

Honeyland

From the Republic of Macedonia, of all places, comes an enthralling documentary that, as the best documentaries can, transports us into a realm we can barely imagine.

Hatidze Muratova lives with her ailing mother, Nazife, a dog and two cats in the northern mountains of Macedonia, making a living collecting honey using ancient beekeeping traditions. Part of that tradition is an equal-share premise that dictates that “half of the honey” collected goes to the bees’ themselves to maintain their colonies and ensure future product. Her world, which she has never left, is a barren, unforgiving land—made of little but rocks--to which she has adapted utterly, though she is close enough to the city of Skopje to sell her superior honey in the market. Her world is also circumscribed by the state of her mother who, at 85, is blind and paralyzed and totally dependent on her daughter.

Her onerous, but serene, life changes when Hatidze sees a van rumble onto her valley floor. The new neighbors are Turkish, like her. They are the Sams, a family headed by Hussein and Ljutvie, a rough-hewn couple and their seven children, who move in with a herd of cattle. At first, the presence of the family, full of rowdy kids and lively exchanges, is a balm to her solitude. She is charmed by the kids and is happy to engage them to fill her loneliness.

She also, fatefully, introduces the couple to beekeeping, and the Sams, eager to supplement their income, develop their own honey-collecting as a cash crop. They, however, disregard her advice and eschew the equal-share idea. Tensions emerge, the competition reaching to the level where ancient Nazife intones: “May God burn their livers.” The ecological message of the conflict between proven ancient practices and raw capitalist fervor is clear but understated.

This simple story is told in austere but telling strokes, with photography offering stunning views of a sternly ravishing landscape through which Hatidze moves like a lissome bird. The Macedonian co-directors, Tamara Katevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, took three years and shot 400 hours of footage to film their story, but it is pieced together so adroitly (running a swift 87 minutes), that it carries the weight of a fable.

Hatidze, who appears in most of the film’s frames, is a wonder. In her mid-fifties and sporting gnarled teeth and a weathered visage, she is both her inimitable self and an icon of the poor everywoman who has seen little but hardship. She is also smart, touching, and caustic, revealed mostly in the low-light reflections in her hut, with her mom as witness and target. One indelible scene has her fiddling with an old transistor radio, where she picks up the tune “You’re So Beautiful.” As an old movie nut, I early on saw her as a Macedonian version of the great Hollywood character actress Margaret Hamilton (the Wicked Witch of the West in “The Wizard of Oz”). Hatidze is, however, no witch but a craggy angel of the mountains.

Co-director Tamara Katevska summed up their relationship with Hatidze: “She said her biggest wish was that one day some journalist would come from some TV station and shoot her story--walking on the mountainside, working with the honey. For her, we were fulfilling this dream and she was totally open to us. She wanted to tell her story because she realized she was the last generation to live this way.” We should be grateful for having them as our witnesses.

(Unrated, the film is in old Turkish with subtitles and runs 87 minutes.)

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