

Film Explores a Timeless 'Dust' Swirling in the Balkans

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SKOPJE, Macedonia--Even before his new movie, "Dust," has had its premiere, Milcho Manchevski has been asked whether the gunslinging American frontier character Luke--who gets caught up in a 1903 Balkan uprising--symbolizes NATO.

The answer is that he doesn't--not quite, anyway.

"He's not NATO, because the script was written before NATO came to have their fun in the Balkans," the Macedonian-born director said, referring to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's campaign two years ago to protect ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, a province of Serbia, the main Yugoslav republic.

"But once the bombing happened," Manchevski continued, "it was impossible to ignore it. We had it in the back of our minds. Everything you see influences you, even subconsciously. I guess I was a little more careful in portraying the fact that Luke is absolutely ignorant of what's going on."

Like his first film, "Before the Rain," which shared the Golden Lion for best film at the 1994 Venice Film Festival, "Dust" is a tale that plays games with time and geography. The movie, which will premiere in the summer at this year's festival, is set in contemporary New York City and the Macedonia of a century ago, which at the time was part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

The tale of the misadventures of Luke, played by David Wenham, and his brother Elijah, played by Joseph Fiennes (Shakespeare in "Shakespeare in Love"), is on one level the story of foreigners lost in a situation they cannot comprehend.

Luke and Elijah fight over a woman, and then Luke leaves America for Paris, but he "can't quite fit in, and then looks for another place," said Manchevski, 41, who is based in New York City. "He actually sort of stumbles into the last frontier--not 'the Wild West' but 'the Wild East.'

"It's a place where you can still live as a bounty hunter, you can carry a gun. That's Macedonia at the turn of the century." Elijah eventually catches up with him.

Loosely based on history from the final years of the Ottomans, "Dust" can be seen as an artistic commentary on the wars that tore the Yugoslav federation as it broke up in the 1990s.

In some respects, the film foreshadows the current fighting in Macedonia--which seceded peacefully from the Yugoslav federation in 1991--between ethnic Albanian guerrillas and government forces. The guerrillas say they are fighting for equal rights for ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, while the government charges that they are trying to split the country.

At least one-quarter of Macedonia's 2 million population is ethnic Albanian, and most members of the minority live in western or northwestern parts of the country, close to Albania and Kosovo.

"Dust" jumps back and forth across space and time to tell two ultimately intertwined stories: one about an old woman and a burglar in New York, the other about the two American frontier brothers-turned-enemies caught up in battles between Macedonian Slav revolutionaries, Turkish soldiers and ethnic Albanian and Greek gangs.

The main action, as a trailer for "Dust" puts it, takes place in "the Wild East, where the centuries don't follow one another--they coexist."

As Manchevski sat at a sidewalk cafe on one of this capital city's tree-lined streets and discussed how his art touches today's reality, street battles between government forces and ethnic Albanian guerrillas raged in a village just 15 miles

away, and the army and rebels traded mortar fire in that area.

The killing of eight Macedonian soldiers by rebel forces in late April "was really uncanny, because it's as if replicating the attack of the Albanian gang in the film," said Manchevski, who wrote as well as directed "Dust."

He said he doesn't really believe that NATO is acting completely without knowledge in the Balkans, but he does think the alliance isn't very good at foreseeing how things are likely to unfold.

"I wouldn't think NATO would want to reverse 'ethnic cleansing' after their involvement in Kosovo; however, that is precisely what happened," he explained, referring to violence by ethnic Albanians against Serbs after the NATO bombing campaign. "I would hope they wouldn't expect or want fighting in Macedonia which is supported from Kosovo, and again that is what happened. You have people with machine guns hijacking the concept of human rights and using it to justify killing."

The film plays off Luke's ignorance of Turkish-ruled Macedonia by using "a variation on the 'Shane' motif, where he comes into town [and] he doesn't know anybody," Manchevski said.

"In a classical Western, he would quickly see who the good guys are and who the bad guys are," he continued. "In a place like this, it would take him much longer. So eventually he takes the side of the innocent civilians, rather than a side in the war. And in a way the film is dedicated to all the innocent civilians slaughtered in the wars here."

Manchevski said he got the idea for the film when he noticed the similarities in old photographs between Macedonian revolutionaries and the Mexican rebels led by Pancho Villa.

Until then, he said, he had always thought of Macedonian revolutionaries as belonging to serious history, while Pancho Villa and gunslingers in the American West belonged in comic books.

"The iconography was so similar: bearded men with bandoleers and rifles on their white horses," he said. "So I'm looking for a way to put those two together. Then I realized they were happening at roughly the same time. At the very same time, you had the beginning of Cubism, the invention of the airplane, Freud, so it's a peculiar playing with time and place. . . . Freud shows up in the film. So do Cubist paintings."

Manchevski said he was also inspired by Carnegie Commission reports about the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913. In the first war, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro fought successfully to break Macedonia and Albania away from the Ottoman Empire. In the second, Serbia, Greece and Romania fought Bulgaria over how to divide up Macedonia.

Parts of the Carnegie reports read like "a fragmented film," with pieces of the story coming first from one witness and then from another, he said.

"Dust" poses to its characters and the audience "the same dilemma as 'Before the Rain,' " Manchevski said. "Do you get involved? Should you get involved? How do you pick sides?"

"I don't believe in picking sides along ethnic lines. You know, 'This is my tribe, and I'm going to support them.' In both films, there is an outsider who's thrown into the middle of a violent conflict. I guess the one thing to see in it is: 'Do get involved. But do think twice.' "