

# Frozen Pieces of Time

interview

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If "Early Works", in the opinion of some film critics, marked the end of an illusion in which the word "revolution" was capitalized, if "Marble Ass" could be interpreted as one of the answers to the question what has left of the marble man in the nineties, in which terms then could we speak of Zilnik's latest "Where is this Ship Bound to?" It may well be that with this film Zelimir Zilnik ends the story of the system of values from a disputable social system, the story quite visible in his artistic and documentary film career, starting in 1967. The latest Zilnik's film, premiered at the fifth Palić International Film Festival (which took place between 24 and 31 July 1998), discloses his characteristic documentary -style view of things. This is the view that "encircles" a seventy-year-old actor named Giuseppe Pastorčič on his way through Central and Eastern Europe in search of the woman of his life. This unusual film voyage starts in Istria, continues through Slovenia, Hungary and Vojvodina and ends in Montenegro by summarizing both a life story and a century at its end.

Q: Your films have always contained certain realistic, life experience which both inspires and provokes the basic plot of the film. To what extent was the life story of your latest film's main character, the Istrian Giuseppe, the foundation for the story of the destinies of common people from Central and Eastern Europe?

A: Building up a film story usually goes this way: I define the subject-matter I would like to pursue, and then I gather interpreters and associates with whom the project is going to be packed up. The "pack-up" should be as authentic as possible. Since I see the film as an iceberg in which pieces of time, characters, ambiance in which we shoot the film get frozen, I get ready for the hard work of looking for the participants. Sometimes I take famous actors, sometimes people who have never acted in a film before. Lazar Ristovski simply seemed to be the most veritable womanizing foundryman ever, same as Milenko Pavic Dika seemed to me the ideal businessman-trickster, or Skelzen Ulaj from "Brooklyn-Gusinje" the authentic gastarbeiter bridegroom - to name only a few characters that had roamed into my films. Giuseppe Pastorčič was not the cause of the whole story, he just "stuffed" the story with his brilliant performance. He had been ignorant to the crucial elements of the plot, such as being a child of an Austro-Hungarian officer, travel to Montenegro and stay in Budapest, or the whole row of entanglements concerning love and the mob. He has never experienced any of these, but his performance lead spectators to believe that the film was the reconstruction of Giuseppe's life story. Creating the dilemma whether we watch the real life or the film is very intriguing to me. Diving into the illusion of the screen is the very sorcery of the film.

Q: Who is actually central to the film story - is it Giuseppe or the countries of Slovenia, Hungary and Yugoslavia (Vojvodina and Montenegro) he travels through with Djordje, in search/quest of the woman of his life?

A: I will tell you about the origins of the story, and you see for yourself what is essential in it. Two years ago I was invited to make a screening of my films in Gorizia, in Italy. The town resembles Petrovaradin, having a hill with an Austro-Hungarian fortress on it, only that Gorizia is a few times bigger. In the fortress, there was a projection room. Many people came to see the films and we had conversations a few hours long afterwards. They asked me about Yugoslavia, its tearing apart, the life we live today. They were very much interested in Vojvodina, in multilingual education, media, administrative procedures. I was astonished. The senator of the province was also there, and he invited me to the dinner after the screenings, using that occasion to ask me about every detail of our life here. I flew off the handle! C'mon, guys, chill out, tell me how do YOU live, we are not of much use anymore. Then they started lamenting how the things got tough for them after the disintegration of the East. How come? They are also a former Austro-Hungarian province, multinational, with German, Slovenian and Croatian schools. The unstitching of the former Yugoslavia along the national seams brings them under the thumb of Rome, implying a denial of the "luxury" of being different. Their nostalgia related to the former Yugoslavia leads to the statement "you'll get together again, just tell us when". They saw my modestly funded productions and asked me if I had any suggestions for them and if we could collaborate. On the next day, I went to Trieste with my late friend Vuk Babic. He showed me the Serb cemetery, with rich tombs as evidence of the economic power of the shipowners and merchants who had moved there from Herzegovina. Then we had a long talk with his friends, some Italian communists, divided in two factions, one of which claimed Yugoslavia disintegrated because of Tito's old revisionism, whose expression was his "dilution" of communism through fights with Stalin. The other group claimed the opposite: the state socialism collapsed because of the Stalinist isolationism, because it did not possess the essence of socialism, which democracy is. It was there, in the Trieste harbour, with my feet dipped into the Adriatic Sea, that I sketched the main features of Giuseppe's story: the main character, Italian, who observes the turbulences in the East with the experience of a nation that had once in the past been seized by the euphoric frenzy of fascism, and with an even greater experience of a nation that pulled its own empire down in civil wars, an empire that had ruled the whole world.

I told my friends from Gorizia I had the framework of the story and I was looking for a seventy-year-old actor that would give a summary of his life in the film, as well as a summary of the century that is drawing to a close. That was the point when our endless correspondence started: they claimed that there was no such actor, and that there was nobody who could organize the shooting of such a film in several Eastern bloc countries.

Six months later, there was no progress yet. So I started looking for an actor myself. It was in Hungary that I discovered Giuseppe Pastorich, a retired bricklayer from Monfalcone, and, as one can see, he did a great job playing the part.

Q: With the film "Where is This Ship Bound to?", you seem to get out of the thematic circle that the Yugoslav cinema had fallen into years ago. You seem to have decided to "break down another myth", this time telling a story about Central and Eastern Europe in a humouristic way, a story about little men's destinies that have shaped the past and the present of this corner of the world. "Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time" broke down one of the greatest myths around. "Marble Ass" was an analysis of the myth related to masculinity and the warrior mentality. What is it that lies in the essence of your interests when it comes to the film "Where is This Ship Bound to"?

A: That is a good question. Do I, at such a relatively old age, want to become an expert at Rome and Anthony and Cleopatra, or is there some other motive? And why not say immediately what the other motive was? It was an idea, a thought that torments us here, and everyone in the former Yugoslav republics,

no matter how much we are trying to suppress it. And the thought is the question how one can swallow down and digest all these defeats inflicted on us, the defeats that would go on torturing generations to come. Within the Yugoslav film production, we have already been given several answers: stories about our ill fate and wild nature, whose point is that we are a people prone to destruction and slaying. As if it was one of the features of the great Slavonic soul, which uses the pauses in-between its fratricidal sprees to create and recite sentimental poems. Another answer to the question is related to depicting the arrogant stupidity and gluttony of our leaders, who are designers of those defeats.

In this film, I have chosen a slightly different point of view: a defeat is a logical lesson and a price we pay to the irresponsibility, which we all show when taking part, or not taking part, in the "public affairs". Our general, decades long assent to carry the weight of arrogance and stupidity of those in power, at a point began to make us different from the normal world. Maybe it is time for us to let go of the narcissistic insight of our own "corruption" or our own "ingenuity" and take a look around ourselves. Let us see what the others are doing and how they live. Let's simply get off the tree from which we have been falling head-on for decades.