Bosnian Film Director Pjer Žalica: “Survival Was A Miracle; Creativity Was a Necessity”

Susan Welsh

In 1994, when the war in Bosnia was at its peak, the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra and the Choir of the Cathedral of Sarajevo performed Mozart’s Requiem in the open-air ruins of Sarajevo’s National Library, under the baton of Zubin Mehta. I am pretty sure that there was never such a performance of the Requiem as this one, in a city under horrific siege—a siege that, at nearly four years’ duration, would become the longest in the history of Europe. Historically known for its religious diversity, Sarajevo’s population before the war was about 45% Muslim, 38% Eastern Orthodox, and 7% Roman Catholic (today’s population is overwhelmingly Bosniak Muslim). The war that raged in Bosnia-Herzegovina from April 1992 to November 1995 left some 100,000 people dead and more than 2 million displaced, out of a total population of 4 million. Yet “Muslim” Sarajevo put on that majestic performance of the greatest Requiem Mass in Western Classical culture, with its benediction: “Grant the dead eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine on them...” Watching a film of that performance in years past, I thought there must be something special about Sarajevo, its people, and the nation. Part of it was their unusual sense of the power of music to bring people together in a common endeavor, in a belief that life is worth living, that present generations must overcome their suffering and make the future better for those to come.

More recently, I happened upon a number of films from Bosnia-Herzegovina, produced from 2001 to 2006. I was amazed that a country that was so recently devastated by war and “ethnic cleansing” could so quickly rise from the ashes to produce films of great vitality and essential optimism. The films I viewed are:

- No Man’s Land (Nićija zemlja), 2001, directed by Danis Tanović, winner of an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, readily available with subtitles. This is the only one of these four films to take place during the war. It tells the story of three soldiers—two Bosniaks and one Serb—trapped together in a trench between the opposing lines. The International Community, in the person of the British commander of the United Nations Protection Force, is determined to save face if possible, but to do nothing to save lives.

- Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams, 2006, directed by Jasmila Zbanic, readily available with subtitles, tells the story of a single mother and her 12-year-old daughter, living in Sarajevo and trying to cope with the personal legacy of the war. The mother’s depression and the daughter’s rage and rebelliousness come to resolution when the truth about the identity of the girl’s father is finally revealed.

- Fuse (Gori Vatra—The Fire Is Burning), 2003, directed by Pjer Žalica, winner of the Sarajevo Festival Grand Prize, readily available with subtitles.

- Days and Hours (Kod amidže Idriza—At Uncle Idriza’s), 2004, directed by Pjer Žalica, difficult to find, but exists with subtitles.

I contacted Žalica whether he found it as miraculous as I did that such excellent and forward-looking films could be produced in Bosnia so soon after the war. He replied:

The war in Bosnia, Sarajevo, was really brutal. It is really kind of a miracle that we survived the siege. But such a traumatic experience also has an exceptional value; it is an extraordinary force which helps you to separate unimportant things from the important ones. I could say that war had a crucial influence on my artistic maturation: It built me up, shaped me as a film director, and as a person as well. I would say that this horrible experience was something from which I ultimately benefited, artistically. Of course, I would prefer that it had not happened that way, that I had had a “normal” artistic development. But since, unfortunately, it happened, I tried to use it in any possible way, from a positive aspect.

We were filming throughout the war, non-stop, on a daily basis. We created some exceptional works, documentaries. The production of fictional films after the war was a logical consequence of that. But the financial situation was really bad during those years, so it took some time to get production going. But when it started, back in 2002–03, it was quite easy, and joyful.

In short, my answer would be: Survival was a miracle, creativity was a necessity.

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The Healing Powers of Laughter and Music

The fictional film *Fuse* takes place two years after the war in Tesanj, a town in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the two main parts of the nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, near the border with the other constituent part, Republika Srpska (not to be confused with Serbia, a separate nation). There are few jobs; corruption, prostitution, and the black market all thrive under the benevolent eye of the chief of police; land mines still explode under the feet of innocent victims; hatred still boils just beneath the surface of everyday life; and trauma afflicts many who have lost loved ones. If you were the mayor of such a town, and you learned that U.S. President Bill Clinton was coming to town to give a speech on democracy and reconciliation, what would you do? What if you were the chief of police? Or the local crime kingpin and pimp? Therein hangs a tale—which I won’t spoil by telling more details here.

Although the film is billed as a “comedy,” and has many very funny episodes, it is the humor of a country that has survived unimaginable horrors. In his Director’s Statement accompanying the film, Žalica wrote that he had come to understand “the awful optimism that gives the human spirit its inexplicable strength to recover from awful war and bitter peace. The ability and courage to laugh and find humor in hardship, even when the toughest life refuses to improve, helps us to survive and continue to have faith in the future.”

