



Marko (Miki Manojlovic, left), Natalia (Mirjana Jokovic, centre) and Blacky (Lazar Ristovski) find time for a feast in Emir Kusturica's lament for a fallen nation, *Underground*.

by Bojan Bosiljic

The Canadian premiere of *Underground* this weekend is a unique opportunity to discover the genius of Sarajevo-born director Emir

Kusturica. *Underground* is considered to be his best work, a unique composite sketch of all his previous efforts and an unusual blend of contrasting emotions with drama, comedy and tragedy.

Kusturica is an outstanding master of symbolism, giving meaning of universal proportion to everyday events. He often sacrifices almost every realistic moment in order to create some grotesque dimension of fantasy. His surrealistic, low-budget films are always a little mused up, but sensitive, courageous and irresistible.

Underground

co-written and directed by Emir Kusturica
starring Miki Manojlovic, Lazar Ristovski and Mirjana Jokovic
Friday, March 15
Canadian Film Institute, National Archives Auditorium, 7:30pm

A tragic modern history of the Balkans

Kusturica's first feature film, *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, won a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1981; *When Father Was Away On Business* won a Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1985; and he won the Best Director prize at Cannes for *Time of the Gypsies* in 1989. His 1992 English-language film *Arizona Dream* starring Johnny Depp, won a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, but failed to find a North American distributor, a telling sign that Hollywood still calls the shots.

When *Underground* was released last year, he won a second Palme d'Or at Cannes. Until now, only Vittorio DeSica, Francis Ford Coppola and Bille August have managed to do the same. As a sharp condemnation of the years of Communist machinery in the former Yugoslavia and the blood-bath that has defined the Balkan regions since 1991, *Underground* is both tense and comical.

Don't be fooled by the French-German-Bulgarian co-production

credits. The film is a pure Serbo-Croatian entity focussing on the tragic history of the cursed Balkans, a region where a bloody war has erupted without fail every 40 years or so. *Underground* is a brilliant film essay on the irrational history of the Balkan people, where love, passion, betrayal, hatred, ethnic and religious lie together. It shadows world history from 1941 to 1992 in three segments ("The War," "The Cold War" and "This War").

The main characters of this movie are two Belgrade companions, Marko (Miki Manojlovic) and Blacky (Lazar Ristovski). They transformed themselves from loan sharks to communists during the Second World War in a terrific stretch of self-preservation. They both love the same woman, the actress Natalia (Mirjana Jokovic), who becomes Blacky's wife. In order to win Natalia's heart, Marko forces his comrade in a cellar alongside a group of partisans hiding from the Nazis while they manufacture

weapons to pass the time. For more than 20 years, Marko tells those living underground that the war rages on. In the meantime, he becomes a rising star in the Communist regime of Marshall Tito until Blacky and his friends finally force their way out of the cellar.

This epic film seizes the viewer's attention and doesn't let them catch their breath until the last of its 192 minutes. At the end of the movie comes a moment of gentle catharsis: One land becomes an island which floats in an unknown direction, while the people are dancing, singing and enjoying themselves.

A native Bosnian and self-proclaimed Yugoslav, Kusturica recently announced that he is abandoning film-making, embittered by the political dispute surrounding this movie. It is sad news for the Balkans. This region, so much in need of tolerance and forgiveness, could rise again through the talent of people like Kusturica.