

Karlovy Vary: Alen Drljević on the Unresolved Conflict in Bosnia

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The legacy of war and the search for reconciliation are at the heart of “Men Don’t Cry,” Bosnian filmmaker Alen Drljević’s feature film debut, which screens in competition at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival. The Yugoslav wars and their aftermath have had a major impact on the director, himself a veteran, and defined many of his cinematic endeavors. Drljević spoke to Variety about the film and the lasting effects of armed conflict.

Your work, including “Men Don’t Cry” as well as your documentary “Carnaval” and the films you worked on with Jasmila Žbanić, all seem to revolve around the Yugoslav wars and their legacy. How would you say the war continues to influence your work?

The wars in former Yugoslavia took place when I was a young man and it changed my life completely. I never could have imagined that something so horrible could happen in my country. And of course, we live our lives with the legacy of that period. There are still so many questions to be answered. Unfortunately, the world has transformed radically in the last 20 years, so these questions have become more and more actual and universal.

Is “Men Don’t Cry” set in Bosnia?

The story is set in a remote mountain hotel in Bosnia. A group of war-scarred veterans from different sides in the Yugoslavian conflict, from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, are brought together by a peace organization. Emotions are highly charged as old enmities and hostilities emerge.

How did you come up with the story? Are there many such therapy programs for veterans taking place in Bosnia?

In the summer of 2010 I signed up to participate in one of the training events for war veterans organized by a peace organization. My primary aim was to conduct research which was to serve as a basis for possibly making a short documentary on the subject. Having been a soldier in the Bosnia and Herzegovina war myself, I thought that my participating in one of these workshops would be the best possible immersion into the “story.” The workshop I attended captured me completely. I was sitting with people who had literally fired shots at each other. Or, to put it more precisely: we had fired shots at each other. What started in an atmosphere of mistrust and discomfort, and even tension in communication, turned into quite an uncommon relationship of understanding and compassion. All those deeply buried emotions and unresolved issues that I had carried within me surged to the surface. Emotional tensions, unusual dynamics in communication and, finally, the catharsis experienced in the workshop have all led to my decision to make a feature film on this subject. There are very few therapy programs for war veterans in Bosnia, especially for veterans who fought on different sides of the war.

Have such programs been successful in healing the emotional and psychological wounds among veterans of the war?

Trauma is a very personal thing. What traumatizes one person can be of less significance to others. This variation in people’s reactions occurs because of their individual personality, beliefs, personal values, and previous experiences. There is very strong professional opinion that meeting with former enemies is the best way in dealing with war trauma.

To what extent is Bosnian society still dealing with the legacy of the war?

In my opinion, war in Bosnia has never really ended. It is still present in the heads. As a society we have never really dealt with the past. And this silent, invisible war is something that could be easily manipulated. Real problems like corruption or poverty cannot be taken seriously because the focus is always in false and misused national or religious issues.

What were some of the main challenges you faced in making your first feature film?

It is a very long and hard process in Bosnia to make a feature film. We have just one or two feature movies per year. It is especially a problem if one is making a first one. It took me six years from the first draft of the script to filming “Men Don’t Cry.” But I think, or at least I hope, it was worth the wait.

Do you have a next project in development? If so, what will it be about?

I am doing some research work for a documentary about illegal miners in Bosnia. Everything is still in the development stage. Maybe in the end it could be a script for a feature film, as was the case with “Men Don’t Cry.”