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Movies: DVD Review

Before the Rain is a postmodern puzzle

An intricately structured '90s classic finally arrives on DVD

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Back when I taught a college course on world cinema in the mid-'90s, one of my students' favorite films turned out to be *Before the Rain*, the first-ever production from the then-newly independent Republic of Macedonia. The film's popularity with the class was initially pretty puzzling, this being a group that could usually be counted on to be conspicuously resistant to subtitles, symbolism and thought-provoking ambiguities -- all of which *Before the Rain* offers in spades.

In retrospect, however, the timing couldn't have been more right for *Before the Rain*. Besides bringing home the whole Balkans conflict in powerfully human terms and through some of the most seductive imagery of the decade, *Before the Rain*'s intricate and artfully dovetailing structure expanded magnificently on the puzzle-box pleasures of *Pulp Fiction*, a pop phenomenon that was just getting audiences primed to exercise their brains a bit. Maybe even more importantly, *Before the Rain* can also now be seen as a direct precursor to the highly addictive, interwoven narratives of *Crash*, *Babel* and other movies that sometimes invite viewers to feel a little too smug at having figured them out.

For my money, *Before the Rain* is a far richer and infinitely more accomplished movie than either *Crash* or *Babel* and, in its understated way, it even blows *Pulp Fiction* out of the water. Director Milcho Manchevski's first feature film tells three stories that all turn out to be part of the same story (don't they all?), with a tricky, non-linear structure that seems to form a perfect circle but doesn't quite. The movie is ultimately revealed as an obstinate faux loop that begins with an ending, like a serpent swallowing its own tail with attitude.

The first segment, ironically titled "Words," involves a young Christian monk (who's taken a vow of silence) and his efforts to shelter an ethnic Albanian from a group of angry Macedonians who think she's killed their cousin. The second section takes place in a London restaurant, where a couple's relationship problems are paralleled and horribly amplified by an unexpected surge of violence from the outside world. The third segment brings us back to Macedonia, where a photo-journalist returns home for the first time in years to find a country twisted and nearly consumed by long-festering internal frictions and hatred.

Some of the characters in one segment wind up figuring in one or more of the other parts of the film, and almost everyone turns out to be linked in ways that become significant as the tale(s) unfold. But the internal rhymes of *Before the Rain* run much deeper than mere surface connections, and the movie's unconventional structure is absolutely organic to its themes and agenda (lest you start assuming Manchevski is just another glib monkey tinkering with chronology). Like some postmodern re-imagining of *Rashomon*, the film ultimately asks us to question not only its narrative and our perceptions of it but the illusionary nature of time itself. Manchevski's story doesn't exist exclusively in the eye of the beholder, but its most telling bits can only be comprehended between the lines or off screen, where truth, such as it is, shifts with each shift of context.

Before the Rain doesn't skimp on the meaty philosophy, always allowing us to form our own conclusions -- "Easy answers are for politicians," says Manchevski -- but the movie isn't all head trip by any means. Although it never preaches, politics and morality are very much on the movie's plate, with its chief concern being the futility of endless cycles of violence. "War is a virus," one character tells us, and that violence takes many forms, from kids playing with guns and torturing animals to adults torturing each other with lies to true believers blowing each other up. Manchevski even seems to implicate himself in the process ("my camera killed," goes one of the film's refrains), suggesting that artists who document atrocities rather than taking sides are simply part of the problem.

Never before available on DVD, Before the Rain at long last arrives in grand style, as a lavishly appointed Criterion Collection edition. The disc boasts a stunning anamorphic transfer in the film's original aspect ratio, with vibrant colors and strong contrasts, as well as a host of well-appointed extras. The most interesting and valuable supplement is a feature-length commentary with the director and noted film scholar Annette Insdorf, who gushes that Before the Rain is "one of the greatest first features in all cinema." Manchevski begins as most artists do, by declaring that "the work speaks for itself," but goes on to articulate his vision with great eloquence and insight.

Also included is a 16-minute interview with lead actor Rade Serbedzija, a short making-of documentary, a montage of on-set footage, storyboards, an extensive stills and production gallery, three theatrical trailers, 80 images from a book of photography by Manchevski, soundtrack selections featuring the Macedonian band Anastasia, and a typically handsome Criterion booklet featuring an essay by Ian Christie. There's even an amusing reminder that even great auteurs have to start somewhere, with Manchevski's origins as a maker of music videos on display in the form of his award-winning "Tennessee" video for Arrested Development. You may not remember the group, but you'll never forget Before the Rain.

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