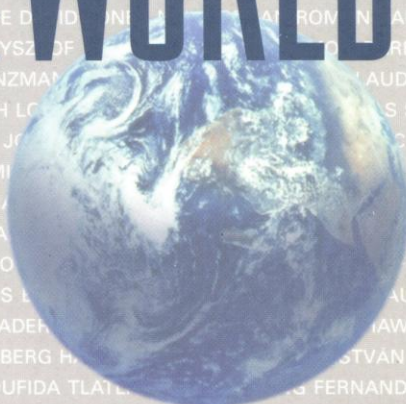


EYE ON THE WORLD



CONVERSATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL FILMMAKERS JUDY STONE

Milcho Manchevski



Photo: Judy Stone.

Park City, Utah

When Milcho Manchevski was growing up in Yugoslavia, he never dreamed that he would put Macedonia on the cinematic map. In fact, at one point after he left, he vowed that he would never go home again.

That was before he discovered the beauty of the region's rugged mountain landscape, which became somewhat of a formidable protagonist in his first feature, *Before the Rain*. The film won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival and it is one of this year's five nominees for a best foreign film Oscar.

"I never thought it would be such a big deal," Manchevski said at the Sundance Film Festival. "The film has done a lot to give a sense of dignity to Macedonia." (Since the former Yugoslav republic declared independence in 1991, Greece has challenged its right to be called Macedonia.)

Eye on the World

Despite the film's elliptical style and the mystery surrounding its protagonists—a fawn-eyed young Orthodox priest, an Albanian girl pursued by Macedonians who think she has murdered one of their clan, and a London-based photojournalist who returns home to Macedonia—Manchevski was struck by how “emotionally involved” viewers became with the characters.

“People were crying—especially in Italy—when they came out of the cinemas. I didn’t expect that. I thought we were making an esoteric European film. I didn’t think we had a weepie on our hands.”

Manchevski grinned. “That probably means we didn’t make a boring film.”

His only previous claim to fame was the video he directed in New York in 1992 for Arrested Development’s rap song “Tennessee.” It won MTV and Billboard awards and was listed among the 100 best videos in *Rolling Stone* magazine. *Rolling Stone* also sent a reporter to Macedonia to find out “how this white Macedonian wound up in the States doing exclusively rap records.”

Born in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, Manchevski, thirty-five, smilingly refers to himself as a “city rat.” His mother, a doctor, died when he was seven and his father, an engineer, died when he was thirteen, leaving him on his own. At fifteen, he was a straight-A student and began publishing articles in newspapers. He now is an American citizen who lives in Manhattan.

Having grown up loving Tarzan and James Bond movies, before progressing to Polanski and Kurosawa, Manchevski was shocked by his introduction to experimental work that “showed that one could deal with film without telling a story. That sets you back 180 degrees.” It also

influenced the circular approach he adopted for *Before the Rain*.

After graduating in 1982, he went back to Macedonia but wasn’t able to make films there. “The older filmmakers ganged up on me. They also felt politically uncomfortable because the project I had at the time was a gloomy story about a young kid who takes pictures. It wasn’t the social realist kind of film they want to see there.”

When Manchevski visited his sick aunt in Macedonia in 1991, he wasn’t thinking about making a film there. “It was a strange homecoming. It felt good in many ways, but I sensed tension in the air. It was tangible, palpable. Like the pressure you get in your mouth before the rain. It could be cleansing and give you a new beginning or it can be tragic or deadly. It was just before the fighting began in Slovenia and Croatia.”

He didn’t put his observations into perspective until he was back in New York. He thought about developing three simple stories that would become more complex when they were put together, but he was convinced it wouldn’t be of interest to anyone. Then British Screen commissioned a script.

Before the Rain is told in three interconnected parts, but not set in a linear time frame. In Part One, *Words*, Kiril, a Macedonian monk who has taken a vow of silence, discovers Zamira, an Albanian girl, hiding in his room. His desire to protect her leads to his expulsion from the monastic order.

In Part Two, *Faces*, Anne, a London photo editor, is torn between her estranged husband and Aleksander, a war photographer. Her personal crisis is juxtaposed to an inexplicable murderous rampage that erupts in a London restaurant.

In Part Three, *Pictures*, Aleksander returns to his childhood village in Macedonia only to be-

come trapped in a deadly ethnic conflict between Albanians and Macedonians.

No reasons are given for the shootings in the restaurant. "It doesn't matter what nationality the killer is. It's not explained on purpose. We don't subtitle his dialogue because I was trying to say that we are not immune to what is going on elsewhere in the world. You cannot switch channels. It doesn't work that way. By not doing anything or not doing enough, you're an accomplice. You're part of the slaughter so it's really about don't ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for you."

Balkan hatreds already have taken their toll on Rade Serbedzija, the actor who plays Aleksander. A Serb from Croatia, he was black-listed when hostilities started. He went to Belgrade, where he was shot at because he comes from Croatia. Then he moved to Slovenia, where he had to learn a different language. In Macedonia, he performed in yet another language. Now he has relocated to London.

Gregoire Colin, the young French actor in *Olivier, Olivier*, didn't have to cope with another language because he plays the silent, enigmatic

Kiril, whose eyes express all the emotion he feels. And Labina Mitevska, a Macedonia schoolgirl, researched the role of Zamira by living with Albanian families in Macedonia and in Serbia.

"The visuals were obviously very important," Manchevski said. "I probably took 5,000 photographs when I was scouting for locations. By having powerful landscapes, we emphasize the strong passions there and we contrast them with the ugly feelings of hatred that are developing."

Now that the film is finished, Manchevski said he can try to articulate what he wanted to communicate, but "making it was an irrational process. And thank God for that because otherwise it would be sending messages of social realism."

Mainly he wants viewers to understand that "you can't run away from saying which side are you on. If you don't say what you stand for, you're not really alive. You can't be a professional voyeur all your life."

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As director: PRED DOZDHOT [BEFORE THE RAIN] (1993).