

January – The Last Man on Earth

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2023.040>



How is it possible for a playwright born in a small Balkan country to master fully the ways and techniques of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Martin MacDonagh and at the same time to possess a different understanding of the essence of life? Yordan Radichkov's unique language style is quite

* Graduated in Theatre Studies from The National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts (NATFA) "Krastyo Sarafov" in Sofia, Bulgaria. She is a member of the Bulgarian Society of Independent Theatrical Critics. Her specialization is theatre directing.

E-mail: emateeva@bgb.bg

discernible, with its intriguing metaphorical expressions. Like children, his protagonists inhabit a surreal world and curiously explore its secrets. The playwright may not be well known on the global film scene. Still, when one reads his play *January* and then watches *The Banshees of Inisherin* by Martin McDonagh, they will feel a similar viewpoint, attitude, and understanding of the meaning of the world.

Throughout the last hundred years of Bulgarian film history, only Binka Zhelyazkova in 1967 and Andrei Paounov in 2021 dared to create a visual interpretation of Radichkov's literary work in sound and picture. This required professional experience, wisdom, and imagination beyond Hollywood's special effects and boisterous dynamics. To shoot a film in which Radichkov's words reveal various levels and allow multi-layered interpretation is a serious test. At the end of January 2023, Andrei Paounov officially debuted as a film director with the feature movie *January*, based on Radichkov's eponymous play. The movie had premieres both in Bulgaria and the United Kingdom (London). At that time, it had already been presented at the national festivals. It had swept numerous festival awards: the Special Jury Prize at the Golden Rose Film Festival'2021 the Critics Guild Prize, awarded by the Union of Bulgarian Filmmakers, the prize for directing at the 26th edition of the Sofia International Film Fest, 2022, the Vassil Gendov Award bestowed by the Union of Bulgarian Filmmakers in several categories: award for best costume design – Maria Paunova; and for best supporting male role – Iossif Surchadziev.

Before taking *January*, look back at Binka Zhelyazkova's *The Tied-Up Balloon*. In the late 1950s, Binka Zhelyazkova was one of the few female directors worldwide to shoot feature films. She started her career in the period when Socialist Realism was

dominant in Bulgarian art, imposing the mandatory presence of positive characters and avoiding conflicting issues. The *Tied-Up Balloon* (1967), with a screenplay by the playwright Yordan Radichkov himself, was entered for the International Film Festival of Expo 1967 in Montreal, Canada. Furthermore, the film was contracted for overseas distribution. However, immediately after it participated in Montreal, the Bulgarian authorities cancelled the contract and prevented its participation at the Venice International Film Festival.

The movie was only shown in Sofia for several days in one cinema. The single premiere was formally needed to account for the production, which was expensive and complicated. The encounter of Binka Zhelyazkova with Yordan Radichkov, though, each of them with their unique styles, led to the creation of a different approach to Bulgarian filmmaking that can be related to the Magical Realism and referred to Emir Kusturica's movies as well. *The Tied-Up Balloon* remains Binka Zhelyazkova's most famous film in Bulgarian film history thanks to her visually powerful allegory of the totalitarian system, featuring vivid and appealing symbols. Its formal characteristics are reminiscent of Surrealism and that of Luis Buñuel.

A free-floating military/barrage balloon, which happens to utter comments, elicits emotions among the residents of two neighbouring villages. They frantically swing from one extreme to another; their disorientation was the cause of the censorship that identified the characters as "politically primitive". Somehow, the viewer is left with the impression that they cannot decide whether to get rid of the balloon by force or prefer to admire it, captivated by the freedom it embodies. Since the film itself does not allow for an unambiguous interpretation, the challenge for the censorship of

that time was even greater. The final tragic tune suggests it to be a parable, which has made Bulgarian film critics define the director's style as Magical Realism based on the allegorical, oneiric development of the narrative.

