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Before the Rain: The Criterion Collection

DVD/APPROX. 113 MINS./1994/US NR

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DVD REVIEW

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Viewed today, "Before the Rain" (1994) might easily be confused with the wretched cycle of "we're all connected" films that have plagued award shows in recent years with "Crash" (2004) and "Babel" (2006) being the most noxious and obnoxious examples. But where these films hammer their sociopolitical commentary home with pile-driver obstinance in scene after scene, "Before the Rain" opts instead for a gradual accumulation of shared images and themes that provide the film's unity.

"Before the Rain" was billed as the first film shot in the newly independent Republic of Macedonia and became a hit on the festival circuit, winning the Golden Lion at Venice which surely makes up for the dubious distinction of being nominated by the Academy for Best Foreign Picture. While the film's nation of origin accounts for some of its popularity, director Milcho Manchevski, who finished his film studies in America, has crafted a film designed to cross national borders and tell a story that is both timely and universal. That sounds ambitious, and it certainly is, but Manchevski limits himself to three simple stories that stand on their terms, each of a specific place and time.

In the first story titled "Words", Kiril (Grégoire Colin), a monk who has taken a vow of silence, finds himself charged with the care of a young Albanian refugee who is being hunted by a group of Macedonia militia men for her suspected murder of one of their comrades. Kiril and the monastery barely withstand a brutal search by the self-styled freedom fighters, and when the monks discover Kiril's stowaway they expel him from the monastery. He and the girl go on the lam, trying to stay ahead of essentially everybody including themselves as an unlikely love blossoms.

The second story, "Faces," makes a sudden shift to swanky London where a photographer named Anne (Katrin Cartlidge) sorts through gruesome wartime photos while also juggling upcoming dates with both her somewhat estranged husband and her lover Aleksandar (Rade Šerbedžija), a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer recently returned from the Balkans, a traumatic experience he has not quite recovered from. Their relationship is strained for many reasons, and made all the more passionate because of those obstacles.

In the final part of the film, "Pictures," Aleksandar returns home to Macedonia where he plans to stay for the foreseeable future. His homecoming is a jarring one as he is confronted by gun-toting teens oozing American-movie inspired attitude, a bombed-out home, and the love of his life now separated from him by the same ethnic divide that tears apart the country.



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Each story is connected to the other in ways both small and large, and the overall structure of the film is made (a little too) clear with the repeated phrase: "Time never dies. The circle is not round." Manchevski's film loops back on itself, ending somewhere in the vicinity of the beginning which might be a bit of a joke seeing as the running time of the film dies (ends) just when the narrative circle is rounded. Except that it's not quite round, only "almost round," and any suggestion of closure is purely illusory. Manchevski provides a chilling comparison between the cycle of nature and the cycle of war, one beautiful and one ugly, but both equally implacable and unconcerned with the presence of humanity.

In this film, characters make great sacrifices that don't necessarily pay off the way they would in a traditional Hollywood narrative, but this doesn't make the sacrifices any less potent. Though the film tackles universal themes, Manchevski's characters live solely in the moment: they have no sense of the bigger picture that the viewer is seeing. They can only act and react the way real people do to the events that occur around them. By grounding his film in this sense of specificity,

Manchevski avoids most of the glib pontifications that the "we're all connected" films wallow in.

The London sequence seems like the ugly duckling here. Anne clearly has no real sense of what Aleksandar has just experienced or what he is returning to, and Aleksandar doesn't really try to explain it to her. The point of this section is to show that strife in the Balkans cannot simply be Balkanized; everyone else is affected by even these internecine battles. And as much as it's easy to think of bad things as only happening "over there," the film also provides a reminder that London has suffered its fair share of domestic terrorism as well. For me, though, the film makes its only major stumble in this sequence when the violence in the Balkans is brought home to Anne in a very direct and rather implausible manner. It's not the implausibility I mind so much as the fact that the point had already been made far more eloquently in the quiet and painful exchanges between Anne and Aleksandar.

The film is beautifully shot by Manuel Teran. Manchevski is nearly as concerned with landscape and intimate details of nature as he is with telling a story, and the film captures a sense of aching pastoral body even amidst the bloodshed, a faint echo of Terence Malick perhaps, though the similarities are modest.



Cartlidge only appears in one segment of the film and very briefly in the third, but her performance is memorable as were all of her roles. Cartlidge, who died at the age of 41 in 2002, was a stunner in Mike Leigh's "Naked" (1993) and as Bess' friend in Lars von Trier's "Breaking the Waves" (1995). When I watched her in these films as well as other Mike Leigh projects in the 90s, I thought she was developing into an international star, but she never got the opportunity. Rade Šerbedžija commands much more the screen time in "Before the Rain," and takes advantage of it in spades. He is a sure and sturdy presence who appears blissfully uninterested in the excessive emoting of method acting.

"Before the Rain" glides along with a deceptive ease, gaining momentum and power with each subtle detail. Connections between the stories aren't announced with the fanfare of trumpets like in the "we're all connected" cycle, but woven artfully into the structure of the narrative. By not trying too hard, it succeeds where so many others have failed.

Video

The film is presented in its original 1.78:1 aspect ratio. This Criterion release opens with the Universal logo, but appears to have undergone the usual Criterion restoration process, supervised by Manchevski. It looks marvelous, as you are surely unsurprised to hear. As usual, I have no complaints about this superior transfer.

Audio

The DVD is presented in Dolby Digital 2.0. Optional English subtitles support the Macedonian and Albanian dialogue in the film, but aren't available for the English dialogue of the London segment.

Extras

This single disc release from Criterion kicks off with a commentary track by Manchevski and film scholar Annette Insdorf, recorded in 20007.

Next is an interview with Rade Šerbedžija, recorded in 2008 in Los Angeles (16 min).

"Behind the Scenes in Macedonia" (1993, 15 min) is, as you might have guessed, a behind-the-scenes look at the film, while a separate feature labeled "On Set Footage" provides 5 minutes of miscellaneous video footage loosely edited together, some with sound, some without.

Viewers can also sample the soundtrack by composers Anastasia, A Macedonian band. This feature includes 16 minutes of the film's score with accompanying footage.

Yet another feature includes 79 photographs from Manchevski's 1999 book "Streets." Unfortunately, the photos don't look all that great when reproduced on this DVD.

Manchevski worked in music videos before directing features. The DVD includes Manchevski's award-winning video for Arrested Development's 1991 smash hit "Tennessee." (4 min.)

The disc also offers a Stills Gallery and three Trailers, including a re-cut version by Manchevski who was unhappy with the U.S. trailer.

Film Value

How many chances do you have to watch a Macedonian film? Milcho Manchevski's debut feature tells three stories in one with such confidence it's hard to believe he was only 35 when the film was released and barely 30 when he began writing the script. Strongly recommended.

DVDTOWN.com rates this DVD:

Video	9
Audio	8
Extras	7
Film value	8