

REVIEW

Young Dreamers

Golden Apricot Shorts 2022

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While the 19th edition of the Golden Apricot film festival showcased a fine selection of international cinema, it also turned the gaze inwards: towards a society under the shadow of the recent conflict in Nagorno Karabakh. Yerevan is a young and bustling city, with a new generation that envisions change while grappling with traditional values in a country at the crossroads.

Armenia, proud of its long and rich history, is on the move, with young adults sketching out their vision of the future. (Recently, the capital's cultural scene was again transformed by the influx of young Russians, many of them LGBTQ, who fled their country after the start of the war in Ukraine.) Nothing is more telling of a country's potential future than watching the dreams of young filmmakers.

In the Apricot Stone section, dedicated to short films from the region, Hambardzum Hambardzumyan's *Korean Delicacy* was deservedly awarded the Best Armenian Short. It is a subtly dystopian, grotesque film that raises more questions than it answers. The plot is based on the director's eponymous collection of short stories. Previously known as a writer, Hambardzumyan clearly masters the language of cinema: the cinematography is elegant, the acting convincing, the storytelling neat.

Set in an Armenian village, *Korean Delicacy* is a dreamy portrait of violence, guilt, and generational divides. One of the villagers, Gazan, hears on the radio that Koreans eat dog meat as a delicacy. What sounds like an absurd Radio Yerevan joke from the Soviet era becomes Gazan's obsession. After drinking vodka with his neighbors, he plots to kill Jecko, an eight-year-old boy's beloved dog.

To convince the boy to give them his dog, he pretends to save it from thieves. Of course, everything has to end in tragedy. The next day, a hearty stew is served, while the devastated boy finds a bloodstained ax in the backyard. Entrapped in their web of lies, the men drive off to search for the dog on a cold winter evening. In a moving final scene, they scream Jecko's name into a vast field covered in snow.

While the deceit is simple, the message is ambiguous; what remains from the men's

horrendous act is confusion and despair. An unforgivable atrocity has been committed against the innocent boy and his dog.

Absurdity and off-beat humor take center stage in Harut Makyan's *Next Station Paradise*, a trashy comedy set in a small Armenian nowhere town. We follow a group of young friends, one of them bound to a wheelchair. Violence, boredom, and dreams of the big city dominate their lives. "25 years... every day.... Same faces, same people, same buildings, same, same, same..." What starts off as a universal trope of small-town misery soon turns into a bizarre take on Armenian society, featuring, among other things, a prostitute in a funeral car.

Slapstick humor also shapes Aren Malakyan and Vahagn Khachatryan's *5 Dreamers and a Horse*. The debut feature, which combines social satire with dreams of revolution, already gained some cult following at its world premiere at the 2022 edition of Visions du Réel. One young cinemagoer told me it is the first Armenian movie he ever saw that openly portrayed queer desire.

The protagonists in Malakyan and Khachatryan's vignettes each pursue their dreams, from the Soviet everywoman operating the lift in a hospital who dreams of space travel, to young lesbians on a rooftop carving out a space to exist. Torn between the old and the new, *5 Dreamers and a Horse* portrays a society at the threshold, with remnants of rural life, Soviet legacies, and patriarchy being challenged by a new generation.

Shifting gender relations and dreams of a Western lifestyle are most clearly conveyed in Martin Matevosyan's short *Emma*, which portrays a young girl breaking free from the oppressive expectations of her family. Instead of opting for a subtle portrait of a young woman though, the film unfortunately turns out to be a cliché girl-gone-bad story in the style of a 2000s TV soap drama.

However, the message of *Emma* is painfully clear: gender equality has a long way to go in a traditional society such as Armenia's. And it is not only the girl that suffers, but also her younger brother who is forced to take over the role of the punitive absent father.

A more nuanced, beautifully shot social commentary is made in Viktoria Aleksanyan's short *Crossing the Blue* about the immigrant Anoush, brilliantly acted by Armine Anda, who is forcefully deported from Europe back to Armenia, which she had left to flee from her abusive husband. Aleksanyan's film is a touching, disturbingly real portrait of a woman fighting for a better life.

The shorts from this year's domestic competition at Golden Apricot portray a country in transformation, with visions of a better future being carved out amidst the ruins of past disaster, from the war with Azerbaijan to the specters of Soviet socialism. These films, many of them hilarious and thought-provoking, transmit hope, both for the future of Armenian cinema and the paths this young country might yet take in the next years.