East European Film Bulletin

INTERVIEW

Stefan Arsenijević on *As Far As I Can Walk*

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We met Serbian filmmaker Stefan Arsenijević at the 62nd Thessaloniki International Film Festival (November 4-14), where his latest film "As Far As I Can Walk" – a migrant love story – screened in the Balkan Survey section. Arsenijević discusses the idea behind his film, its potential for provocation, and the difficult development process.

What was your initial inspiration for the film?

First of all, the refugee crisis I was witnessing was such a big event. Watching thousands of people coming through every day and passing through Belgrade reminded me of similar scenes I had experienced growing up in Belgrade in the 90s. Back then we received over half a million refugees from the Yugoslav Wars, so there was a certain kind of empathy from my side as I could see myself in these people, while at the same time the media was talking about numbers and statistics. So I felt like I should somehow do something about it and bring my own perspective into it, what I mean is to try and see these refugees as equals somehow, since, coming from a Third World country, it seems natural for me to do so.

At the same time, I was thinking about this famous medieval epic poem in our country, a very important part of our cultural heritage. I was thinking to transform or adapt this poem into something modern and contemporary. It's a love story and I am very much into love stories. This feeling was the main thing that interested me in the movie. But it is also a poem about forgiveness. And I had the feeling that we live in a world where we are constantly divided into two different sides – not three, that would show some degree of progress. A world where one is somehow forced to pick a side, whether it's politics, ideology or sports, vaccines and Covid. Coming from a country that experienced war in the 90s, I felt like I knew this can't lead to anything good. We simply have to learn to live together, and this is the only way, or you just start exterminating the

other side. Honestly, I don't see another solution except to have a dialogue and to try to understand and accept the other. This poem contained this idea but on the level of a couple. Another interesting thing in the poem is the element of female infidelity, a topic that is very progressive for medieval times and one that I think is not so often seen in films. So I thought these two ideas could be combined…

Did you get a sense of breaking a taboo by addressing the topic of the refugee crisis in this particular way, by re-actualizing the epic poem of Strahinja Banović?

You could say it was an experiment. I don't know if I would congratulate myself for being brave. I was just trying to find a fresh angle, because, if you tackle these very big topics, it is always important to find your own angle. Other films have done the same. I thought this would be a unique opportunity since it's my cultural heritage and it has to be revisited if we want it to remain alive, otherwise it's all dust in a museum. Perhaps what we were trying to do is a bit provocative for Serbian audiences, but so far, the reactions have been positive and really overwhelming, and people are very curious.

Your film is doing the festival tour now and hasn't been screened in Serbia yet. Did you have a particular audience in mind when making the film?

That's a great question. I was hoping for a wide audience. During filming, though, I tried not to target people holding similar political opinions. That's why it was a love story, since they can reach a wider audience and that's the reason I'm interested in them. Also, through love stories you can tap into some other layers and possibly provoke people to think about things or reconsider what they thought to be a fact or not. I tried not to make the typical arthouse film for festivals. So far, judging from the audience's reaction it seems that these melodramas are successful. We'll see how regular screenings will go.

So, how has the film been received so far by festival audiences?

It's a very nice feeling. I travel and participate in the festivals to see the audiences' reaction, especially after the terrible pandemic. It's really exciting to sit among the audience. People are moved. Some of them find it difficult to talk after the film. This morning I received an email from someone who was at last night's screening, confessing she had to go and get a drink to put herself together. I had similar experiences in other screenings, with people needing

some time after the film to process their emotions. Probably because information is quite easy to digest, but emotions are a different thing altogether. We were trying to deal with some complex emotions in our film. It's somehow tragic, but at the same time very hopeful. The film shows characters struggling through hard conditions, but they are strong and where there is strength, there is hope too.

You chose to work with professional actors and non-professional actors. What was your motivation for this, and could you tell us more about this experience?

When you tackle this kind of topic you want to be as authentic as possible, but I also felt that something could go terribly wrong. Initially we thought about having real migrants acting, but we quickly abandoned the idea due to the impossibility of casting somebody with good acting skills for the protagonist, who needs to appear in every shot of the film. The main character needs to go through a big emotional journey, and I thought non-actors would not be able to do that. It took almost a year to find Ibrahim Koma who plays Samita, a beautiful and great actor. One of the reasons I chose him was that he was not too expressive. He's very minimalist in his approach. People even think that he's a non-actor – which is a great compliment -, but it takes a lot of experience to achieve this kind of simplicity. He was a child actor and grew up in front of the camera.

