would prefer a civil society where it doesn't matter what your nationality is. But it goes both ways."

Upon reflection, the meaning of the Macedonian photographer's British girlfriend flipping through his photographs in the film becomes clear. She represents those of us in the West reading the newspapers and looking at photographs of the faraway Balkan war, surprised to find that it affects us more directly than we thought.

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