

Directors' Fortnight

12:08 EAST OF BUCHAREST

by Corneliu Porumboiu

Romania, 2006, 89 min, 35 mm, colour, 1:1,85, stereo

PRODUCTION

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SCREENINGS

WED 24-05	09H00	NOGA (Press)
WED 24-05	17H00	NOGA (Official)
THU 24-05 (french subtitles only)	11H30	ARCADES
THU 24-05 (french subtitles only)	22H00	STUDIO 13

SYNOPSIS

The whole country watched live on television as angry crowds forced Romanian dictator Ceausescu to flee Bucharest by helicopter. In a quiet town east of the capital, sixteen years since this historic day, the owner of the local TV station invites two guests to share their moments of revolutionary glory. One is an old retiree and sometime Santa Claus, the other a history teacher who has just devoted his entire salary to his drinking debts. Together they will remember the day when they stormed their town hall calling "down with Ceausescu". But phone-in viewers dispute the claims of the heroes, who may have been boozing in the bar or making Christmas preparations rather than rebelling in the streets.

INTERVIEW WITH CORNELIU PORUMBOIU

Where did you get the idea to make a film about the Romanian revolution of 1989, set in the present day?

Corneliu Porumboiu: I saw a televised debate about it five years ago, in my hometown of Vaslui in the East of Romania. The question of the day was: was there, or was there not a revolution in our town? Three people were arguing over how the events unfolded at the time. This subject has been bouncing around in my head for five years. Then in May last year, I finished writing a screenplay that I'd been working on for two years, that I was still not happy with. So I began writing *12:08 East of Bucharest*, using these three characters that I had seen on television as inspiration. It was a sort of therapy to distance myself from the other screenplay. To my great surprise, I finished it one month later. I was so happy with it I decided to begin filming as soon as possible.

Where were you when the communist regime collapsed?

I was fourteen at the time and I remember it very well. The day the regime fell, I was playing ping-pong outside while my parents sat glued to the television set. I came back into the house just after the crucial moment examined in my film: because at 12:08pm, where we lived in the country, everyone was watching live as Ceasescu fled.

Why is a young filmmaker like yourself interested in this moment of history?

The revolution had a profound impact on me. At the time, I thought I would end up working as an engineer in a factory. The revolution completely changed my prospects, as it did for other Romanians... The TV programme that inspired the film, showed how the revolution of 22 December 1989 did not spread to my town, Vaslui. People went out in the streets only after learning about the events in Bucharest. Suddenly, they realized that this was a radical upheaval. That said, there is nothing autobiographic in this film.

How do you sit in relation to your characters who are at odds with their past?

I am like the character of the young cameraman who films the "revolutionary" debate. He wants to participate, so he tries to give his point of view with his framing and by being innovative: he films the witnesses in close ups, zooms, moves close to them to capture some of their truthfulness. Like him, I wanted to involve myself directly in the film in the first person.

Does your film play with the power of television?

No, I tried to focus on my three characters - the presenter, the teacher, the old man and their memory of the revolution. I wanted to multiply the view points on this event. Thus, during the show, many viewers phone in to give their version of things... Their debate on the smallest details of this "historic" day of 22 December 1989 is funny and

desperate at the same time. Because these people speak about one event that changed their lives, while they question themselves about its very existence in their town.

Are they like the chorus of a human comedy?

Yes, because I was afraid of losing myself in the generalities of such a vast subject. I wanted to show the different points of view on events where memories are very personal. When people speak about the revolution on local television, they don't take history into account but they quickly fall back on their individual experiences. And there, I show that in little communities like this one, the notion of heroes is redundant.

Do you mock their pretensions to become heroes?

Nobody in the film could ever bring themselves to believe that a drunkard could ever be a hero of history. In a small town like this one, people live side by side every day : they know exactly where you come from, so of course there can be nothing heroic about your life in their eyes. To change this set of mind, the television journalist, for example, wants to create a character that is bigger than life. This is typical. This guy dreams there will be a statue made of him one day! He created his television station, because he wants to do important things, he wants to tackle history.

Is it easier to take on subjects like the fall of the communist regime and changes to society sixteen years later?

