

INTERVIEW

Ivan Ramljak on *Once Upon a Youth*

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We spoke to Croatian filmmaker Ivan Ramljak during the online edition of the 19th DokuFest Prizren (August 7-25), where his graduation film “Once Upon a Youth” won the Balkan Doc competition. The film is an archival collage-film which depicts the late 1990s and early 2000s in Zagreb through a portrait of an artist friend of Ramljak. The director discusses that eventful period in the region’s history, the idea behind making his film, and explains how Croatia’s cultural scene has since developed.

First of all, congratulations on your award in the Balkan Doc competition at Dokufest.

Thank you, I was actually very surprised by it. We were applying at different festivals for over a year and most of them turned us down, so at some point I began to question whether the film is even good. It was my master’s graduation film in Zagreb, and the professors and everyone were thrilled by it. But when we started to send the film to the biggest festivals, just to try it, everybody rejected us.

Then Sarajevo as well as documentary festivals like Cinéma du Réel didn’t accept us either. But these rejections were very interesting, because we didn’t get standard computer-generated emails, but long texts about how great the film was and how moved they were and that they cried a lot. We even got a huge email from Sundance, that was really something! It was very interesting to get this kind of refusals. Now, with this award, I’m satisfied and can be calm, because I know that everything is okay.

Your film was my absolute favorite at the DokuFest Prizren, I was really impressed and touched by it. For someone like me who only

grew up in the 1990s, it's a real adventure to watch it. What was the idea behind making the film? And how was the process of making it?

I first thought about making the film when I realized that Marko was kind of a forgotten person. When you google his name, you end up with almost nothing. He was working on many different projects, he was a photographer, a VJ and a DJ. But all of that was before everybody started to put everything up on the internet. In this age of the early internet, you couldn't find anything online. He was also studying at the Film Academy in Zagreb, but he never finished. At the academy people also mostly forgot about him, so I had this horrible feeling that I must do something, because I can't let this guy be forgotten. He really did too many good things.

With that idea in mind I talked to one of our mutual friends. I wanted to first talk to him, because I didn't know whether that's a good idea or completely crazy or maybe too painful and inappropriate in a way. That friend of ours said that it was a great idea and that we had to build this monument for Marko because he absolutely deserved it. Then I went to talk to his mother and his sister. I presented them with the idea very carefully because I knew that the whole thing was extremely painful for them. But they told me that I needed to do it. Most of the material, all the photographs and a good part of the videos, was kept by Marko's mother in her flat. There're also some photographs and films that we couldn't find, although we knew that he shot them. We don't know where those ended up.

We then digitized all the material that we could find, around 15 000 photos and maybe ten hours of video material. Some of the videos were shot by Marko and me, some by other people like his sister or some other friends. All this visual material was the starting point. And from the beginning I knew that I wanted to keep this visual part completely archival to really recreate the atmosphere of that time, so I didn't want to shoot anything now.

From the very beginning, we already had this concept of five characters talking about Marko, so actually the end result doesn't differ that much from the original idea. We weren't sure whether the sequential dramaturgy would work, but it did. When we watched the first rough cut in the editing room, we were actually surprised how well everything worked out. The technical part of the process was hard, but not as hard as the emotional part.

As you said, you used all this authentic material to recreate the atmosphere of this particular time. This is what you really get as a viewer, the film feels very raw and intense. Maybe you could tell us a bit more about your personal experience of the time in which the film is set, the whole spirit of these first years after the disintegration of Yugoslavia?

Firstly, about this rawness, at some point we thought about making it less raw. We experimented with some sound design and tried to use some sounds that could fit the pictures. We actually made half of the film like that and we were also thinking of using more music. But then we realized that we were actually losing this emotion and the atmosphere suddenly felt fake. We realized that we needed to keep it completely raw which is maybe not so common.

To answer your question, those times were very interesting. The war ended in 1995 and I personally never felt that I was part of any nationality. I was born in Yugoslavia. I'm a Croat, but I honestly don't even understand what it means to be a Croat or anything else but a human being. When the war ended and we gained our independence, I didn't expect anything but some kind of normality. We expected to live in a normal country like the Western countries surrounding us, but this period from 1995 to 2000 was very strange, because we had a quite conservative and nationalist government.

Our government was scared of any kind of cultural or social thought that was different from their own conservative politics, so they were banning radio and TV stations. It was completely different than in Serbia, for instance. Serbia was the "Wild Wild West" or "Wild Wild East". You could do anything in Serbia, you could buy liquid ecstasy in the store, legally! And in Croatia you couldn't even smoke a joint, because you would end up in prison. It was this paranoid government that thought that they can somehow survive if they forbid everything.

