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INTERVIEW

Constantin Popescu on *Principles of Life*

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Constantin Popescu's "Principles of Life" ocuses on the character of Emilian Velicanu (Vlad Ivanov), a cynical, middle-aged man incapable of dealing with his environment. We met the director of the film at the Transilvania IFF in Cluj, where the film screened as part of the international competition...

What fascinated you about Razvan Radulescu and Alexandru Baciu's script for "Principles of Life"?

It is a direct story, very straight-forward and honest. The main character is a sketch, but very complex at the same time. The more the story advances, the more it appears to show an ordinary day with nothing happening, and yet I was curious to find out what happens in the end.

I found the story had similarities with a classic Romanian novel from the early 80s that I like very much, but the main thing that interested me about the script was the lack of communication between Velicanu and the other characters in the movie, especially his family members. It is the story of a constant, effortless failure. It's strange, but I consider the script to be an X-ray of a failure. Velicanu's lack of communication represents his failure on all levels – the relationship with his friends, his family, his employer. The moment that marks the point of no return in his life is the end of the film: he tries to be a friend and parent to his son, but does not succeed in taking on either position.

I must say that when I saw the final product for the first time, I thought that the script was better than the movie. Maybe I missed something, although I am not exactly sure what that is. Still, I think it is great what Vlad Ivanov does in the film. I relied on him very much and I do think that he and Gabriel Puian – who plays Catalin, the son – did a great job on the film.

Do you think that the film is plot or character driven?

I would say that *Principles of Life* is a character-driven piece, because my eyes always focus on Velicanu. Even if it may appear that other things in the film are also important, Velicanu and his narrow-minded view of things are what I was concentrating on. That is why we used long lenses framing the film from far away, although I did find that quite annoying. I think that the audience wants to see more from the shots – what's on the left and the right of the frame, but that's how I see Velicanu's perspective on things. Velicanu does not get the big picture of things, and I do believe that these aesthetics help the film.

Does the conflict with Catalin at the end of the film resolve something?

The fact that Velicanu beats his son makes him even weaker than he already is. He tries to reinvent his life with a new wife, child, house, and car, but he is weak, and I like that. He is making the same mistakes again and again.

In my opinion, the main thing we learn from the end is the message that we have to learn to communicate with each other. Society shouldn't just be about alienating yourself .

Do you think that the ending is a cinematic escalation – something that comes out of a movie character – or is it how things work in real life?

Sometimes that's what happens in cinema. In movies, everything is relative to a certain extent. But I can't tell you whether it is like that in my film. I am glad about the fact that my character keeps failing. In the end, he just presses the wrong button. I never wanted to give the audience a hope of redemption.

Did you picture Vlad Ivanov in the role of Velicanu from the beginning of the project?

Yes, I thought about Vlad already while reading the script. I even called the scriptwriters to ask whether they had written it for Vlad, and they told me that they kind of did. Nevertheless, we did castings to see whether my first choice was right, and I didn't find anyone else who I thought would be capable of doing it better than Vlad. It happens like that. You choose an actor instinctively, and it keeps going in that direction.

Are you trying to off-track from New Wave cinema? We had the feeling that in Principles of Life, you didn't want to take things as seriously as some New Wave films.

Yes, that’s true. When I think of a movie, I think about how I should transmit the message – how to frame, how to shoot – not as much about the background. Still, I like those films, too. Maybe in one or two years I will shoot a film like that. I don’t know whether I am able to, but I want to try. But I never really thought about this Wave thing like that. If I have a good story, I just think about what’s most suitable for it.

In my opinion, there are a lot of things to talk about in Romania and I do think that all of us have an individual way of speaking about them. It would be boring if we all gave you the same picture. But really, I didn’t have an agenda with *The Portrait of the Fighter as a Young Man* and *Principles of Life*. I just felt it was the right thing to make.

Is Principles of Life aimed at a Romanian audience?

No, the film does have some jokes that are reserved for a Romanian audience, but I think that the message is more important than some jokes.

Did you improvise a lot of scenes in Principles of Life?

No, only the one where Vlad dances. It was a point where I thought that I needed the audience to stay with Velicanu a little longer, to understand him and make him a little more likeable. But the audience knows that Velicanu has regrets. He’s not a robot. But even though it seems like he doesn’t know how to deal with things, I didn’t want to make the viewer feel sorry with him. If you make a mistake, deal with it.

Are there any father-and-son scenes that you cut out? The poster shows the two in a swimming pool, which we do not see in the film.

No, we didn’t shoot a scene in the swimming pool. One of the writers had the idea to show father and son in a pool on the poster, because all the time Velicanu tries to teach Catalin something, although it is him who is under water.

Does the title derive from the script?
Yes, and I think that it’s okay because I have met people like Velicanu myself – the kind of people who think they know everything and don’t listen to you.

Do you have any upcoming projects?

I want to finish my trilogy about Romania in the 1950s but the films have

nothing in common visually or stilistically. The 1950s and 1960s are the least known years in Romania, complicated years and delicate subjects: communism, fascism, treason. No one wants to talk about it, but I think we need to start a discussion about that period of Romania, and finally lay the cards open on the table.

Thank you for the interview.