

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Incident at Sarajevo</b>
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Source	<i>East Bay Express</i>
Date	1986 Feb 21
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Otac na sluzbenom putu (When father was away on business), Kusturica, Emir, 1985



# Incident at Sarajevo

**WHEN FATHER WAS AWAY ON BUSINESS.** Directed by Emir Kusturica. Screenplay by Abdulah Sidran. Produced by "Forum," Sarajevo, Yugoslavia. With Moreno D'E. Bartolli, Miki Manojlovic, Mirjana Karanovic, Mustafa Nadarevic, Mira Furlan, Davor Dujmovic, Slobodan Aligrudic, and Predrag Lakovic. At the Northside.

By Kelly Vance

One evening in 1950, during the politically nervous period when Yugoslavian prime minister Marshal Josip Broz (Tito) was toughing out his decision to break away from the Soviet bloc, a minor government official returning by train to Sarajevo made a pair of mistakes. The first was to seduce his traveling companion, a co-worker whom he regarded as just another conquest. The second was to comment on an editorial cartoon in the Yugoslav government newspaper which made fun of Stalin by showing Karl Marx studying in his office beneath a portrait of the overbearing Russian premier. "This is going too far," muttered Mesha Malkoc, an old-line party functionary who was a critical step or two behind the times. Soon afterward, Mesha was denounced by his disappointed girlfriend and taken away for a period of hard labor and reeducation to correct his "Stalinist sympathies." His family, as did many others in the first years of Tito's internal crackdown, referred to Mesha's absence as "being away on business," hence the title of Emir Kusturica's mesmerizing film, which opens on a deceptively harsh note yet unfolds to reveal a sympathetic family portrait which glories in human imperfection in the best Eastern European manner.

Mesha is eventually released from the labor camp after his wife intercedes with her brother, a government police agent who has married the woman who blew the whis-



tle on Mesha and who was instrumental in railroading him to jail. A man imprisoned at his brother-in-law's insistence for a thought crime would be plot enough for most filmmakers (Costa-Gavras or Nelson Pereira dos Santos would force us to do as much time as Mesha), but Bosnian poet Abdulah Sidran's screenplay puts Mesha's "business trip" into perspective as a sort of regrettable dues-paying thousands of Yugoslavs went through. Life, and lechery in Mesha's case, goes on as Sidran and Kusturica's political angle melts gently into something more universal and at the same time more personal. Instead of remaining a wretched symbol of total-

itarian unfairness, Mesha is allowed to mature into the hopeless womanizer his family puts up with like a beloved toothache. Prison is only one of his misadventures.

Told through the eyes of Mesha's six-year-old son Malik, *When Father Was Away on Business* is studded with narrative incident. Events, large and small, spin toward the viewer with all the unpredictability we could expect from a narrator so unreliable as to sleepwalk at several points in the story. Malik and his older brother Mirza, proper Moslem boys (Yugoslavia is a stewpot of national groups and religions), are circumcised on the very afternoon their father is to report to

the work camp. Naturally Mesha doesn't want to spoil the celebration, so he slips out quietly while the boys' grandfather makes jokes around the table about washing down foreskins with a glass of slivovitz. Later, after Mesha is released but assigned to a rural post where his family joins him, young Malik experiences the first inklings of what love can mean. He accompanies his father and two other men to a countrified spa and whorehouse, where he ruins the fun by sleepwalking into the woods. He also falls in love with the tender, sickly daughter of a Russian doctor. The scene with Malik and his friend Natasha, both silently bursting with

curiosity, bathing together for the first time, is a wonder of understated good humor.

I suppose one could compare Kusturica's procession of warmly realistic images to the work of Ermanno Olmi, especially his *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, which shares *Father's* fascination with the small but wonder-filled foibles of common people with uncommon souls. Certainly Kusturica (whose name is pronounced Kous-tour-eetsa) shares similar viewpoints with the Eastern European directors, writers, and camerapersons with whom he studied at Prague's FAMU film school. Politics is always grist for the artistic mill as state repression waxes and wanes in towns like Belgrade and Warsaw. The safest approach has characteristically been to retreat to the near past, one or two regimes distant, and satirize the current system from behind a screen of nostalgia and gentle (always gentle, rarely ever confrontational) humor. The masters of this Iron Curtain style of wry comedy, directors such as Milos Forman, Jiri Menzel, and even the woolly king of pastiche Dusan Makavejev, have tended to go international just as fast as their reputations could carry them.

Yugoslav films, however, seem to be made mostly for Yugoslavians. With the international notoriety of *Father*, maybe Kusturica's first feature, *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, which also deals with the early 1950s in Bosnia, will receive wider distribution, along with the work of such seldom seen (in the US) directors as Aleksandar Petrovic. A Serbo-Croatian by ethnic origin, Kusturica is the most popular director to emerge from Yugoslavia since the film festival furor created

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by Makavejev in the late '60s. Let's hope that *Father's* Golden Palm from the 1985 Cannes festival won't lead to the abandonment of Sarajevo. Even though Hollywood could benefit from a little Balkanization, the loss of such a welcome window on the diversity and spirit of present-day Yugoslavia would hurt.

A tone of forgiveness permeates every frame of this film: forgiveness for infidelity, treachery, and petty aggrandizement, for ideological mistakes, for matters which would mean life or death in other

cultures (or at least in other films) than Kusturica's little slice of Bosnia. Instead of killing his ambitious brother-in-law Zijo for sending him up, Mesha waits until a wedding to disgrace the man in front of the entire family. Mesha's patient wife Senija has numerous excuses to drop her husband, who can't seem to resist even the most casual of female acquaintances. She doesn't, though. She remains with him and her two sons, going so far as to pick a fistfight with her vicious sister-in-law in a schoolyard after that woman's testimony causes Mesha's

arrest. Blood is thicker than anything else in Kusturica's Slavic microcosm. Mix that blood with a touch of skeptical joie-de-combat to find Kusturica's formula for humanism. And this is humanistic filmmaking in the grand tradition, full of peccadilloes, kids, and stolen moments of drunken joy, all of which proudly assert that people are more adaptable than states or hegemonies. It's an old idea for a film. Bravo to Kusturica and Sidran for reaching back to the bad old days for the dreamlike testimony of Malik, who after all is a baby-boom-

er with genuinely red diapers.

The actors in *Father* play so cohesively in ensemble that their faces stand out much more clearly than their naturalistic performances. Miki Manojlovic as Mesha is a melancholy Ernie Kovacs, bumping half-heartedly into trouble without benefit of a cigar. Mirjana Karanovic as Senija is the picture of "old country" womanhood. Grandfather Muzamer as played by Pavle Vujisic is a bear who can drink more slivovitz than any man alive. Mustafa Nadarevic is the Balkan Hunter Thompson, the ultimate expen-

dable brother-in-law, bucking for promotion by ratting on his friends. Davor Dujmovic as Malik's older brother Mirza looks like a teenage Mike Royko. Cekic the government man (played by Slobodan Aligrudic) has the case-hardened cruel face of the brutal bureaucrat who could torture you as easily as converse with you but would rather play chess. And Malik, the roly-poly sleepwalker whose memory we trust so implicitly, is just a pink-skinned kid portrayed by a pink-skinned kid named Moreno Bartolli.