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Film Review: Eastern Plays

By Ray Bennett, May 17, 2009 10:12 ET



Bottom Line: Dark but intriguing look at youthful struggles in a racially torn Bulgarian city.

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CANNES -- Uneven but gripping, Kamen Kalev's "Eastern Plays," which screened in Directors' Fortnight, is a portrait of a young drug addict artist caught up in the violent racial strife of present-day Bulgaria.

There's a sudden crime not long into the picture, a savage beating that drunken artist Itso (Christo Christov) witnesses. He also takes some blows even as he sees that his younger brother Georgi (Ovanes Torosian) is among the gang running amok.

The film touches on the brothers' relationship, but it's more an exploration of the artist's feelings of desperate alienation in Sofia, a seemingly tranquil city in which street thugs are paid by slick politicians to stir up unrest.

Many scenes take place in darkness and some go nowhere, but its sympathetic portrait of a young man who knows he's gone off the rails amid the travails of an Eastern Bloc nation grappling with racism will make the picture of interest to festivals and special interest audiences.

Kalev takes his time introducing the central characters up to the point when Itso stumbles upon a gang assaulting a Turkish man and woman and their daughter, who are visiting from Istanbul. Georgi acts as a lookout for the hoodlums but it's not until the next day when Itso shows up for a family meal that it becomes clear they are brothers.

Itso, who has broken up with his tearful girlfriend Niki (Nikolina Yancheva), is attracted to the dreamy Turkish girl Isil (Saadet Isil Aksoy), but her father, in the hospital recovering from his beating, forbids her to see him.

Although Itso is on methadone and drinking too much, he forms a bond with the girl while

Georgi fights his own demons and their struggles form the rest of the story.

Christov, who died after the making of the film and is given a dedication at the end of it, was a nonprofessional, but his acting shows both range and depth. A scene in which he expresses his emptiness to a witless psychiatrist is touching and he and Aksoy have much chemistry in their scenes together.

Festival de Cannes -- Directors' Fortnight

Sales: Memento Films International

Production company: Waterfront Film

Cast: Christo Christov, Ovanes Torosian, Nikolina Yancheva, Saadet Isil Aksoy

Director-screenwriter-editor: Kamen Kalev

Director of photography: Julian Atanassov

Production designer: Martin Slavov

Music: Jean-Paul Wall.

No rating, 89 minutes


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