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The World is Big at the International Film Showcase

Winner of the California Independent Film Festival 2009

Best Picture award comes to local theaters

By Sophie Braccini



Film poster

Provided

The *World is Big*, also known as *The World is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* (the complete translation of its Bulgarian title, Светът е голям и спасение дебне отвсякъде) is a 2008 movie by Stefan Komandarev, from Ilija Trojanow's novel of the same name. With the end of the Bulgarian communist regime, state subsidies for movies dried up and film production in Bulgaria fell into a black hole. But a few recent releases suggest that the lean years are ending.

The World is Big is the most ambitious Bulgarian movie produced since 1989; four countries contributed to its making: Bulgaria, Germany, Slovenia and Hungary. In 2010 the movie made the shortlist of nine semi-finalists to the 82nd Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film. The film can be described as a tragic-comedy in which humor and drama intertwine to tell the stories of two parallel journeys – of fleeing one's country in the 1980s, and of coming back home today.

After a car accident Alexander, a 30-year-old young German of Bulgarian origin, loses his parents and his memory. Arriving from Bulgaria, his grand-father, Baï Dan, (played by Miki Manojlovic, a leading actor in the Balkans and Europe) decides to take him on a trip to the Bulgarian village where he was born and spent his first years. The film gradually becomes a road movie as the two men journey toward the Balkans, through Europe, on a tandem bicycle.

The old man, a backgammon champion, takes his grandson on a spiritual journey toward his past

and his family, while teaching him the rules of backgammon. Manojlovic gives a great performance as an aging Balkanic sage with a twinkle in his eye. In parallel to the contemporary trip, the movie uses flash-backs to transport the spectator to the '80s and the saga of a Bulgarian family forced to exile in Italy and Germany by a government that was very close to Moscow's politics at the time. The film gives only glimpses of life in the Eastern bloc under authoritarian rule—the oppressive power structure, the difficulty of fleeing, life in the migrant camps in Italy that turned out to be even more repressive, and life in Germany are barely touched upon.

Some might find that there are one too many transitions between the present and the past, and that this somewhat disrupts the viewer's ability to identify with the characters—the lyricism of this story, the reunion between the old Bulgarian and the grandson he had lost for 25 years, has difficulty blossoming. By the same token, life in Bulgaria and in the camps is not given enough depth to completely convince the viewer. Komandarev didn't want to underplay one period to highlight the other, but there is not enough time in a single movie to fully develop the characters and involve the audience.

It is nonetheless a powerful movie that asks simple and important questions common to most human beings. Where are my roots? Who am I? It is also a movie about the desire of freedom and the capacity to fight back, about the difficulties of living in a foreign country and the choice between staying there and leaving.

The film will play at the Orinda Theater, January 6-12, and at the New Rheem Theatre, January 13-19, kicking off the second year of the International Film Showcase. The Showcase was created by Orinda residents Efi Lubliner and JoAlice Canterbury. Every month they bring an internationally acclaimed foreign film, which has never been released commercially in the Bay Area, to Lamorinda. For more information, tickets and show times go to <http://www.lfef.org>.

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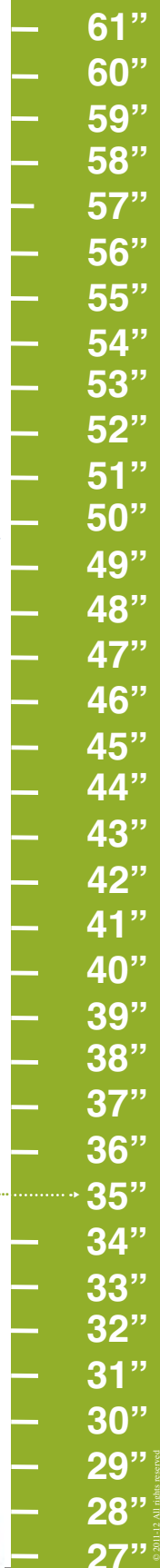
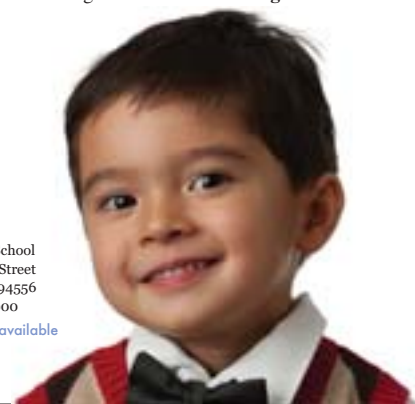
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