

Before The Rain

Who ever heard of a movie from *Macedonia*? Macedonia--isn't that where Alexander the Great came from? In Greece somewhere, right? Well, not exactly. The new film, *Before the Rain*, is indeed from Macedonia, but it's from the very new Republic of Macedonia, a 1991 splitoff from the old Yugoslavia. Moreover, it is not too strange or alien, and it's as contemporary as the Bosnia crisis itself. Its maker, Milcho Manchevski, introduces us to a world that looks and sounds exotic, yet where familiar conflicts play out that are as old as the Macedonia hills that Manchevski lovingly photographs.

A word about the geography in *Before the Rain*, about which the film is not explicit. The Republic of Macedonia is territory that belonged to Turkey until the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in 1912, and it gained, after World War II under Tito's rule, some autonomy, including the official recognition of its Macedonia language. The population of some two million is about two-thirds Greek Orthodox Slavs and about 20 percent Albanians, mostly Muslim. It is that ethnic and religious mix that is incendiary in the village Mr. Manchevski depicts, near the border with Albania.

Before the Rain, which has been nominated this year for an Academy Award as best Foreign Language Film, is sophisticated in look and intricate in structure. The picture is a triptych, sections alternating between rural Macedonia and contemporary London. Part I, "Words," concerns a young monk, Kiril (Gregoire Colin) who has taken a vow of silence in a 12th-century monastery. The outer world intrudes when he finds a young Albanian girl, Zamira (Labina Milevska), hiding in his cell. She is on the run from gun-toting villagers, but Kiril wants to protect her and spirit her away from danger, perhaps to his uncle residing in London.

Part II, "Faces," finds us in London, where photo editor Anne (Katrin Cartlidge) is passionate about and probably carrying the baby of a hot combat photographer from Macedonia, Aleksander (Rade Serbedzija), while looking to drop her estranged husband, Nick (Jay Villiers). But Aleksander (Kiril's uncle) has had enough of Bosnia, war, photography, and London and longs to return to his village. Anne is hurt, but still feels she must break off with Nick and, to tell him so, they meet at a quiet restaurant where even they are not safe from brutal ethnic hatred and violence.

With Part III, "Pictures," we follow Aleksander back, after decades away, to his childhood village, where that same ethnic strife has reached, turning neighbor against neighbor. Religious rancor between Christians like Aleksander and Muslims, like the family of an old girlfriend, Hana (Silvija Stojanovska), simmer and sting. A UN observer force is present in the zone but can affect little. Looking for peace, he finds only enmity; searching for a long-lost past, he finds but cold comfort. When Hana seeks his help with her daughter--the same young girl Kiril found in his cell--his intervention only brings disaster.

There is a bucolic side to what we see in Macedonia (a couple of great horizon shots, for example) but more to the point is the ancient clash of ethnic and religious ties, triggered and exacerbated by the Yugoslav breakdown. There are no "right" sides here, there is simply inexplicable hatred of the Other and the heady drive of revenge. The film does not shrink from presenting these intractable divisions: you can only shake your head at them. The title evokes that calm but tense expectation that comes before a

shower. The characters in the film keep sensing it, and the film audience does too.

The surprise of *Before the Rain* is in the rather novelistic structure. Amazingly, and coincidentally, director Manchevski--who also wrote the script--produces a plot that turns around on itself like a Möebius strip, just as Quentin Tarantino did in his acclaimed *Pulp Fiction*. Here, as in the American film, there is a three-part narrative, the first part of which post-dates the last segment. Thus, the audience sees the end of the movie catch up with the first part as the film figuratively coils back upon itself. Inevitably, too, it makes the viewer rethink and recast what he has already seen. You have to work through this time traveling to appreciate the whole.

The whole is basically sound. The middle London sequence is the weak sister here; it seems thin and self-indulgent sandwiched between the raw but picturesque Macedonian ones. Further, it contains a gross cliché in a film refreshingly free of them. The cliché is Aleksander introduced as the disaffected photographer who has seen too much of the world's brutality: "My camera killed a man," he says at one point. Such a figure was, perhaps, distinctive as far back as *Medium Cool*, but after the Nick Nolte character is *Under Fire* and the John Malkovich one in the *The Killing Fields*, this stance is beginning to approach triteness.

Thankfully, Aleksander gets back to Macedonia and redeems himself. Mr. Serbedzija--once he gets out of London--is a virile, honest presence in his home territory, and one believes in and appreciates his poignant attempts to reconnect with a Muslim family now estranged from him. The actor, a stage veteran from Croatia known for his roles in the classics in the former Yugoslavia, has the look of Shakespearean stature--he has been a Macedonian Hamlet. Young Mr. Colin, as Kiril, speaks barely a word but tells us plenty through his eyes and body language. Ms. Cartlidge, last seen by Washingtonians in Mike Leigh's perfervid *Naked* (she was the much-abused girlfriend), does the best she can with a rather thankless role as a whiner. Making a telling debut is the 18-year old Macedonian girl Labina Mitevska as Zamira; she embodies the combination of alertness and terror of the hunted animal.

Yet this is Milcho Manchevski's opus. As a Macedonian filmmaker who has gone home again (he studied in Illinois and worked in New York), you sense he is working with material close to him, sense that he is retracing his steps along with his creation, Aleksander. As a first feature which introduces us to a new part of the world, it is a worthy debut.

("Before the Rain" is not rated, but it is clearly adult, containing sexual material and scenes and photos of violence.)

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