

Berlin movie review: "Mothers"

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BERLIN (Hollywood Reporter) – Macedonian director Milcho Manchevski continues down his distinctive artistic path in his fourth feature, “Mothers,” which is about women of all shapes and sizes, not just maternal figures. Structured in three parts like his Oscar-nominated debut “Before the Rain,” it mixes fiction (the first two episodes) with documentary for an interesting result that’s more compelling than the film’s underlying philosophical questions.

Manchevski says “Mothers” was inspired by the artwork of Robert Rauschenberg and is about the nature of truth, specifically our very subjective perception of truth. Perceptions of reality are stock themes for experimental filmmakers, yet despite the highbrow concept of “Mothers,” the film’s three sections are relatively linear and hit home on an emotional rather than intellectual level.

Nevertheless, the film’s unorthodox structure will make it the director’s most theatrically limited work to date. “Mothers” will be lucky to screen outside narrow cinephile circles.

All three episodes are set in Macedonia, the first (also the shortest and weakest) in the capital city of Skopje. Although the intimidating Bea (Emilija Stojkovska) and her sidekick Kjara (Miljana Bogdanoska) didn’t actually see the man who flashed their friend near their elementary school, they decide to report the event to the police. They stop along the way to buy some shoes and at the station take pictures of themselves on their cell phones. The girls play with the truth until somebody gets hurt, but none of the more serious questions about power and how reality can be manufactured are developed in an original way.

The film’s second and strongest part is about a small TV crew traveling to Mavrovo, in the country’s central-west region, for a documentary on dying rural traditions. They find perfect subjects in a deserted village with only two inhabitants — an ancient brother (Salaetin Bilal) and sister (Ratka Radmanovic) who haven’t spoken for 16 years. The crew has its own intrigues as well: sound engineer Simon (Dmitar Gjorgjievski) is in love with camerawoman Ana (Ana Stojanovska), who’s sleeping with the director (Vladimir Jacev).

While Manchevski would have us ponder the nature of the siblings’ feud, the story’s true power lies in its depiction of social change. The brother and sister’s way of life has all but vanished in the modern world, a colorful bit of folklore for the bemused, urban filmmakers.

That women have come a long way and yet are fundamentally still the same also couldn’t be more explicitly shown in the differences between the free-spirited, 20-

something Ana and the elderly woman who cracks dirty jokes as she talks about her arranged marriage. The only one to feel a maternal pull from the old woman, Ana starts up a friendship that goes beyond the documentary.

All of the actors are quite good, but the episode belongs to Stojanovska and Radmanovic. Aged to look like she's over 100, the latter's performance is hauntingly gripping.

The third installment in "Mothers" is an TV-style documentary on a serial killer from the town of Kicevo, who raped and murdered three women in their 60s. Crafted like a mystery, although the story ran in the international news in 2008, it features interviews with the victims' families before disclosing the alleged perpetrator, Vlado Taneski, a respected crime reporter who lived next door to the three women and wrote about their murders.

Truth and fiction mix on several levels here, not least of which in regards the trust Taneski instilled in his neighbors, and his guilt, still being contested today. But Manchevski goes too far with police footage of the cadavers in the segment. Such images are gratuitous, even disrespectful of the victims' families.

As in "Before the Rain," elements from each segment are woven into the others, adding yet another layer to Manchevski's recurring notion of the cyclicity of life itself.

(Editing by Zorianna Kit)