My favorite part of directing a film is working with actors. For all the other people in the camp and some smaller roles we used real migrants to increase the authenticity. Whenever we did something wrong, somebody on the set would tell us, "no, it would never happen like this". It was a challenge since these actors and amateurs were from different backgrounds and countries and there was always limited time for rehearsals and shooting days. Ibrahim is from France, while Nancy Mensah-Offei [Ababuo], the lead actress, was born in Ghana but is actually Austrian, and the third in this love triangle, Maxim Khalil, is Syrian and had had to flee his country and now lives in France. There were also lot of other actors from Germany and other parts of Europe, and they had to seem like a family for the taxi scene. Despite this, all the actors were wonderful, brilliant, and committed, even though we were shooting under uncomfortable conditions due to the cold.

Do you usually rehearse a lot before filming?

I usually rehearse a lot to know where we stand. Ibrahim, for example, was amazingly committed. He came to Serbia, and we rented an apartment for him in Belgrade several months before the shooting. He was living there, meeting

with the refugees and discussing the script scene by scene with me on a daily basis. During filming, it became easier because we started feeling pretty confident. It was important to establish a connection with the actors. Nancy, who is doing a lot of theater and has a busy schedule, could only come for a few days at a time. When we are on set, we have to be fast anyway and it was cold too, but we knew what we were doing. Not all actors were able to rehearse, though. I had to meet some actors for smaller roles online before they would come. A refugee from Syria, now living in France, we met online, and she came the night before the shooting and was stopped at the airport because of her documents. She was interrogated long after midnight. We had to explain that this person is actually coming to participate in a film production in Serbia.

In the Q&A, you mentioned spending time in refugee centers for research and that it took you five years developing the film. Tell us about the process of developing your initial idea.

The initial idea came from a story of a taxi driver driving around refugees. Once, a family of refugees asked him to drive them to the Hungarian border. He had to refuse because if the police stopped him, they could charge him for human trafficking. He explained to me: “What should I do? I will not judge people by the color of their skin or ask them for their passport when they come in”. It was interesting so I imagined filming the driver in real time. A taxi driver driving around refugees during a two-hour ride – a car full of migrants, a family and two strangers. The driver is not very fond of migrants, but still he needs to provide for his family. His passengers also don’t trust each other, there’s a lot of suspicion. And I thought it could be an interesting road movie. I wanted to do it quickly, on a very low budget. And this is how it all started.

I asked for 100,000 euros from the Serbian Film Center, but they had reservations. I asked for a smaller amount and committed myself to start filming immediately, but they didn’t think it was a good idea. A year later, the idea seemed too simple, other films about refugees were already being released so I decided to rework the epic poem and expand the story even further. In the end, the taxi scene was included while we constructed everything else according to the poem. We were inspired by Ibrahim Ishak, a migrant from Ghana we met who really wanted to integrate in Serbia. He was a football player and very similar to our main character. So we built everything around this fact. We wrote the script quite quickly. I collaborated with my long-term collaborator, scriptwriter-director Bojan Vuletić, and French scriptwriter Nicolas Ducray. It took us three months to change the basic idea and we did a lot of research. But the process of financing was very long, it took almost two years, with all the five countries involved.

Did you have any challenges or difficulties in getting funding during those two years?

No doubt, getting any project funded by the country you live in is the hardest. At the same time, you look for international co-producers. It proved helpful to have the French co-writers, especially since the script includes such an important folk tale for our culture. It was also helpful to have an outsider looking at the script and highlighting the good and the less good parts in it. In the end, we managed to secure international backing from France, Luxembourg, Bulgaria, and Lithuania.

What was the most challenging part of the whole production process for you as a director?

Most definitely filming. It was a strange and time-limited situation with a lot of different actors completely unknown to us. In Serbia, we have a very small scene where everybody knows each other. It was challenging and at the same time refreshing, and I was very much enjoying it. I'm so happy I met these wonderful actors. I'd like to work with them again, but I don't know how realistic that is. We have to invent very creative stories. You know, this was a very unusual film for a Serbian production, and it took a long time to film. The film crew was international, too. It's exciting to have an actor from Syria or a costume designer from Luxembourg. What are the odds?! It's like a children's game where we all know the rules. It is a very stressful game to play, but we play it. Another challenge was filming on location out in the cold. It involved a lot walking, as the title suggests.

Thank you for the interview.