

media luna new films

SCREENDAILY Review

Student

20 May, 2012 | By Howard Feinstein

Dir/scr: Darezhan Omirbayev. Kazakhstan. 2012. 90mins



With his new film Student, Kazakh director Darezhan Omirbayev puts to rest any notion among the world's intellectuals and literary folk that adaptations of Dostoevski's great Crime and Punishment have been exhausted. Not only is his aesthetic singular—lean, pared down to nicely textured basics, excision of extraneous images and sounds—but the overall social, political, and geographical context is so unique that it affords him the opportunity to spin the entire narrative in an uncharted direction. The use of gorgeous spare wrapping for complex ideas is an inspired choice that keeps the entire project both accessible and stimulating.

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Omirbayev has been making features for more than 20 years, but this ex-mathematician and film theorist has not had an easy time of getting the exposure he deserves. The Kazakh film industry can hardly maintain itself domestically much less promote products on the international stage. Good festivals have long taken notice of his talent, but finding distribution is the Sisyphean challenge.

Given the recognition that the source novel has all over, and the deceptive simplicity of this adaptation, now is possibly a good time for producers and distributors to begin a small Omirbayev bandwagon that would highlight his gifts and potential. He could be one of the greats if given half a chance. Otherwise markets will be limited to his

native country and neighboring Russia, where support exists for his efforts. In fact, Student is shot in Russian, which points to how limited the domestic audience is.

This version takes place during the current era of transition from traditional values and a socialist economy to a rapid, undigested capitalist model. The same types of hustling oligarchs willing to step on all others in their pursuit of money that has been endemic in Russia operates in Kazakhstan as well. A rupture plagues the society, and here the unremarkable student around whom the story pivots serves as the conduit for the multiple contradictions. He commits the famous murders charted in the novel, but he is not sure why.

Because he a broke philosophy student enraged by the state of things? Or because he and another student are attempting to apply the self-deluding values espoused in the novel. The book is relatively new in Kazakhstan, so debate on the subject is fresh, if rather misguided. One of their professors is a woman who buys fully into the concept of Social Darwinism, and that going for the money is a valid choice. She can not provide an answer, however, when asked if murder is the logical extension of the ideology. Another professor takes a different position: the individualism that has run rampant in the West is ill-suited for Kazakh culture. There is an impasse, and the only outlet is violence.

The student takes a bit too seriously the dilemma faced by Raskalnikov in the novel. He actually thinks that his actions can right wrongs, and that killing in the pursuit of some kind of justice is an appropriate moral choice. As in the novel, he struggles with his decision after the nearly random killings. Along the way he meets a poet no longer of any use to the new society and his family, most of whom are handicapped. For some reason he places his trust in the man's daughter. She becomes the priest of his confession, until he fully recognises the gravity of his crime and turns himself in to the baffled police. The moment is Bressonian, almost a celebration of his acknowledgement of the heinousness of his transgression.

Omirbayev makes his points obliquely. Rather than depending on a lot of dialogue to explore the main topic, he opts for tv clips, especially almost literal depictions of Darwinism at work in nature: animals tearing each other to pieces. Some of the references are much less direct, like a clip of the aftermath of the JFK assassination. The male professor maintains that humans can never fully subscribe to social Darwinism because we have an awareness that animals lack, but watching the tv images in close proximity can't help but make you question that argument.

As in earlier films like *Kairat*, *Killer*, and *Cardiogram*, Omirbayev has succeeded in taking an alienated young man and developing his character with often mundane details of daily life. Yet the sum total of his experiences always lead to a higher truth that is not easily attainable by other means.

Production company: Kazakhfilm
International sales: Media Luna New Films, Ida Martins
Producer: Kzf Kim
Cinematography: Boris Troshev
Music: Baurzhan Kuanyshev
Main cast: Maiya Serkibayeva, Yedyge Bolysbayev, Bakhytzhhan Turdaliyeva