

INTERVIEW WITH RALITZA PETROVA



DIRECTOR OF "GODLESS"
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES

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BY KARIN SCHIEFER

YOUR FEATURE DEBUT "GODLESS" CELEBRATED ITS WORLD PREMIERE AT THE LOCARNO FILM FESTIVAL IN 2016 WHERE IT WAS PRESENTED WITH THE PARDO D'ORO [GOLDEN LEOPARD] AND THE BEST ACTRESS AWARD. THIS WAS FOLLOWED BY A LONG LIST OF FESTIVAL INVITATIONS AND A WHOLE HOST OF FURTHER PRIZES. WHAT DID THIS ENORMOUS RESONANCE MEAN TO YOU AS A YOUNG FILMMAKER?

It was truly humbling. I wasn't expecting such a reaction. Beyond all that, however, the biggest reward remains my personal satisfaction that I'd made an uncompromising film. This feeling motivates me to carry on. What also motivates is the knowledge that there is an audience for films like "Godless", contrary to the claims from certain distributors and sales agents that people don't want to see such "heavy" films. This was first demonstrated by Carlo Chatrion, former director of the Locarno Film Festival, putting "Godless" in the main competition, and the jury of the 69th Locarno festival – Arturo Ripstein, Kate Moran, Rafi Pitts, Rodrigo Teixeira and Wang Bing – awarding the film the main prize. It was then followed by the acknowledgement of 26 other festival juries and many filled screenings worldwide. These were all people from a variety of cultures and countries, proving that there is a space and interest for films that deal with more serious subjects and are not just entertainment. I believe

that post-Covid-19 there might actually be an appetite for such films, which make us reflect on what is happening around us. The rest would simply not feel relevant to what people are going through right now.

YOU PURSUED YOUR ARTISTIC EDUCATION IN THE UK. HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN SURE ABOUT WISHING TO MAKE YOUR FIRST FEATURE FILM IN YOUR NATIVE COUNTRY, BULGARIA?

For first-time directors it makes sense to use their background as a resource. The craft might not be perfect yet, but the energy and the heart are very pure. In that sense drawing from my own background, where I have the deepest insights, allows me to have the right measure. "Godless" is filled with ghosts, impressions and traumatic events that I've experienced in my country. I often like to mix the real and the imagined, forming new meanings and narratives. For me, film is a poetic medium. It deals with time, image and sound to create a new experience for the viewer. In "Godless" there's a lot of fantasy and hyperbolisation, but emotionally it is very close to my heart. I think of this film as a little symphony. There is one central emotion, expressed in a polyphonic way. It's like when you throw a handful of stones into the water, they create ripples at the same time, but each ripple has a different size, quality and lifespan. The core emotion in the story of "Godless" is indignation – the anger



Golden Leopard for "Godless" at Locarno Film Festival

and disgust that pulse inside a person when they are forced to compromise their truth in order to survive.

"GODLESS" IS A STORY ABOUT THE LACK OF WARMTH, OF LOVE, OF BEAUTY, OF HUMANISM. DID THESE IDEAS LEAD YOU TO THE POINT WHERE YOU CHOSE ELDERLY PEOPLE AND THE WAY SOCIETY DEALS WITH THEM TO DEVELOP THE STORY OF GANA, YOUR PROTAGONIST?

It is an amalgamation of things. The physical, psychological and emotional abuse throughout the layers of Bulgarian society, and the lack of open debate about these issues, causes a lot of damage and dysfunction, both on an individual and a collective level. The initial idea for the plot – the trafficking of people's ID cards on the black market for identity fraud – came when I read somewhere that an old man voluntarily sold his ID card in order to buy his next meal. I saw this act as a cynical metaphor for the trading of everything identity stands for – human dignity, values, nationality, history, achievement. The characters in "Godless", much like the old man in the real story, get to such a low point that they not only lose faith in the state, they have no respect for what it represents. If you're ready to sell your ID card for a meal, there's something deeply wrong in the trust between the individual and the state. To me the immunity of a country is its judicial system. If the judicial system doesn't work, people get away with murder. In "Godless" this is literally what happens – in daylight, in the most banal, trivial way. We have seen similar stories coming out of countries like Russia, Mexico, the Philippines and others. In that sense there seems to be something universal about the potential for corruption in the human soul. I wanted to talk about these worlds, where morality is constantly being tested. In "Godless" the main char-

acter, a medical nurse who steals and traffics her patients' ID cards, leaves her victims some petty cash, so that they can afford the fee for a new ID. There's this perverse relationship where the person who is meant to care for you is actually your abuser. I wanted to explore the boundaries of a person's own guilty conscience and to find hope through the capacity of the main character for change. Even if at the end Gana, my protagonist, is sacrificed, her soul is redeemed.

YOU HAVE TWO PROTAGONISTS – A WOMAN WHO TAKES CARE OF ELDERLY PEOPLE AND HER PARTNER, WHO REPAIRS CARS DAMAGED BY THE VERY BAD ROADS IN THE COUNTRY. BOTH OF THEM SEEM TO BE A PARS PRO TOTO OF A WHOLE SYSTEM. YOU TALKED ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF POETRY IN YOUR FILMS. HOW DO YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CINEMATIC VOCABULARY?