I see a great divide in the history of my country – broken up into before the revolution and after. I don't pretend to take on the revolution in my film but I try to show what has happened in the sixteen years since then. This is why I became so attached to the lives of my three characters. I observe what this revolution has become after sixteen years and how the vision of the revolution was transformed by each of the protagonists. I also have the feeling that the big hopes and desires that we have had since the revolution have – for the most part – been disappointing. Most people were not at all ready for the changes that happened.

An engineer who becomes a journalist, a Security member who fashions himself a factory owner... how do you see the changes that occurred in the lives of your characters?

In my film, I don't stigmatise the Security guy who works every day and who has his own version of history. Unlike him, many people were not able to take advantage of the changes in society since the revolution. Look at the history teacher – he holds on to his past without moving forward, he doesn't work and he refuses to change his life.

Do your characters stay touching because you don't try to hide their weaknesses?

I wanted to be as honest as possible, without artifice and without relying on a ready-made structure or following the conventional dramatic lines taught in film schools. Inspired by this TV show and its three characters I wanted to be very realistic. I wanted the film to be as close as possible to what I see and feel. It is not a Manichaeian film. I love my characters for their humanity. They show their weaknesses, no one is perfect.

The mise-en-scene of Ceasescu's execution was a shock, a new form of reality shown on television. Is this partly why TV plays such a central role in your film?

I think that our revolution was the first to be broadcast live all over the world. In 1989, we had very little information about what was happening in Berlin, Prague and other parts of Eastern Europe. All that we knew came from the American radio station Free Europe. There were only a few rumours going around that spoke about the events underway in Europe and about what was happening there and would soon be happening in Romania.

Without television do you think this revolutionary spirit would have spread throughout Romania?

Who knows? History is usually made in the big cities, but the television programme in my film shows how much people in the smaller towns would also like to be part of history even though nothing of historical importance happens where they come from. Television is a sort of catalyst. I still remember when Ceausescu fled: my whole town came out into the streets.

Why do your characters argue their truths so vehemently?

I don't believe in one historical truth. The whole film is based on this. I find myself in each of my characters, but each one has their own truth. Above all, what remain of a revolution, more than the symbols and images of its leaders, is the contradictory memories of people like those in the film. I thought of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*: how do we transform the reality that we want to remember? The characters in my film don't lie like they do in Kurosawa's, but when they want to remember something that happened sixteen years ago, they begin to modify reality. Each person has his or her own memories and perspective. Where is the truth? I show the different options, and because people forget so quickly, their memory blurs the facts and transforms reality.

Where does the humour that plays with paradoxes, the absurd and a sense of fatalism come from?

This humour is like a thread that weaves its way through my films. It is probably linked to an idea of a certain fatality in life. As we speak on the phone, at this very moment, I'm watching a beer commercial. And I will go have one after our conversation is over. We

Romanians have, in a way, invented absurdity... or least we've made an art of it. But I don't have any method. Humour is beyond me. It must come from my hometown and the mentality of the people in this area.

How do you work, do you leave room for “accidents”?

I've been working with the same team for the past few years, which makes things easier. I spend a lot of time with my actors. I make very few changes on set, I might for example, try a different blocking...this is a key element for me. Each second of the film and each centimetre of film stock must be justified and have a sense. In the same way that each character must have his or her own gestures, I expect my actors to forget themselves in order to be more in their roles. We rehearsed a lot before shooting; this helped me to find the essence of the characters. When it works, I follow them around everywhere and I'm even ready to change dialogue for them. On the other hand, when it doesn't work I dream of being able to work with them like Robert Bresson. (laughs)

Do you film the lives of your characters without moving the camera to be more realistic?

Yes, all my films are inspired by real events but realist cinema is a pious wish, it is impossible to make. That is why I create my own reality. For example, I filmed the TV show on the revolution in real time, but in my own way. I am like the young cameraman in the film who wants to put his personal stamp on everything he does. I take real situations and I transform them. For this film, I decided not to move the camera – to give the characters time. Contrary to the young people in my short films who were very close in age to me, the characters in 12:08 East of Bucharest are not the same age as me. I had to get to know them...

...and is this where the distance comes from?