Actually all these things that we started, this radio station I'm talking about in the film, this club, this pop magazine, we started all of that because we didn't have anything like that. We didn't have a place to go, so we started a club. We didn't have a radio station that we liked to listen to, so we started a radio station. Our motivation to do all this was actually very selfish, but in the end, it turned out that we were actually building these independent cultural institutions that became quite important and still exist today.

When I talk about that time to young people, people in their twenties nowadays, they cannot believe that we could only go to bars, that there were no film festivals, no music festivals, that nobody had any money, so you couldn't travel anywhere. Of course we also had no internet back then and the things that we could do were very limited. So we were driving around in circles smoking marijuana, and that's a nice metaphor for those strange times.

Your film clearly shows how important music and cinema are for you and your friends. What music and what films had a special impact on you during these years?

I remember that one friend of ours had a tape of a David Holmes radio show

program, from the BBC maybe, that he was just mixing. He was mixing together everything from Sonic Youth to some crazy African music from the 60s, from Serge Gainsbourg to some experimental stuff. I remember that we were listening to that tape over and over again. That was the moment when we realized that you can actually mix everything together if you know how to do it.

At this point, there was already this famous student radio station called Radio Študent based in Ljubljana. We wanted to create a radio station that would play some kind of music that you don't expect on Croatian radio stations. In the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, we also had an important radio station in Zagreb, Radio 101. The station was really political and the only independent radio station at that time, but the station and their music actually grew quite old over time. So we gathered a lot of people who wanted to work at Radio 101, but couldn't. All of them were crazy experts on different radical and bizarre kinds of music.

As for cinema, it was a big problem that we didn't have a cinematheque in Zagreb in the 90s. For some reason, winners from Cannes and other festivals would never play in our cinemas. So we had to go to Ljubljana to discover directors like Kiarostami, Takeshi Kitano, Sokurov or Wong Kar-Wai.

One of the liveliest stories in your film are the summer road trips to the Croatian islands. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

We wanted to travel and we didn't have any money, because the salaries in Croatia in the middle of the 90s were very low, maybe around 100 Euros. I don't know who first had the idea to see all of Croatia's islands. It's actually the most beautiful part of the country. The summer trips were just incredible. We had crazy budgets like 10 Euros a day and we barely ate and drank. This project lasted over 10 years and in the end, we saw all of the over 40 islands. I didn't see all of them with Marko though. I visited these islands again for my film *Kino otok [Islands of Forgotten Cinemas]*, a short documentary about the lost film culture on the Croatian islands from 2016].

Once Upon a Youth is obviously a portrait of your own generation which, as you said, built up independent cultural institutions that still exist today. How do you perceive the new generation and their culture in Croatia today?

Everything's changing all the time and it's of course very interesting to watch that. For instance, in Zagreb in the last couple of years we're starting to have a very strong jazz scene which didn't exist before. It happened by accident, because we had three or four guys and girls who studied jazz abroad, in the UK

and in Austria. They all returned to Zagreb more or less at the same time. There's also one club that opened coincidentally and the whole scene grew out of it. We now have maybe ten or fifteen jazz bands playing all kinds of jazz and three different kinds of clubs in Zagreb. Of course, I'm talking of the time before coronavirus and lockdown.

But for instance in Split, the biggest city at the seaside, they completely lost their scene, more or less because of tourism. Everyone is just thinking about making money in tourism, so nobody is playing in a band anymore. It sounds funny, but it's really like that. One friend of mine who lives there told me a couple of months ago that there are no rehearsal rooms in Split anymore, because there're no bands. All the guys who had these rehearsal rooms for bands to rent out bankrupted because of that. That's horrible!

There are a couple of hip-hop and trap acts, but no bands. So it changes all the time, I cannot say that there's a better scene today than what it used to be. Different times bring different problems. This whole thing with corona and lockdown really reminded me a lot of the time during the war, the beginning of the 90s. Just two days after the lockdown was introduced in Zagreb, we had the biggest earthquake in the last 140 years, which was completely surreal! After that Zagreb looked as if we had had some air bombing. The city was completely empty and in ruins for a month and a half and that really reminded us of the war. Walking around those ruins and empty streets, with everything closed, the future being so uncertain, it was really bizarre. I mean the future is still uncertain, but at least I'm at the seaside right now, so from time to time you can forget about it all and live in this utopia.

Thank you for the interview.