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Kusturica: Droll and fatalistic, but he doesn't swim against the current.

## Busy Work

By J. Hoberman

WHEN FATHER WAS AWAY ON BUSI-NESS. Directed by Emir Kusturica. Written by Abdulah Sidran. Produced by Forum Films (Sarajevo). Released by Cannon Films. At the Plaza Theatre, opening October 11.

NO MAN'S LAND. Directed and written by Alain Tanner. Produced by Tanner and Marin Karmitz.

CHAIN LETTERS. Directed, written, and produced by Mark Rappaport. At the New York Film Festival, October 9.

There's a tendency these days to be thankful for modest virtues, and When Father Was Away on Business is a small film writ large. The second feature by 31year-old Emir Kusturica, surprise winner of the Palm d'Or last May at Cannes, and the first critical hit of the New York Film Festival, this bittersweet, child's-eyeview of the early '50s is the most internationally acclaimed Yugoslav feature since Dusan Makavejev's WR, a Cannes winner in 1971. Kusturica's Sarajevo is an even funkier realm than Makavejev's Belgrade, and although the film has its lusty aspects (even a kindred subtext of sexual frustration), it's more an exercise in charm than outrage.

Along with many of the most talented Yugoslav directors of his generation, Kusturica studied at the Czech film academy FAMU. This group—which includes Goran Paskaljevic, Rajko Grlic, and Srdjan Karanovic, among others—is known as the Prague school. Like that of the Czech new wave directors, the Yugoslavs' forte is a kind of drolly understated fatalism. (This fatalism, however, is less audacious than the Czechs': "Seldom do these filmmakers swim against the main currents of received myth and collective belief," observes Daniel J. Goulding in Liberated Cinema, his recently published history of post-war Yugoslav film. "The new generation adopts an attitude of critical accommodation rather than dialectical confrontation.")

For its first 40 minutes, When Father Was Away is jovially absurd. Kusturica opens with a sequence of a village geezer singing a toneless flamenco tune as everyone else (women and children mainly).

ing note of self-mocking provincial bravado. The whole country is a joke—a Slobovian sitcom populated by beery crocks, slivovitz-stupified peasants, uptight comrades, and cute ugly kids—including Malik, the tubby little hero, and his bespectacled, accordion-playing older brother. Kusturica's funniest sequences turn on the juxtaposition of a six-year-old's narration with the director's own knowing montage. The same joke is built into the title; father's "business" trips are both the cover for his philandering and the family euphemism for his stretch in a prison camp.

After father is arrested—an honest communist, he's set up as a pro-Stalin "cominformist" by an irate girlfriendthe film's mood grows darker, with Pop's sexual revenge (followed by a radiocast of a soccer match where Yugoslavia triumphs over the Soviet Union in the '52 Olympics) providing an ambiguously upbeat ending. Exhibiting a marked preference for the anecdotal rather than the

allegorical, Kusturica istit just i any, i i ance interpolate i and accorde he's shameless. Father travels a long way on Balkan soul, and when that's insufficient—at 144 minutes, the film is at least half an hour too long—the director greases the wheels with shmaltz.

Considering its subject matter, this is one of the least political of political films. Not to call it timid: Bosnia, where it was made, is scarcely the most culturally liberal of Yugoslav republics. Nor do I know another Yugoslavian film which, as happens here when Malik is called upon to make a presentation on behalf of the Young Pioneers, uses the words "Comrade Tito" as a laugh line. When Father Was Away is not so much cautious as indifferent; the early '50s in Yugoslavia were exceptionally complicated (not just because of the nation's crushing isolation but also because of conflicting impulses within the ruling party). Kusturica, as Goulding suggests, belongs to a post-political generation.

When Father Was Away bills itself as a "historical love film"; you have to wonder if what it means is the calculated love of historical recreation. Kusturica's Do You Remember Dolly Bell?, which won the Opera Prima at Venice in 1981, seems the Yugoslavian equivalent of Time Stands Still; scripted, like When Father Was Away, by the Bosnian poet Abdulah Sidran, it's an anecdotal account of teen life in the '60s, when Western pop culture was penetrating Sarajevo.

