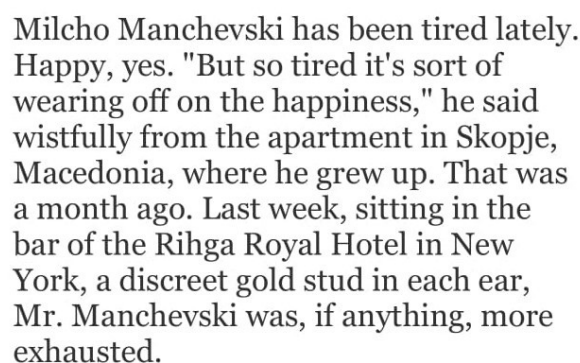


FILM; A Journey to Macedonia Takes a Director to Sundance

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The director, who is 35, had a lot to feel tired about. Not long ago he was leading a busy but manageable life as a New York-based director of music videos and commercials. Then he made his first feature film, "Before the Rain."

That film, a story of ethnic conflict set in London and Macedonia, has been shown at festivals in a half-dozen countries over the last five months. It has won nearly a score of awards, including the Golden Lion (shared with another film) at the Venice Film Festival, and it will be

shown tonight at the Sundance Film Festival, in Park City, Utah.

Although the movie doesn't open in theaters in the United States until next month, it has already made a celebrity of its director in Macedonia, which chose the picture as its first-ever entry for the Academy Award for best foreign language film. (The nominees will be announced on Feb. 14.)

"Before the Rain" is not an easy movie to characterize, or even to follow. Vividly photographed and told in three parts, its narrative structure is almost circular, ending where it began. Its protagonists include Kiril (Gregoire Colin), a young Macedonian

monk who has taken a vow of silence; Zamira (Labina Mitevska), a desperate ethnic Albanian girl, and Anne (Katrin Cartlidge), a well-heeled English photo editor.

At its core, though, it is the story of Aleksandar Kirkov (Rade Serbedzija), a London-based war photographer who returns to his native Macedonia to find his village divided into hostile camps, ethnic Macedonian against ethnic Albanian. In no time, he is forced to take a side.

Mr. Manchevski (his full name is pronounced meel-cho man-CHEVF-ski) stresses that his film is in no way a documentary. In fact, as he pointed out, Macedonia -- a landlocked region that is now an independent country -- is the one part of former Yugoslavia where political change has so far been nonviolent. The film grew out of a trip he made to his homeland in 1991. (Mr. Manchevski lives in the East Village in Manhattan, but he has dual citizenship and keeps the Skopje apartment where he spent his childhood.)

In 1979, when he left Skopje to study film at Southern Illinois University, Macedonia was still part of Yugoslavia. But in 1991, the region was in transition, and the director was struck by a heavy, pervasive sense of expectation -- of what, exactly, was not clear.

"It could be cleansing, the beginning of something new, or tragic and deadly," he said. "I wanted to capture this sense of something in the air, like before a rain when you sense that pressure inside your mouth."

On his return to New York, he wrote an outline. Then he left it in his computer.

"I was convinced I wasn't going to get funding," he explained. "I thought it was too personal, too esoteric." Though he thought of it daily, the outline sat in the computer for a year and a half.

Finally, a friend suggested sending it to British Screen, an organization that nurtures new talent by helping to underwrite films unlikely to attract sufficient commercial financing. Simon Perry, British Screen's chief executive, read it, liked its originality and commissioned a script.

"It was a very topical story, but it wasn't a piece of realism," Mr. Perry said. "It was always a piece of poetry." He considered Mr. Manchevski's video background a plus. "So many writers come from theater or novels; they're so word-based. Milcho is image-based. He wants to enrich your eye, give you a feast in your ear." Mr. Manchevski's completed script was approved within days.

SHOOTING THE FILM, which ultimately cost \$2.5 million, with financing from several co-producers, was arduous. It was hard just to get to the locations, many of them remote mountain areas inside Macedonia. Occasionally, the crew had to build its own roads. Mr. Manchevski would sometimes shoot a single scene in places miles apart, then splice the footage together to create a unified whole. Kiril's mountaintop monastery, for example, is a composite of four different monasteries.

There were also the practical problems of coordinating a crew and actors from more than a half-dozen countries, among them France, South Africa, Bulgaria and Macedonia. The project was not made easier by Mr. Manchevski's exacting eye. Before beginning to film, he spent weeks at the Louvre, examining paintings and contemplating how to achieve the sometimes primitive, sometimes medieval, sometimes urban looks he wanted for his film.

"Milcho doesn't compromise artistically," said Lenny Grodin, who produced many of the music videos Mr. Manchevski directed. "He gets wonderful visions, and then he has the ability to translate them onto film." Mr. Grodin was first drawn to Mr. Manchevski's video work by his ability to blend the contemporary and classical. "He has the classic European eye combined with a very young, hip edge."

Silvan Furlan, the artistic director of the Slovene Cinematheque in Ljubljana, Slovenia, sees in Mr. Manchevski's work a marriage of Eastern Europe and Hollywood -- a combination of the European auteur tradition and Hollywood's ability to make movies that speak to a wider audience. Mr. Furlan was among those who chose "Before the Rain" to be shown at the Film Art Fest in Ljubljana this year. Reaction to the movie was positive, he said, despite the fact that Slovenians, like others in the former Yugoslavia, are daily confronted by images of ethnic conflict.

"We are full of those pictures, as you were during Vietnam," he said. "We have enough TV documentaries dealing with the situation in the Balkans." But Mr. Manchevski's extremely personal vision "opens a new imaginative register," he added, "even for the public of ex-Yugoslavia, which lives this reality every day."

The film maker's hybrid sensibility was shaped during a painful youth. His father was an engineer, his mother a doctor; he was an only child. His mother died of a sudden illness when the boy was 6. When he was 13, his father also died, because of a heart condition. Though Mr. Manchevski lived with an aunt, he considered himself on his own.

He was sustained by books and, naturally, movies -- James Bond films and spaghetti westerns when he was small, later the works of Akira Kurosawa, Roman Polanski and Milos Forman. Eager to study film, he won a scholarship from Southern Illinois University. He returned to Yugoslavia after graduating but eventually settled in New York, paying the rent by delivering balloons and acting as a court interpreter while writing scripts.

One script written on spec -- a fictional film about an actress -- contained an imaginary commercial. As part of an effort to raise money for the movie, he shot the commercial. That led to work directing real commercials and music videos, a field in which he thrived. His video of Arrested Development's "Tennessee" won the 1992 MTV Award for best video/rap.

Today, Mr. Manchevski is hopeful about the future of his homeland. He rejects the idea that Balkan nations are doomed to repeat a centuries-long cycle of violence. "Before the Rain" has its share of violence. It also depends heavily on the image of circles, both

metaphoric and literal. Its fractured narrative is indeed almost circular, but that "almost" is very deliberate.

"Using the circle as an excuse is too easy," Mr. Manchevski said. "It's not so that if something happened 300 years ago, it has to happen again. For me, the only thing that matters is your own personal responsibility -- whether you're in Northern Ireland or Armenia or London or Macedonia."