I asked Žalica why *Fuse* does not deal with Islam, except for an ironic comment here or there. None of the characters are believers, as far as the audience knows, I said. His reply:

I’m not sure that none of the characters are believers. Some of them could be, but that was not a social aspect, or a personal aspect that I was focused on. Religion as something personal could be an important motivating factor, but not in this story. Also, religion could be an important social generator for a story. But not in my movie. Lots of characters are not Muslims, so it’s not quite clear to me why you say “Islam.” There is no Islam, nor Orthodoxy, nor Catholicism in this movie. Intentionally, I wanted to have just people who are trying their best to regain a normal life, despite politics, religion, open war wounds, ethnic diversity.

Of course, you are right when you say that religion is a significant factor in the country, but I tried to focus on things that I thought were essentially important for the life of my characters. In this case, I think it was not religion. Ethnic diversity—yes; religion as part of it—of course; but religion as the most important—no.

After *Fuse* I made the film *Days and Hours*, which is a simple story about a man who came to repair a water heater, but instead repaired a human heart. This film is situated in a traditional Muslim family, neighborhood, but still does not deal with religion as some important subject. Maybe it’s up to me.

*Days and Hours*, unfortunately, was not released for mass circulation, but I managed to acquire a copy with subtitles, and found it a beautiful and life-affirming story. Žalica discussed it in a 2006 interview with Peter Scarlet, the executive director of the Tribeca Film Festival, on Link-TV’s “Cinemondo” program ([www.linktv.org/video/1628/interview-with-pjer-zalica-director-of-fuse](http://www.linktv.org/video/1628/interview-with-pjer-zalica-director-of-fuse)). Žalica pointed out that the film has no strong narrative line; rather, it is “microsurgery of the human soul.” The war is never explicitly mentioned, yet its impact is pervasive. “Many people told me that it really helped them to love life, better than before,” he said, adding with a laugh that others told him it was “really boring”!

In the film, a young household appliance mechanic, Fuke, pays a visit to his Uncle Idriz and Aunt Sabira several years after the war, to try to fix their worn-out hot water heater. He finds them still sunk in grief over the loss of their son in the war. He also discovers a rift between Idriz and his son’s widow that is now keeping the elderly couple from seeing the one joy of their lives, their granddaughter, Aida. Others in the neighborhood, old friends of the extended family, are suffering in their own ways. Fuke’s loving way of handling his relatives slowly rekindles their love for one another and their love of life. Finally Uncle Idriz picks up a long-abandoned mandolin, a neighbor hears him play and brings along an accordion, another shows up with his clarinet, everyone—including granddaughter Aida and her widowed mother—begins to sing, and soon the whole neighborhood explodes with music and laughter. (We never do learn the fate of the hot water heater.)

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Bosnia Today

I mentioned to Žalica that 6-7 years have now passed since these films appeared, and I see very little about former Yugoslavia in the press nowadays. What has changed? “What is it like in Bosnia now?” I asked. “Is there a sense of national pride and sovereignty, or is the hand of the International Community as heavy as you (hilariously) portrayed it in Fuse? What is the economic situation like? Education? Jobs? Outlook of the youth? How has the global financial crisis affected Bosnia?” Here is his reply:

Well... tough question. People in Bosnia are proud, nice, warmhearted. But national pride is divided, like everything else. Criminalized, nationalistic politicians are still misusing ethnic diversities and religion as the tool for total control and robbery. Fear of neighbor is still the way to rule in Bosnia. Artificial animosity among ethnic groups is the political ambiance created by the Bosnian political elite of all ethnicities, with the ultimate goal of absolute control. And absolute control is the common and unique political agenda.

The economic crisis is another trump that our politicians are using to threaten and humiliate people. Every day you can hear them saying, “We have to save, there is no money for anything”—at the same time their own salaries are growing, and corruption is total, from the primary school to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The international community has the same weak, impotent role as 15 years ago. Plus, they are obviously also profiting well from this situation. Hopefully, not for long. It seems that people are getting sick of that. We have elections this year, and it seems it’s a time of changes.

Of course, this is the worst possible image of the situation. Things are not so black, but they are not white, for sure. In conclusion, I could say that I’m an optimist. I love people, I love and believe in life in its primal form, based on openhearted relations between people. That’s why I’m a film director.

Žalica currently has three new films underway. The first, in the post-production phase, has music as a central theme; it is a documentary titled Orchestra, the story of a composer and pop star from Sarajevo, who wrote the music for Žalica’s other films. “It’s a story about the big, dramatic changes my country has passed through, but from very different perspectives.” Two fictional films are in pre-production: one about the German minority in Serbia during the Second World War, “which is a film about intolerance”; the second about a Mossad agent in Sarajevo during the recent war, “which is a story about detoxification of the human soul.”

If past is prologue, then we have some fine films to look forward to.

Note: Readers are encouraged to send comments, reviews, or suggestions for films to review to SlavFile or to Susan Welsh; welsh_business@verizon.net. Of particular interest, relative to this article, would be Serbian films. I can only cope with films that have subtitles, so if you have others in mind, I urge you to write a review yourself! Editing help is, of course, available.

Fuse
Residents of Tesanj have sewn U.S. and Bosnian flags to welcome President Clinton, whom they hope will bring international attention and prosperity to the struggling town. Do the red stars in the American flag signify secret communist sympathies on the part of the tailor in charge of the project?