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Living Within "Shadows"

By **Milcho Manchevski** (Special from the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival)

Shadows is a film about sex and death, and a few things in between, like personal responsibility.

I believe in films (and art in general) that are about people and about ideas, not about places. Some people make the mistake of reading a film from Macedonia as if it is a film about Macedonia. They can't shake off their need to put things in neat little folders. That stereotyping disguised as defense against stereotyping borders on intellectual racism. A good work of art is about people and ideas and emotions, not about geopolitical concepts. I don't see why Wong-Kar Wai couldn't make films about New York or Bergman about Taipei or Tarantino about Lagos. Those films would not be that different from the films these filmmakers have already made.

I believe what really matters in film is the tone, not the story. It is the tone that sends the message and communicates with the viewer much more than the story. I heard somebody describe my previous film *Dust* this way: He said if watching a good Hollywood film is riding a rollercoaster, watching *Dust* is like sitting in a car with a test-crash dummy.

Shadows is probably more personal than my other films. Not only because both I and the main character, Lazar, like watermelons, or because my mother was a doctor, just like his... My films *Before the Rain* and *Dust* were personal films, but they were also intentionally open enough so that they could be interpreted as a comment on society; *Shadows* has some of that, but it's really much more of a film about the inner life of one person. I feel personally connected to Lazar's hypnotic nightmarish journey. This film actually feels more personal, even though when I started making it, I didn't plan it that way.



Menka-Vesna Stanojevska and Lazar. Image copyrigh Bavaria Film International.

are eating my liver!"). Lazar's mother is what Lady Macbeth would have been like, had she lived to have an adult child.

Lazar seems to struggle between four tough women: his mother, his wife, Menka and his neighbour. I am just trying to speak the truth in face of the propaganda about the "power" of masculinity.

I have been asked about the sexual tension in the film. Sex - good. Hypocrisy - bad. Sex contains in itself both life and death. Because of the way society treats it - turning it into a taboo, being hypocritical, having a low threshold of tolerance for things sexual - sex ends up



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Kalina (Ratka Radmanovic) and her wolf. Image copyright Bavaria Film International.

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holding strong attraction for a lot of artists.

We have been raised to believe that there is some balance, some justice in the world. I am not sure this is necessarily true, but I am willing to reinforce that illusion for now. It's good when you pay your debts, even if you only have inherited them. That is a positive way of cleansing. Of course, in *Shadows*, all this is told in a very, very simple, accessible way, which I believe is the way interesting art should be. Sometimes I like esoteric art as well, but I am very drawn to simple, deceptively simple, art that actually can be quite deep, things like Kurt Vonnegut, for example.

I subscribe to what Bergman has said about violence, and I am paraphrasing here from memory: He says film is a perfectly legitimate way of ritualizing violence. Ritualizing, not glorifying. Society needs to deal with this extreme - yet integral - aspect of its existence. Ritualizing has been a central way of dealing with it since time immemorial. Film lends itself to ritualizing it for many reasons, its convincing "realism" not one of the least important. I believe that hiding violence from art or from social storytelling is not going to solve the issue. On the contrary, it is only going to make it worse. Not to mention that playing a shrinking violet about talking about violence is hypocritical, as those same people support many other kinds of violence. What about, say, a loyal employee being laid off after twenty-five years. For some people that's perfectly ordinary, acceptable. It is legitimate to ask, is that violence? And what does the fact that we don't discuss it as violence tell us about ourselves?

In a war, when someone gets shot, they don't just fall back. Probably it hurts, maybe they stagger, then they look at themselves and they are shocked. Do they at some point start laughing, and say, "Is this really happening to me?" Or do they say, "Damn! I wish I'd had more sex when I could have?" Or do they whine? What happens to this person during those 20 seconds or 20 minutes while he's dying? So, fortunately, in a film it is all make-believe, so you can explore a little bit of that when making a film. But if you treat violence as something without real consequences, something fun and easy, then you are doing society a disservice. -MPM

Image, top of page: Lazar (Borce Nacev) and his son. Copyright Bavaria Film International.

Milcho Manchevski was born in 1959 in Skopje, Macedonia, where he studied Art History and Archaeology before graduating from the Department of Cinema and Photography at the Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA, in 1982. He has directed numerous experimental and short narrative films and music videos. The most notable are the experimental 1.73, for which he won an award at Belgrade Alternative, and the video for the group "Arrested Development" for the song "Tennessee," which won many awards, including Best MTV Video. His first feature film, Before The Rain (1994), won more than thirty international awards, including Golden Lion in Venice and Independent Spirit, and was nominated for Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

He has authored a number of short stories, a conceptual book of fiction (The Ghost of My Mother), a book of photographs (Street), and numerous performance pieces by himself and with the group 1AM, which he co-founded. Manchevski teaches film directing and heads the Directing Department at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts' Graduate Department.

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