

Interview: Alen Drljević • Director

"Questioning our own truths is what cinema is for"

by Vladan Petkovic

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Bosnian filmmaker **Alen Drljević's** first fiction feature, *Men Don't Cry*, world-premiered in Karlovy Vary's Official Competition. Cineuropa spoke to the director about the idea for his film and the tough subject of facing the war-torn past.

Cineuropa: Where did the idea for the film come from?

Alen Drljević: The film is based on an actual peace workshop, organised by an organisation that helps war veterans from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia. I first had an idea to make a short documentary about it, and in 2010, I applied to take part in one of these workshops, as I also fought in the war in Bosnia as a soldier. And I thought the war and my experiences in it were long behind me, that I was doing this purely for the purposes of the documentary. But when I got there, this whole process pulled me in so deeply that I immediately forgot about the project. You sit there with people who literally used to shoot at one another. Of course, it starts with distrust, anxiety and discomfort, and slowly develops into a kind of understanding, compassion, and finally has a cathartic effect. That's when I realised how many repressed and buried emotions and experiences I had inside myself, and this workshop helped me immensely. And that's where I got the idea to make it into a fiction film.

How did you decide on the directing approach?

I wanted to keep some of the documentary qualities, so there are two non-professionals acting in the film, who are actual war veterans. Also, some of the actors were in the war. For instance, the character of Valentin, played by **Leon Lučev**, is based on the actor's own

experiences from the war in Croatia. And **Emir Hadžihafizbegović** was in the war in Bosnia. But even those of us who did not fight in the war, we all carry this burden, and we all have unanswered questions about it. So we went for a full immersion, and every actor quickly found in himself something that is connected to his character and its traumas. We had a solid, pretty much locked-down script, but at the acting rehearsals ten days before shooting, I let the actors improvise.

The documentary approach was also present in the camera work. I decided to film the big scenes of psychodrama with two cameras and to let the actors do their thing. Each of the psychodrama scenes was filmed in one shot. It was very exhausting, so after three or four takes, it would feel like we had been shooting for 24 hours.

But the psychodrama part was not that present in the original workshop, correct?

In reality, it's a peace workshop, so there are some therapeutic methods involved, but not so much, and we decided to add more of the psychodrama. According to psychologist **Vladan Beara**, who has been working with war veterans for 20 years, the best way to face one's own war traumas is to meet a former enemy. Also, I wanted to stay away from too many monologues. I knew from the start that I didn't want to use flashbacks, because they would decrease the tension and break the emotional charge that the film is building. So psychodrama is a much more cinematic approach, as opposed to characters just sitting and talking about their experiences.

You deal with the war and its consequences in many of your films. Do you think you are done with it now?

I went off to the war when I was very young, and it's something that I have to live with. But I think that the societies of the countries of the former Yugoslavia have not yet come to face their pasts. I think this is only starting now. And this is not unusual; the Germans also began to face Nazism only some 20 years after the Second World War. I think we're finally starting to make films that are not trying to just tell us their versions of the truth, but instead films in which we question our own truths. I believe this is one of the goals of cinema and art in general.