

69th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 6

God Exists, Her Name is Petrunya: A satire from Macedonia “between anger and melancholy”

By Verena Nees
13 March 2019

*This is the sixth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held from February 7 to 17, 2019. The **first part** was posted on February 15, the **second** on February 22, the **third** on February 28, the **fourth** on March 5 and the **fifth** on March 11.*

This year’s Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) once again presented a number of documentary and feature films from eastern and southeastern Europe. Some took a new and refreshing approach. After years of films dominated by images of hopelessness and social decline following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the breakup of Yugoslavia, clear signs of resistance and rebellion are emerging.

“A satire between anger and melancholy” is the description given to the Macedonian film *God Exists, Her Name is Petrunya* by director Teona Strugar Mitevska. It was awarded the Ecumenical and German Film Guild jury prizes at the end of the Berlinale (the latter award has been handed out since the 1970s to the best art house film).

In this reviewer’s opinion, the film’s lead performer Zorica Nusheva also deserved to win the festival’s best actress award. Mitevska’s film opens in European cinemas May 9.

This enchanting work expresses both the anger and the longing for equality and justice prevailing in the tiny Balkan country of Macedonia, which became independent after the Yugoslavia war of the 1990s and is now called North Macedonia following the settlement of its dispute with Greece earlier this year.

The plot is based on events that actually took place in the small Macedonian town of Štip in 2014. As part of an annual ritual on Epiphany, the Christian feast day, a Macedonian Orthodox Church cleric blesses a wooden cross and throws it into the river, from which a pack of young men try to recover it. The one who finds it first is supposedly blessed with luck for a whole year, according to Orthodox religious tradition.

This time, however, Petrunya (Nusheva), a young unemployed female historian, also plunges into the icy waters.

She is first to fish out the cross and holds her prize triumphantly in front of the assembled television cameras.

A woman has rescued the cross—this is not in the clerical playbook! Petrunya is forced to defend her find against the combined power of the church, police, judiciary and her male rivals. She must also stand up to the media, which sensationalizes the event.

Contrary to the claims of various reviews, *God Exists, Her Name is Petrunya* is not a tract about gender issues. With wit and a light touch, the film shines light on the dire social reality in this post-Yugoslav mini-state ruled by a corrupt capitalist elite aided by the church and the rest of the establishment at the expense of a desperately poor populace.

With a population of just over two million people, nearly a quarter of the Macedonian workforce is unemployed, while the jobless rate rises to 47 percent among young people (2017).

The opening scenes reflect this reality: a barren, “godforsaken” hill in winter, with a few straggly power lines running into the void. The scene is gradually animated by liturgical chants, and a small procession led by a priest takes the foreground. Already the director is working with a certain twinkle in her eye: only a handful of people follow the Orthodox priest, as a young man, bearing a particularly large cross, hastens to join the procession. In his haste, the cross snags in a treetop and the young man nearly tumbles down the steps leading to the river.

The next scene features Petrunya hiding under a blanket. Her mother pushes a breakfast roll toward her. Why should she get up? She is out of work, despite having a first class degree in history. Her mother drives her to another job interview at a textile factory. A “well-inclined” neighbour is boss of the factory and has an office job for her, the mother says. But “put on something pretty. Tell him you are 24, not 32!”

Petrunya gets up. She is not very slim, has a broad face, and is no beauty, not the type of model that a nouveau riche Macedonian wants for his front desk. Nevertheless, her

disarmingly open demeanour exerts a certain fascination.

She borrows a flowered dress from her girlfriend, who survives by selling clothes online. Then Petrunya tosses on an old-fashioned, black plush coat and goes to meet the factory boss.

The latter is sitting in a glass office in the middle of a workshop, like a king surrounded by his ladies-in-waiting—mere seamstresses who eye Petrunya suspiciously. The allegedly well-intentioned neighbour looks down from above on Petrunya's dress, and in a bored voice asks her age (Petrunya: "30 ... hmm, 32") and about her education ("a degree in history"). Then contemptuously: "What's the point of history!" Finally, he becomes obnoxious and vulgar ("I would never f*ck you"). Of course she doesn't get the job.

A little later, she jumps into the river in her flowery dress and plush coat and rescues the Three Kings Cross. Relaxed, she lies on her bed at home later with the cross between her bare breasts, her face beautiful and smiling. She merely wanted the right to be happy, Petrunya later tells her friend to explain her leap into the water.

The forces of the state and the church dispute her right to happiness. What follows is a number of hilarious scenes at the police station around the question of what constitutes "democracy." At the beginning of her interrogation, the police inspector asks Petrunya: "Are you religious?" She answers the baffled official with the question: "Are you gay?" She is not prepared to answer any questions about her private life, she adds.

In another scene, the police chief and his friend, the priest, stand in front of a window. What should they do with the woman and the cross, the chief asks, handing the priest a glass of schnapps ("Watch out, that's pretty strong"). "This cross belongs to the church," says the priest. A woman cannot keep it. "Well," says the policeman. "But that's not a law. We have a constitutional state under the rule of law!" The priest straightens his gown and shrugs. "Yes, but there are also clerical rules." How else could we maintain support for the church?

While Petrunya is being held at the police station, although she has not been officially charged, a horde of the half-naked men who had dived for the cross romp in front of the building. They unleash their hatred and lust for revenge into a television reporter's microphone. The mob includes a number of aggressive skinheads, seemingly a hint at the right-wing gangs running amok in the former Yugoslav republics.

The bustling television reporter (well played by Labina Mitevaska) is the second leading character in the film. She embodies the type of self-absorbed media person who seeks to reduce all issues to the cliché of women's struggle against men. Her thesis, i.e., that Petrunya wanted to send a signal against the prevailing "medieval patriarchy," is met with incomprehension by her interviewees. Petrunya's parents

answer her pompous questions with disarming simplicity. For her father her daughter is "a good person." When asked if they pray, the father answers "no," the mother "yes."

At the police headquarters, where Petrunya waits to be released and talks to a young policeman who admires her courage, the reporter interviews workers passing by, "What do you think about the 'scandal surrounding the woman with the cross'?"

The first one replies: "Don't you have other problems to worry about? Who is doing anything about our criminal government?" And the next one says: "What if God has been a woman from the outset?" He provides the catchphrase for the film's title.

The reporter is unable to organise an interview with Petrunya. Finally, her boss pulls her off the story. The "scandal" has lost its appeal.

In an interview, the film's director, Teona Strugar Mitevaska, explains that from the start her team had no intention of making a feminist film. Even the girl who actually jumped into the river in 2014 would not have held such a view. Her film is rather about the fight for justice and equality. "We need a belief. We all need hope that we can create a movement that can change things."

In this context, a notable exchange takes place in the police station. Petrunya is once again questioned about her study of history: "In which special area have you focused—Alexander the Great?" the police inspector asks. Petrunya shakes her head. "No, the Chinese Revolution." "Why is that?" the astonished policeman asks, "Don't you care about our history, the history of Macedonia?" Petrunya responds: "I want to combine communism with democracy."

Although not taken further, this remark suggests a new and interesting development to be observed in several countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. History is returning, against a background of a growing wave of strikes and protests against social inequality and the corrupt capitalist regimes that emerged following the break up of Yugoslavia. What was Yugoslavia under Tito and what is socialism?

From this standpoint, the film ends on an optimistic note. Petrunya leaves the police headquarters with a cheerful look. She leaves the crowd behind her, hands over the cross to the priest ("I do not need it anymore.") and follows a trail upward in the snow.

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