Ever since American Graffiti signaled the end of the '60s, the memory film has become a universal phenomenon—don't look to Father to change it. The festival press screening greeted Kusturica's film with the sort of tumultuous applause and appreciative whistles ordinarily accorded restored epics by Abel Gance. It's always pleasing to look in the mirror and see ourselves.

In his quiet way, Alain Tanner is one of Europe's genuinely experimental filmmakers; since splitting up with John Berger after Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000, he's worked at developing a sensuous intellectual cinema founded upon open-ended situations and improvised shooting scripts. Rethinking narrative, he's also attempted to reimagine contemporary Europe—with severely mixed results. If Messidor is one of the most underrated movies of the past halfdozen years and In the White City a true tour de force, Tanner's failures have been no less spectacular. No Man's Land, sad to say, is one of them.

Set around the French-Swiss border. evidently a region of chronic unemployment, No Man's Land is structured, like Jonah, around a gaggle of multiple characters—in this case, a gang of amateur smugglers, most of whom would rather be somewhere else. They're a schematic lot, and they give the film's title an unwanted

effect is as precious and discombobulated as Terry Riley's obtrusively tinkling raga-baroque score.

No Man's Land marks a return to Switzerland, the ironic "middle of the world," after two films abroad and, although Tanner's feel for landscape has scarcely deserted him, he seems less willing to let environment dominate human events. What No Man's Land lacks is the visual logic of Messidor and In the White City, films where the setting is the subject (even the narrative), overwhelming character and spectator alike. Messidor and In the White City were adventures in floating free. (Like his characters, Tanner seemed to work without a net.) Overplotted and insufficiently experiential, No Man's Land never takes off.

The relationships in No Man's Land are kindergarten material compared to the web of interpersonal connections spun by Mark Rappaport in Chain Letters. The first of Rappaport's six features to wend its way to the New York Film Festival, the film concerns nine characters, many of whom turn out to be siblings or bisexual (or both), and their escalating, symmetrical infidelities. It's a clever, if joyless, La Ronde. Overcivilized and self-absorbed, obsessed by sex and violence, Rappaport's New York is no less a bourgeois apocalypse than Schnitzler's Vienna. Like Schnitzler as well, Rappaport is fascinated by erotic compulsion; unlike La Ronde, however, the passions Chain Letters maps are pretty classbound, restricted to a slightly seedy New York yuppie demimonde.

After Hours borders on Rappaportland (particularly in its gleeful paranoia, sexual and otherwise), but the 43-year-old director has been working this turf for over a decade. For the most part, his creatures are a nasty lot, much given to sexual sniping and supercilious banter. Considering Rappaport's ironic attitude towards love, his take on the aging yups who populate his films is puzzling. While their cynical sophistication appears to mirror his own, their hit and miss banter also seems the subject of his satire. Although the combination of affectless delivery and affected wit enables the filmmaker to have it both ways, it inevitably comes across as smug.

Chain Letters is better integrated and less painfully convoluted than Rappaport's last film, Imposters—as well as less burdened with Hollywood and high cultural references. Still, watching it, you get the sense of an intelligence constrained by its own conceits, divided against itself. Rappaport's best ideas are often visual—in addition to some outrageous porn sequences, his first feature, Casual Relations (1973), has numerous affinities with the contemporary poststructural narratives of Yvonne Rainer -and James Benning—and his characters are basically props. Thus Chain Letters's tidy plot and relatively conservative mise-en-scène seem oddly self-denying. The film is more low-budget normal than avant-garde extravaganza.

The difficulty of placing Rappaport is inscribed in the festival blurb itself. which terms Chain Letters "accessible" yet "perplexing," compares its narrative strategies to both Dickens and Borges, and misleadingly drags in Stranger Than Paradise. One of Rappaport's leading critical exegetes has even gone so far as to ascribe to him "the misfortune of living in the wrong century and on the wrong continent." Actually, part of the interest this filmmaker brings to this 23rd NYFF is his total indigenousness. Whether quoting the subway panhandler you've heard a dozen times on the D train or employing the latest fashions from Canal Street bins, Rappaport is both a New



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