As a member of an audience I like immersive cinema which uses cinematography, sound and editing as a way of reflecting the emotional world of characters. Werner Herzog made this powerful film called "Fata Morgana", an experimental documentary shot in the Sahara desert. Most of his early films are like immersive symphonies to me, without straight narratives. I learned a lot from him, as well as from filmmakers like Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Carlos Reygadas, Wang Bing and Kaneto Shindo, a Japanese filmmaker who is hardly known in the West: a sort of working-class Ozu. To me what these artists have in common is their use of the poetic medium of film. An image in their films is not just an image, not only a documentation of a character moving through space. Their images are impressions of the characters' inner states. There's a famous quote within the filmmaking community: "an image is a thousand words, but a sound is a thousand



Shooting of "Godless"



"Godless"

images". Sound creates so much life outside the frame. In "Godless" the oppressive, horror-like atmosphere is expressed for the most part through sound. The character of the nurse is being exploited by her own environment, which doesn't give her many options for a better life. I wanted to show that making "the right choices" comes with a big risk for one's own safety. So with our sound designer, Peter Albrechtsen, we used the sound to evoke that sense of danger. When deciding on the visual style of the cinematography, our talk with the two cinematographers of the film, Chayse Irvin and Krum Rodriguez, was a lot about how to visualise a reality you cannot escape from, where nothing is safe and stable, where there's this sense that there isn't a way out. We used a floating focus, where the actors would be constantly coming "in and out" of sharpness. We wanted to envisage a reality where there was a sense of refusing to see what's around you, a certain denial about it, because it's too painful. Another very conscious decision was to shoot everything in daytime, so the crime happened blatantly in daylight, without hiding under the cover of night, in a way, "for everyone to see", only that no one in the film chooses to "see", out of fear, and this is the point of the story. The film has sometimes been described as "dark", but visually speaking there is no darkness: it is rather beautiful to look at, especially on 35mm. We were looking for this contrast. The deceptive beauty and triviality of violence. In a coffee shop two young people talk about how they killed someone, while across their table two grannies are having afternoon tea. I wanted to express the shamelessness of the whole procedure. There is also the fact that I was trained in England, where I developed a powerful appreciation for social realist type photography, like that of Paul Graham, Richard Billingham, the filmmaker Alan

Clarke. They are very close to documentary, but they elevate reality to express something bigger than life.

THE BLURRY IMAGES OF THE CHARACTERS MADE ME THINK THAT THEY SOMEHOW HAD LOST THEIR INDIVIDUALITY. THEY COULD BE SOMEBODY ELSE.

Absolutely. All of the cast members were chosen to have a similar feel about them, a certain sense of abandonment and disappointment in their eyes. So that at some point it didn't matter who you're watching, their fates seemed the same. They are part of the same struggle, exposed to the same "radiation". Even the characters who seem to have power, like the judge and the police chief, are people in trouble who are suffering just as much as the nurse and the elderly patients.

YOUR LEADING ACTRESS IRENA IVANOVA IS A NON-PROFESSIONAL ACTOR. DID YOU WORK WITH BOTH PROFESSIONALS AND NON-PROFESSIONALS?

There are only two professional actors in the film; the rest of the cast is non-professional. I needed the faces to express the authenticity of the reality the film was talking about. We cast people from care homes for the elderly and simply took them to our set and cared for them in the same way they would be cared for by their care workers. For me the story of "Godless" is a homage to those people. As for the main character of the nurse, she was played by Irena Ivanova, who is actually a well-known poet in Bulgaria. I relate to her poetry a lot. When I first read her poems I thought: this person knows what I want to talk about. I had a sense of a kindred spirit. All the other members of the cast had a connection between their role and their real life. What was important was that each cast member had a vulnerability which could become visible on screen.



"Godless"

THE FILM HAS A VERY SURPRISING ENDING. WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO ADD THIS EPILOGUE?

We never explicitly see the ending of Gana's life. We leave her on this ominous road, assuming that she has swallowed enough morphine pills to help her experience a painless death. I've always considered Gana's story as a Joan of Arc story. She's going to her death, but her conscience is at peace. She has made the right decision. The next scene plays out as an epilogue – the judge and his son are skiing – hypothetically somewhere above the ditch where Gana might have met her death. This scene was about a new order during a pristine, snow-white timeless moment. A father and a son are having a crazy little family moment that ends up in a confrontation with nature. I believe in the cyclical order of things. If you commit a murder and you don't repent, retribution will come your way at some point or other. Call it the law of nature, a higher power, God, fate, whatever you want. What I show in this final scene is an expression of this mighty force, a *force majeure*. To me redemption is about gaining consciousness. It is about realising something, about growing spiritually. In that sense my characters are my teachers.

THIS POWERFUL FILM MAKES US CURIOUS ABOUT YOUR NEW PROJECT. DID IT TAKE LONG TO FIND A NEW THEME? WHAT'S YOUR NEW PROJECT ABOUT?

It's the urge to make sense of life's mystery that keeps me making films. I tend to make personal films, where the imagined and the real merge to create narratives with more complex meanings. I'm excited about my next film. It deals with some uneasy questions around family codependency, addiction and sexual stereotypes. Essentially, it is a coming-of-middle-age anti-love story with elements of black humour, which ends with hope for the main character. I hope to lock the script in a few months and to start applying for financing.

“The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the director concerned and in no way reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or the Eurimages Film Fund.”