Until recently, the work of Binka Zhelyazkova was *terra incognita* in the context of European and world filmmaking. Her name appears in the biographical movie *Binka: To Tell a Story about Silence* (directed by Elka Nikolova, 2000, shown at MoMA – the emblematic museum in New York). The film features memories, chronologies, and opinions shared by creative associates and the director's colleagues. It is noteworthy, however, to mention the eight-hour anthology *Women Make Film* by Mark Cousins, which begins with the credit to Binka Zhelyazkova as one of the few women worldwide to direct feature films at that time. Although during her lifetime Binka Zhelyazkova received an award for overall contribution to Bulgarian filmmaking, her movies were rarely shown in cinemas or on television, and mainly on anniversaries rather than at any other time.

Andrey Paunov's documentaries are well-known beyond Bulgaria, namely *Georgi and the Butterflies* (2004), *The Problem with Mosquitoes and Other Stories* (2007), *The Boy Who Was King* (2011), *Walking on Water* (2018). They feature colourful characters and offer a benevolent view of the absurdities of the Bulgarian reality, in which historical memory is on the edge of anecdotal or distorted ideas of patriotism. Paunov's documentary explores the post-socialist absurdity in Bulgaria in a good-natured, non-accusatory manner, and any similar analysis related both to our past and present should have a similar approach for the benefit of future generations.

His fiction feature debut, entitled *January*, is an intriguing interpretation of

Radichkov's world, where the presence of mystery, horror, thriller, and the aesthetics of black and white cinema offer a gripping and memorable cinematic journey. Although Radichkov's magic is present in each episode, the movie has its original charisma. It took Paounov ten years or more to rethink and develop his idea for a film based on a play. The British screenwriter Alex Barrett and Paounov himself wrote the script for the movie. The director, however, had previously chosen Bulgarian actors for the cast. The movie *January* is a co-production of Bulgaria, Portugal, and Luxembourg.

In Radichkov's original play (written in 1974), the action takes place in an inn. In contrast, in the film, the characters live in a wooden building next to a mountain hut where two men (Samuel Fintsi and Yosif Sarchadzhiev) breed lobsters and sell them for a fortune in the city. Beyond the hut, snow reigns freely, and apart from the snow, there is a forest where, apparently, all men vanish. A sled heralds the disappearance of those who dare cross the forest, and, always, when it returns, there is a frozen wolf in it instead of a human being/s. An elderly man is one of the characters. He is engaged in solving crossword puzzles and has a magpie that drinks rakiya (Bulgarian brandy) for a company. The bird is in a cage, so used to being there that it can hardly survive in the open space. A younger man breaks open walnuts with an electric nutcracker, but because of the high voltage, the generator powering the lobster tanks, an electrical contraption, keeps breaking down. Therefore, the trips to the hut are a daily routine for the younger hero. Now and then, the elderly hero, who is in the crossword lover, joins him too.

Some men appear inquiring about a certain Petar Motorov in the outer world. He is an expected persona, however invisible to the men and the public. Motorov is like a trademark, a legendary figure for the

community, a symbol of the established order, which gradually loses its contours as all who refer to him vanish in the forest.

Andrei Paunov's *January* has a tense narrative that is sometimes painfully monotonous – with an obsessive repetition of the same line, yet the change in the intonation suggests different interpretations. The film pays homage to Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* in some episodes. For example, the survivor, who, in the turmoil of vanishing men reappearing as wolves, walks around the hut with an axe at the background of smashed portraits of Lenin and Marx staring from the walls. Silhouettes of ghostly children-pioneers symbols of socialist youths, chasing each other in the flashes of the stopping generator, and then a horse passing along the corridor - or maybe it is not a horse but rather a hallucination.

