

NY TIMES GUIDE TO 1.000 MOVIES EVER MADE

BEFORE THE RAIN

Written (in Macedonian, Albanian, and English, with English subtitles) and directed by Milcho Manchevski; director of photography, Manuel Teran; edited by Nicolas Gaster; music by Anastasia; production designers, Sharon Lamofsky and David Munns; produced by Judy Counihan, Cedomir Kolar, Sam Taylor, and Cat Villers; released by Gramercy Pictures. Running time: 116 minutes.

With: Katrin Cartlidge (Anne), Rade Serbedzija (Aleksandar), Gregoire Colin (Kiril), and Labina Mitevska (Zamira).

In a sedate London restaurant, two people meet to discuss their marital troubles. They agree that they need more time, not realizing that there is no time left. In the background, away from the main action, an unexplained argument has begun to brew, as a waiter is taunted by an increasingly wild eyed stranger. "Sir, I didn't do anything," the waiter insists to his boss. He appears to be right. It doesn't matter.

We will never know what the stranger's grievance was, only that it proved the point of Milcho Manchevski's devastating *Before the Rain*; that violence escalates organically and mysteriously, in ways that mean there can be no innocent bystanders in and explosive, hair-trigger world. In a film that unfolds unpredictably, with a Mobius-strip structure oddly like that of *Pulp Fiction*, the one constant becomes an air of foreboding. The birth of a lamb, a pregnant woman in a cemetery, the sight of a small boy toying with a machine gun: any of these things may signal sudden disaster.

"War torn" is the preferred cliché for events occurring near Mr. Manchevski's native Macedonia, but this film takes a more intuitive view of violence than that. "War is a virus", suggests a doctor in the film, providing a suitably unruly model for the uncontrollable peril Mr. Manchevski explores. The rain of the title is the hard rain Bob Dylan described. And the Macedonian hilltop setting where much of the film unfolds is divided by such stubborn bitterness that different parts of the landscape experience different weather.

It's red-letter occasion when two first-time directors with films as hugely effective as *Before the Rain* and Lee Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors* make their New York debuts on the same day. Of the two, Mr. Tamahori has the brute force, while Mr. Manchevski has the poetry. Working in a sophisticated, elliptical style, he joins filmmaker's as disparate as Krzysztof Kieslowski (*Red*) and Atom Egoyan (*Exotica*) in finding his story's deepest meaning in hauntingly oblique connections. Ideas that defy reason, like the immutability of hatred and violence, may be best approached this way.

Before the Rain, opening today at Lincoln Plaza, begins with and returns to a remote Macedonian monastery, which might seem a safe haven from random bloodshed. It starts off peacefully, with the sight of Kiril (Gregorie Colin), a beatific-looking young priest, working in a vegetable garden. When he returns to his bedroom, he finds a surprise: Zamira (Labina Mitevska), an Albanian girl with oddly close-cropped hair, is hiding there. There would be a language barrier between these two anyway, and there is the added obstacle of Kiril's vow of silence.

As the monks meet for prayers, death makes its entrance: armed Macedonian villagers have arrived, demanding to search the monastery in their hunt for

Zamira, who they say is a killer. So edgy that they wind up machine-gunning a cat, these intruders do not see in Kiril the purity that is apparent to the audience. The soon rob him of any refuge he may have know as a young monk, leaving him absolutely adrift when the episode is over. Mr. Manchevski, needs more terrible image of an uncertain, treacherous world than the sight of Kiril lost at the end of this episode.

This opening section of the film is called "Words." The next story that is told, "Faces", is seemingly separate and may or may not occur next in time. Set in London, it features Katrin Cartlidge (who was so memorable in *Naked*, and is fine again here) as Anne, who works in a photo agency.

When first seen, Anne is idly looking at two bare chest, one Madonna's the other that of a hollow-eyed, starving man. Before the Rain, uses such juxtapositions with chilling authority, to powerfully ironic effect.

Anne has been involved with Aleksandar (Rade Serbedzija), a rakish Pulitzer Prize-winning Macedonian photographer with a weary view of war. "Peace is an exception, not a rule," Alex maintains. Meanwhile, Anne's mother accuses her daughter, who is pregnant, of a different sort of nonchalance. "No problem is so formidable that you can't just walk away from it," her mother says icily. In fact Before the Rain proves an overwhelming argument for the opposite point of view.

Breaking off with Anne during the London sequence, Alex returns to his family for an episode called "Pictures". (Mr. Serbedzija, a formidably magnetic presence, seems much more at ease during the film's non-English-speaking segments.) Not having visited the place in sixteen years, he finds his home half-destroyed and armed friends and relatives, who are Macedonian Christians, patrolling the tiny village. Nearby, at a neighbouring settlements, Albanian Moslems are doing likewise.

Alex's former sweetheart, who could be Anne in a different life, lives in the Moslem village and barely dares speak to him. That is not Alex's only reason for sensing how absurd and dangerous these divisions have become. Casually, he takes a weapon away from a half-naked boy and finds that the child's uncle looks angry. It's not clear whether the uncle thinks the boy was endangered or is simply irritated to see him lose his gun.

Mr. Manchevski's taste for ambiguity sometimes leads Before the Rain into blatant paradoxes, so that it does not unravel with quite the satisfying completeness that *Pulp Fiction* did; after this film circles back to its denouement, a minor narrative thread involving photographs of Kiril and Zamira is left deliberately unexplained. Neither the presence of such loose ends nor the film's slight straining of its rain metaphor diminishes the final impact of an overwhelming vision.

Transfixed in horror, Before the Rain watches the promise of violence seep into every last aspect of its narrative. Mr. Manchevski tells his story elegantly and leaves his audience with a warning too strong to be ignored.