

Balkan blues:

New Balkan Cinema gives war a chance

New Balkan Cinema starts Saturday, March 1 (see listings)
Canadian Film Institute Auditorium, National Archives
395 Wellington Street

by Bojan Bosiljic
The recent massive pro-democracy demonstrations in Belgrade serve as an extraordinary prelude for the forthcoming retrospective of films

from the former Yugoslavia.

The New Balkan Cinema program at the Canadian Film Institute echoes the grim war years during the 1990s and promises an exciting and unusual experience for Canadian filmmakers who know very little about the Balkans and its many ethnic and religious groups. The seven movies of this retrospective (all with English sub-titles) are like pieces of a mirror broken when dropped. Each of them contains a fragment of the truth, but they form a complete picture of reality only when joined together.

The states of the former Yugoslavia produce seven to 10 feature films a year, which are widely considered to be the most innovative and vital in Europe. They have been recognized throughout the world through numerous awards and acclaim at international film festivals. The New Balkan Cinema is a rare opportunity for North American audiences to see another kind of film-making and to experience the hidden challenges of cinematic expression.

Yugoslav directors make small movies full of life, emotion and passion, and tell a story using a purely cinematographic language relying on breath-taking and enchanting images and metaphors. All of these movies reflect Balkan history and the consequences of the recent wars.

Ironically composed of a bitter humor, they portray life during war-time in their own special way, when international sanctions had turned the people of the former Yugoslavia into a nation of smugglers, spies and black marketeers. It was a time when all life had stopped in a space between sham

and shame. These film-makers, in spite of constant financial woes and ideological pressures, managed to make magnificent films.

BURLESQUE TRAGEDY (March 1.): Directed by Goran Markovic, this is a perceptive and appropriate allegory for these troubled times in the Balkan region. In protest against the inhumane living conditions and shortages of medicine caused by sanctions and the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, a psychiatrist decides to close down a clinic and return the patients to their homes or at least find some other accommodation for them. Free and unaccustomed to the rules of "normal society," the patients do whatever they wish, paying no attention to the chaos they cause. Heartbreaking and hilarious.

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH (March 16.): Directed by Milos Radivojevic, this is a moving drama about tenacity with a withering look at the human cost of political and social upheaval. Three thirty-something intellectuals in Belgrade struggle to survive in the darkening days of the 1990s. One is an architect who works illegally; another has become a smuggler; the third is a graduate of literature who, while waiting for a university job, tries to make a living by gambling.

UNDERGROUND (March 2.): A surrealistic, brilliant film essay on the irrational Balkan mentality, where love, passion, betrayal, hatred, ethnic division and ideological lies cohabitate. Portraying a period from 1941 to 1992, director Emir Kusturica captured the Palme D'Or at Cannes in 1995 for his personal insight into 50 years of history of the former Yugoslavia, from the Nazi occupation through the Communist epoch to the present day



Three professionals try to make ends meet on the fringes of the the law in war-torn Bosnia in *Between Heaven and Earth*, part of the New Balkan Cinema at the Canadian Film Institute.

explosion of nationalism. A real masterpiece of contemporary cinema, it is absurd that this film has not been released widely in English Canada.

PREMEDITATED MURDER (March 8.): Two love stories, taking place during two different wars 50 years apart, are intertwined in this film by Sarajevo-born director Gorcin Stojanovic. Bulika, a hip-girl from Belgrade, meets Bogdan, a wounded soldier from a God-forsaken Serb village, in the 1992 war. Jelena, Bulika's grandmother, a sophisticated Belgrade socialite, meets Krsman, a rude Serbian peasant who became a high-ranking Communist officer of the National Liberation Army in 1944. They all experience the unavoidable tragedy that appears to be the historical trademark of the Balkans. A powerful and remarkable movie, based on the best-seller by Slobodan Selenic, one of the Balkan's leading authors.

MARBLE ASS (March 8.): A controversial and confrontational film by veteran director Zelimir Zilnik, with a disturbingly original and utterly absorbing examination of conflict resolution. The leading character is transvestite Merlin, whose "job" is to pacify the Balkan region by prostituting himself with an infinite number of men. He calms down violent soldiers and nighthawks, arrogant rich men, unfortunate loners and hot-headed boys, tak-

ing on himself the exploitive and violent instincts of men who would otherwise target girls, mothers and old ladies.

TANGO ARGENTINO (March 9.): Renowned director Goran Paskaljevic's multi-award winning film is a poignant drama about survival and the possibility of hope in the face of overwhelming odds. The hero of the story is Predrag, a boy whose parents, in the collapsed state of things in the former Yugoslavia, do not know how to cope with their problems. As he helps his mother who works with the elderly, he begins to make new friends with old people. A touching, poetic and irresistible film.

PRETTY VILLAGE, PRETTY FLAME (March 15.): Directed by Srdjan Dragojevic, this film is based on a true story which took place during the first winter of the Bosnian war in 1992. Serb soldier Milan is seriously wounded and reminisces in hospital about the hell he had been through while his platoon was trapped in an abandoned tunnel. Along with scenes of massacres, nostalgic memories of his friendship with a Muslim childhood friend keep coming back to Milan's mind. The two pals meet again, but this time as enemies. Their vows of eternal friendship are broken and dragged through the mud of the war. This is an uncompromising and most impressive film about the madness of the Bosnian war.