



Movie Review

Shadows (Senki)

2007

Director: Milcho Manchevski

Cast: Borce Nacev, Vesna Stanojevska, Sabina Ajrula-Tozija

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In the 2003 introduction to the published screenplay of his first feature-length fiction film, *Before the Rain* (1994)—which appeared actually a few months after that of the screenplay for his second feature, *Dust* (2001)—Milcho Manchevski expressed his frustration with widespread assumptions about that film as literal historical account. “In almost all interviews I gave for newspapers and television in dozens of countries over the final years of the last century,” he writes, “I kept repeating that *Before the Rain* is not a documentary about former Yugoslavia, nor about Macedonia, nor is it a documentary at all. I would say: ‘You can see this from the aesthetic approach: it’s shot like a fairytale; look at the camera work, or the editing, or the music. I am using actors. It’s scripted, for Heaven’s sake.’ Who got it—got it.”

Now we have Manchevski’s third feature and again there should be no doubt about aesthetic approach. *Shadows* premiered in early September at the Toronto International Film Festival and was quickly tapped as Macedonia’s official 2008 Oscar entry for Best Foreign Language Film. Already scheduled for theatrical release in ten European nations, this lovely and moving film is just now making the rounds of US distributors. The other two features, with their extended historical elements and fractured, multiple and overlapping narratives—what Manchevski calls “Cubist storytelling”—are widely rentable in the US. Watching the three features close together is extremely rewarding. Manchevski is building a body of work that will shine in retrospective programs—for shared, reverberating landscapes, elaborated images, and a cadre of supporting actors whose reappearance in successive film makes his work subliminally familiar and easy to enter—and now, for the clarity of his turn into newly personal territory and straightforward narrative.

“Return what’s not yours. Have respect,” says the old woman Kalina (Ratka Radmanovic), murmuring urgently in an ancient dialect that no one speaks anymore. She appears matter-of-factly, in her head scarf and heavy skirts and shawl, a small cross tattooed between her eyebrows in the old way, waiting in the dark on the living room couch of a young doctor. Lazar Perkov (Borce Nacev) has just returned to his apartment in the Macedonian capital of Skopje from his parents’ villa in the lakes district after a year convalescing from a near-fatal car crash. Trying to return to work at the hospital, he misses his already straying wife and little son, who have remained at the lake. He has nightmares, forgets things, fears his recovery isn’t stable, speaks in odd images that cause the unnerved family chauffeur to roll his eyes, and has now had his first visit from the unsettled souls of the dead.

That Lazar doesn’t know what’s stolen or how to put it back doesn’t get him a pass. Preoccupied with his young man’s struggle to emerge from the shadow of his mother’s overbearing ambition, herself a physician (the formidable Sabina Ajrula-Tozija)—impossible not to recall with the film’s final shot of blinding light—Lazar encounters one woman after another who teaches him that ignorance and personal innocence are no excuses, and who invite his wary, steadily growing search. In a land overrun for centuries by intruders, these women are preoccupied with theft and its attendant glaring debt. Manchevski’s images are earthy, specific, free of arid abstraction. For example, one day Lazar searches out the crowded ramshackle home of his mother’s chauffeur, Blagojce (Petar Mircevski), wanting a ride to the country. With his trained scientist’s eye he diagnoses a burn on the driver’s wife’s arm. She patiently explains the birthmark resulted from her mother eating stolen grapes while pregnant.

Manchevski tinkered for several years with the nuances of his film’s title, beginning with the *Ghosts* and detouring to *Bones* before settling on the immensely resonant possibilities of *Shadows*. The word’s added visual dimension encourages our attention toward DP Fabio Cianchetti’s use of reflections, doubling, broken space, and Menka’s propensity for suddenly dropping out of the frame mid-stride and then abruptly reappearing. Cities in Manchevski’s films have always been claustrophobic and disorienting. There’s a similar handling in that maze-like Paris apartment where Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers* occurs, a film Cianchetti also shot.

Kalina is the first “shadow” who appears to Lazar, identified by her dialect as one of the displaced Aegean Macedonians. A linguist whom the young man seeks out to translate her message also remarks on Lazar’s own name’s Biblical reference to resurrection. Seeking that professor, Lazar meets the lovely Menka, a suicide by hanging (luminously played by harpist Vesna Stanojevska). On a hospital gurney, then waiting for the elevator, Lazar meets the cross, craggy-faced Gerasim, a refugee whose brother nailed a spike into his heel at burial in hopes of magically halting his wandering in the afterlife (Salaetin Bilal, the Turkish Major in *Dust*). There is an unbaptized infant whom Gerasim awkwardly but tenderly carries instead of abandoning, and Kalina’s sometime companion wolf.

These walking dead may invite Lazar’s curiosity and compassion—and in Menka’s case his intimacy—but they cannot explain their repeated violent deaths or their connection with the cardboard box of old bones that his mother scavenged for her own 1973 anatomy class from beyond the consecrated ground of the cemetery—“not a real grave,” she snorts indignantly—in her home village of Gluvovo. Or what he must do. In the pivotal showdown, slugging each other, sprawling on her office floor, Lazar forcibly takes the bones from his mother in this fight over laying the past to rest or making it “useful” to one’s own ambitions.

That fight over a box of bones has room to contain a parable about the past these shadows more broadly represent, though one of the film’s more courageous qualities is Manchevski’s insistence that Lazar’s own journey carry the film emotionally and dramatically rather than resort to expose. Kalina’s dialect reveals she is from Aegean Macedonia—the eastern territory annexed by Greece in 1913—but the film says little else about her people except that their fate was “exodus.” Manchevski says audiences outside that culture don’t need the specific history to connect with these characters’ pain and longing for relief as abandoned and forsaken peoples.

For those inside that culture, even that slightest reference to Kalina’s extinct dialect evokes the following specifics. In 1912 Greece allied with Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro, declaring war on Turkey. While this ended the Ottoman Empire’s occupation of Macedonia, it led directly to Macedonia’s partition among its neighbors. In Aegean Macedonia, Greece embarked upon a decades-long campaign to change the population’s ethnic composition, forcibly expelling hundreds of thousands, confiscating lands, forbidding languages, renaming places, plundering and destroying villages, and re-colonizing the area with ethnic Greeks from nations to the east. During the Greek Civil War of the late 1940s this campaign accelerated anew. 60,000 were expelled in 1948. Some internments from the mid-40s continued until 1974—the year of Lazar’s mother’s anatomy class—and as late as 1985 Greek laws governing that area excluded Aegean Macedonian descendants from reclaiming confiscated land. In 1991, the modern Republic of Macedonia emerged from the upheaval of Yugoslavia’s disintegration by referendum.

Lazar’s journey is also the artist’s journey and a parable for the work of cinema. It becomes his job because he is the one who is there to see. Let us hope this film is available on US screens, and quickly.



By: Nancy Keefe Rhodes
Published on: 2007-10-09
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