Yes. By not moving the camera, I wanted to let their way of living express itself. I didn't want to cut scenes. But let them breathe on their own. Time is very important in this film: it is “sixteen years after the revolution...” I was trying to show how life in a small town creates a certain way of being.

Where does the atmosphere in your long takes come from? What are your influences?

I like Jim Jarmusch's early films a lot, though I don't really think about him when I'm filming. His style does have little echoes in this film, which resembles a realist documentary. When I write a screenplay I think first of all about capturing the spirit of the story. It is from there that I begin writing as a director. *Down By Law* probably inspired the slightly strange structure of my story: in the first part we follow each of the characters and then we find them altogether on a TV talk show.

(Aesthetically the spirit of the painter Vermeer inspired me. There is not much happening dramatically in his paintings, but I wanted to capture something of a way of living and being.)

A new Romanian cinema is emerging in the international film festivals but are directors like you obliged to produce their own films?

No this film is a special case, because I wrote the screenplay in June 2005 and I wanted to shoot immediately without waiting for a decision from the Romanian government-funding agency. We shot in December 2005. The film was relatively simple to produce. I work with a group of friends and a lot of people helped me. It is much less expensive to make a film in Romanian than it is in France or Germany. I have yet to find a Romanian producer who will support me in my ideas. So I have to produce myself in order to be able to follow through to the end on the story I want to make. I even invested some of my own money in the film. I don't want to have to answer to anyone.

What are the main obstacles to making films in Romania?

Like in any country, the biggest obstacle in directing a film is the director himself. (Laughs)

According to your colleague Cristi Puiu (The Death of Mr. Lazarescu) there isn't a Romanian New Wave, just desperate directors...

(Laughs) He is exactly right!

How do you work on set?

My films are based on true stories and on people that I know and love. I love shooting – even if I have to constantly fight against my own chaos. When I feel the concentration of my actors in rehearsal, that's when I begin to see the film as a whole. Even if there are many problems that I haven't solved in pre-production – on the first day of shooting everything suddenly becomes clear to me. It's while I'm shooting that the best ideas come to me.

It's a drug that's pleasurable and creative. Once I've captured the particular spirit of a story then I have a hold on my film, otherwise...

Are your films committed socially?

I tell my stories in the present and I hope my films show a part of Romanian society today. I try to make films about the truth of a character and not to give a political speech. Even if the starting point is an historical fact, like the ban on abortion under Ceausescu

in my medium length film Livius Dream, I'm telling a story above all else – that of a young boy, his desires and his truth. I don't want to make documentaries or social commentaries... I always try to place the characters at the centre of my films. I'm afraid to make moral judgements, to shove things in people's faces... for me that is the opposite of what cinema is.

Today Romania is still in convalescence. Communism didn't care at all for the individual. In comparison with the State, a human being had no importance... But to a certain extent, I fight these dogmatic ideas by nature of the stories I choose.

Is not judging your response to the spirit of the communist era under Ceausescu?

Absolutely. At that time films had to have a message, a judgement or morality... I think it's more important to show the characters and their destinies... I'm anything but a judge!

The end of your film evokes snow with a mix of poetry and nostalgia...

Yes, but my characters aren't lamenting the communist era. They are nostalgic about the notable days of the revolution when anything seemed possible. The revolution was like a renaissance. But people saw things in black and white. They thought we would live like people in the United States; the American dream became their prime objective.

CORNELIU PORUMBOIU

Born in 1975 in Romania, graduated in 2003 at the Bucharest University of Drama and Film. His short films LIVIUS' DREAM (2003), GONE WITH THE WINE (2002) and A TRIP TO THE CITY (2003) won him several international awards, including a Prix de la Cinéfondation in Cannes 2004. After being resident of Cinéfondation, he directed his first feature 12:08 EAST OF BUCHAREST in 2005, which premieres at the Directors' Fortnight 2006.

CAST

Mircea Andreescu
Teo Corban
Ion Sapdaru

Piscoci
Jderescu
Manescu

CREW

screenplay
photography
sound
production design
editing
music
producer
executif producer

Corneliu Porumboiu
Marius Panduru
Alex Dragomir, Sebastian Zsemlye
Daniel Raduta
Roxana Szel
Rotaria
Corneliu Porumboiu
Daniel Burlac