

'Men Don't Cry' ('Muskarci koji ne placu'): Film Review | Karlovy Vary 2017

3:06 PM PDT 7/12/2017 by Boyd van Hoeij



Courtesy of KVIFF

Alen Drljevic, the former assistant director of Golden Bear winner Jasmila Zbanic ('Grbavica'), makes his feature fiction debut with this look at veterans of the Yugoslav Wars.

A group of middle-aged Yugoslav War veterans from different backgrounds get together for an extended group-therapy session in *Men Don't Cry* (*Muskarci koji ne placu*), the fiction feature debut from Alen Drljevic. The rookie cut his filmmaking teeth as an assistant director on the films of Golden Bear winner Jasmila Zbanic (*Grbavica*, *On the Path*), and she's a producer here, but there's also a sense that their partnership goes deeper than that, with *Men Don't Cry* almost functioning as a testosterone-addled pendant to the female-focused stories of Zbanic. Both bring a keen eye for detail and nuance to stories that explore the thorny recent past; macho attitudes and shame; universal humanity vs. ethnic divides and religion and tradition vs. atheism and contemporary Western attitudes. The pic went home with the Europa Cinema Label and the Special Jury Prize at the recent Karlovy Vary International Film Festival and will appeal to other festivals and distributors.

Most of the story unfolds in a nondescript, off-season hotel in the mountains of Bosnia, where the volunteering group-therapy leader, Ivan (Sebastian Cavazza of *On the Path*), from what is now Slovenia, has corralled a group of war veterans from the different corners of former Yugoslavia for what is probably an intentionally vaguely titled "reconciliation course." Most of the men aren't necessarily even all that interested in revisiting their wartime experiences again — and even less so with people from the ethnic groups they were trying to kill or risked being killed by — but at the end of their few days there, they have been promised a monetary reward for their participation, which many of the men could probably use, seeing how their daily lives

are filled with divorces, traumas, unemployment, disabilities and other unpleasant realities that can all be at least partially linked to their wartime experiences.

The film, written by the director and Zoran Solomun, who co-wrote Zbanic's *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales*, initially seems content to just observe the group of men as they first play innocent-looking games — they are pelicans and penguins, running after each other — and then sit down for their first group talk. Ivan's statement, which is used as the starting point for the discussion, is that "each side committed war crimes" during the conflict some two decades earlier, which immediately throws off a few of the men. The confrontational Andrija (Ljubjana-born Primož Petkovsek of *No Man's Land*), for example, can't believe his Croat compatriot, Valentin (Leon Lucev of *Grbavica*), feels like he can stray from or at least question the accepted war narrative of his ethnic group, something that goes not only for the Croats but also the Bosnians and the Serbs.

Like in the films of Zbanic, what interests Drljevic isn't that all his protagonists become better people by the end of his narrative, which is not realistic and robs the various storylines of any possible suspense or intrigue. Indeed, some of the attendees will take off early, might set fire to someone else's property or remain entrenched in their personal version of the war. What matters is that, like Ivan, the film isn't harshly judgmental about these different reactions but instead incorporates a variety of them to suggest something of the breadth and reality of the different types of ways people are dealing with their traumatic past.

Ivan suggests the men re-enact a crucial war memory as well, though the actual purpose of the exercise, which is to give them an opportunity to "correct" one of their regrets through role-playing, isn't clearly stated at the start. Valentin, for example, gets to relive the moment one of the men under his command preferred to commit suicide rather than be killed by Serbian forces, a potent cathartic experience for him captured by cinematographer Erol Zubcevic (*Snow, Children of Sarajevo*) in short, staccato and twitchy handheld shots with a very limited depth of field that suggest something about the confusion and lack of clarity of both the moment in the past as well as his response to reliving it in the present.

Through late-night conversations in their shared rooms, as well as banter at breakfast and late-night drinking and singing sessions, more details emerge about the men's situation during and after the war. The fact the protagonists remain partially interchangeable is part of the film's core message, suggesting how every side in the war suffered and there were no real winners. The middle-aged Muslim Bosnian, Merim (Emir Hadzihafizbegovic of *Grbavica*), is thus afraid of the dark and says it's a sin to want to die, while his much younger Muslim compatriot Jasmin (Boris Ler of *In the Land of Blood and Honey*), who turned 18 and was sent to fight against his will at the tail end of the war, has become a nihilistic atheist who's confined to a wheelchair. But their roles — or, indeed, those of any of the others — could have been reversed if things had gone differently.

Men Don't Cry finally functions best as a revealing peek inside the complex fusion of toxic masculinity, ethnic strife and real-life traumas that was caused and heightened by the conflict rather than as a more traditional narrative about a man or men on a way toward redemption. This choice, which makes the film different from Zbanic's narratives, is both the film's biggest strength and a clear weakness, as it suggests something about the psychology of the male species in the specific context of the Balkans and the region's most recent conflict, but also makes the already darkly themed film a harder sell commercially, as watching the film at times really does feel more like watching actual therapy sessions than experiencing an emotional story of change and deliverance through a character.

For most of the running time, the acting and cinematography are almost documentary-like, though there are certainly moments, especially when suggesting how the past haunts or has influenced the present, that the fact Drljevic has chosen to work with some of the region's best actors rather than non-professionals really pays off. And the film's initially enigmatic opening shot, in which a dead tree divides a Balkan landscape that's slowly being invaded by mist into two, finally becomes a potent metaphor for the way in which the war, now dead and over, has the potential to still divide a country and cloud the reality and good judgment of its inhabitants. Not everyone might benefit from therapy, meeting with their peers from across the divide or even just talking about what they went through, Drljevic seems to suggest. But for some of the veterans, it might really clear the air and lead to a brighter future.

Production companies: Deblokada, Iridium Film, Produkcija Ziva, Manderlay Films, This and That, Cineplanet

Cast: Boris Isakovic, Leon Lucev, Emir Hadzihafizbegovic, Sebastian Cavazza, Ermin Bravo, Boris Ler, Ivo Gregurevic, Izudin Bajrovic, Primoz Petkovsek

Director: Alen Drljevic

Screenplay: Alen Drljevic, Zoran Solomun

Producers: Damir Ibrahimovic, Jasmila Zbanic

Director of photography: Erol Zubcevic

Production designer: Mirna Ler

Costume designer: Sanja Zeba

Editor: Vladimir Gojun

Music: Dado Jehan

Sales: Picture Tree International

Venue: Karlovy Vary International Film Festival

In Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian

98 minutes