In *January*, life appears to be a retro dream with vivid flashbacks of the past, a crossword puzzle in which a Being wanders and whistles between an old pop hit, a mountain in Japan, and a planet in the Solar System, spelled out in four-letters (in Bulgarian Earth is spelled in four letters *земя*). Are the dog or the magpie relatives of the Tenetsa, a glorious spirit from North-western Bulgaria? Are they like him, possessing a superhuman power, or have they all passed into the realm of shadows a long time ago? Do they exist, or are we part of their dream? Do we exist? The black and white screen takes on colour when the sole survivor finds himself in a bar, and there, almost like in David Lynch's film, the bartender answers all questions about life: "People in the city don't know anything". Namely, the knowledge we have about ourselves, created by people similar to us, is relative; in the city, it is even more indefinable – today, we are here, tomorrow we are beyond reality. Time has stopped; the meaning is not what it seems. The film *January* succeeds in

capturing the characteristic timelessness of Radichkov's characters.

The Bulgarian contemporary cinematography is known for talented camera masters, but the artistic work of Vasco Viana – one of Portugal's most successful young cameramen in *January* is incredible. The camera view sets the messages; each frame is a sign created by Viana. Even without words, Vasco's footage speaks. When one shot is enough to build perception, the movie takes on flesh, the camera preserves life, and the captured image perfectly responds to the dramaturgical codes. The black and white of most of *January* is a shelter for our fears. Motorov will not appear as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and despite the respect for his personality, he is not God.

Ivo Paunov's original score is another autonomous film component, evoking associations, tension, and atmospheric suspense. The sound wave has the effect of Bernard Herrmann's music for Hitchcock's movies or Ennio Morricone's works for Dario Argento's films – although the symbiosis of Argento and Morricone is unpredictable and beyond its melodramatic cliché. Ivo Paunov in *January* turns every sound into a corridor towards the unknown, into a communication tunnel through which the viewer and the characters are eager to get through in the hope of finding the missing piece of the mystical puzzle called life. In this mysterious parable about people turning into wolves, the finale for the last survivor who chose the transformation is Emil Dimitrov's *Julia* (1972), the so-called Frank Sinatra hit of the East. Admittedly, this is a wonderful choice as Dimitrov was the best-selling Bulgarian artist during the socialist times: according to the American magazine "Billboard", he sold 65 million copies of his albums in the world, over 40 of which were in the USSR.

His *Julia* became a European hit in 1972 on many European charts. In the song, Julia, although well-loved by her sweetheart, leaves him at sunrise. Thus, every reverie ends as the last man in the world gets into the sled.

Yosif Sirchadjiev, Samuel Fintsi, Leonid Yovchev, Zahari Baharov, Malin Krastev, Borislav Chuchkov are enigmatic in their performances. However, the high acting amplitude of the first two is taken for granted; they rule the screen. The final appearance of Malin Krastev, although brief, contributes to the *Twin Peaks*-like philosophy of life in the coldest month and in the darkest forest. Indeed, everyone is looking for their Petar Motorov, but the Gods are frozen; however, we should not despair. Remember the words of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (2004), who said that maintaining our serenity is no small piece of art amid the gloom, and yet what would be more necessary than cheerfulness?

We always search for what is beyond us, looking for the unreachable, even though we fear the unknown. Our pursuit of the unknown is as erotic as it is cinematic – a person cannot stay in one place while breathing, thinking, eating, drinking, or solving crosswords; they always want to be elsewhere. And although we realize that the journey is hard, full of risks, and often pointless, with lost benefits, we continue it like Sisyphus and sink into the snow of January. Who needs such a game (circus)? Despite all odds, this game saves us from loneliness, the shadows of the past, and the thought of death. Everyone has their January when they realize life is perhaps lost in the foreign translations. In *January*, by Andrey Paunov, lonely people solve crosswords and look out the window at the immense whiteness. The last person must leave so that we can start all over again.

Bibliography

- Darakchieva-Bratoeva, Ingeborg 2013. *Bulgarian Cinema from "Kalin The Eagle" to "Mission London"*. Sofia: Institute of Arts Studies.
- Dimitrov, Emil (dir.) 1972. *Julia*. [Movie]. Available at YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNN-7-IlJNs> [04.08.2023].
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 2004. *The sunset of the idols*. Sofia: Hristo Botev.
- Statulov, Deyan 2022. *The impossible freedom Ideological censorship in Bulgarian feature cinema (1948–1989)*. Sofia: Locus.