

Before the Rain - Stunning Tale Of Macedonia

REVIEW/FILM/VENICE: "Before the Rain" - Stunning Tale Of Macedonia
Before the Rain (British-French-Macedonian/Drama, no rating, 115 minutes)

By Deborah Young

HOLLYWOOD (Variety) - "Before the Rain" is a visually and narratively stunning tale in three parts, set between modern London and the timeless hills of Macedonia, in the former Yugoslavia.

Through a parable of intertwined lives, it attempts to answer the tragic riddle of why the Balkan states are perpetually at war.

High production values, and the fact that a third of the film is shot in good Queen's English, should help this heartfelt, poetic and violently anti-violent film find its way to appreciative Western arthouse auds.

"Rain," the first feature directed by Macedonian-born helmer Milcho Manchevski (now a New York resident and director of music vids), is also the first film made in the newly declared republic of Macedonia. Bordering Greece (which hotly disputes its very name), Albania, Bulgaria and Serbia, the mountainous country is shown to be in danger of becoming the site of the next Balkan blood bath.

But unlike many observers who blame the war in the former Yugoslavia on political pressures, Manchevski depicts senseless ethnic hatred as endemic to the region.

Film is divided into three parts. In the first episode, "Words," the young Greek Orthodox monk Kiril (Gregoire Colin), living in an ancient monastery, shelters and hides an Albanian girl, Zamira (Labina Mitevska), even though they can't understand each other's language.

A band of machine gun-wielding roughnecks bursts into the monastery looking for her, claiming she killed their brother.

Kiril and Zamira escape together, but are intercepted by the girl's Muslim relatives. They shoot her down in cold blood, rather than let her go off with a Christian.

After "Words," which shows the aching beauty of the Macedonian landscape with its monasteries, churches and people who appear lifted from another century, the modernity of the second episode, "Faces," comes as a shock.

Anne (Katrin Cartlidge), who works in a London photo agency, is torn between her Macedonian lover, Aleksandar (Rade Serbedzija), a Pulitzer Prize-winning war photographer, and her sweet, boring husband, Nick (Jay Villiers.)

Before she can make up her mind between them, Aleksandar takes off for Macedonia and Nick dies in an absurd shootout in a restaurant.

The third episode, "Pictures," takes the story back to Macedonia and brings the threads together. Aleksandar returns to his native village, where he's determined to spend the rest of his life forgetting the horrors of taking photographs on the front line.

But the rumblings of war have already infected the once-peaceful Christian villagers: They treat their Albanian neighbors, who are Muslims, as enemies now. Trigger-happy boys with automatic weapons bar Aleksandar's way when he goes to see his boyhood love, Hana (Silvija Stojanovska).

Picture owes part of its disturbing magic to its challenging structure. All the events seem to take place at the same time, until the surprising and clever ending.

Without beating around the bush, "Rain" accuses the people themselves of starting a fratricidal war, rather than blaming politicians or the U.N.

The Macedonian part has an urgency that spills over into the London sequence, where a normal restaurant becomes the site of a massacre. It suggests that no war is limited by man-made boundaries, and no place is so far away that it is safe from danger and violence.

There is a piercing sadness in the fanaticism of hating one's neighbor that "Rain" captures very clearly. The monks who have sheltered Bosnian refugees tell the bloodthirsty avengers to turn the other cheek.

They reply, "We already have." "An eye for an eye."

"Might is right." "He's not one of us -- I'll cut his throat." "It's time to revenge five centuries of our blood."

Actors have a strong iconic presence, in which faces are as important as speeches. Dialogue is kept to a realistic minimum. A passionate soundtrack by Anastasia provides a powerful driving force in the film.

Manuel Teran's breathtaking cinematography imparts a tragic natural beauty to the landscape which, the film implies, may soon be torn apart by war.

At the Venice Film Festival; competing

Anne Katrin Cartlidge

Aleksandar Rade Serbedzija

Kiril Gregoire Colin

Zamira Labina Mitevska

Hana Silvijia Stojanovska

A Mikado release (Italy) of an Aim Productions (U.K.)/Noe Productions (France)/Vardar Film (Macedonia) co-production, in association with British Screen Finance, the European Coproduction Fund (UK). (International sales: PolyGram Film International Classics.) Produced by Judy Counihan, Cedomir Kolar, Sam Taylor, Cat Villiers. Co-producers, Frederique Dumas, Marc Baschet, Gorjan Tozija. Directed, written by Milcho Manchevski. Camera (color; Technovision widescreen), Manuel Teran; editor, Nick Gaster; music, Anastasia; production design, Sharon Lamofsky, David Munns; associate producers, Sheila Fraser Milne, David Redman.

Reuters/Variety

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