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Darezhan Omirbayev

The uncompromising Kazakh auteur discusses adapting Dostoyevsky for the big screen, the changes sweeping through his country and why he thinks cinema is dying By Clarence Tsui

FOR SCREEN ADAPTATIONS of an existent literary text, additions to the original source material can speak volumes about a director's vision. In Darezhan Omirbayev's *Student* — a take on Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* — two scenes stand out. In the first, the lead character, a university student, endures a lecturer inculcating her about the merits of the survival-of-the-fittest doctrine in a capitalist Kazakhstan — an irony given the protagonist's Spartan existence while oligarchs and their scions flaunt their wealth freely. In the second, a television showing a Kazakh documentary is watched by no one — a deep contrast to earlier scenes in which people are seen to be fixated by soap operas.

These scenes reflect Omirbayev's angst as he observes, as an artist and a citizen, the major upheavals sweeping across his country as the capitalist system takes hold. Unable to abide with or counter such changes, his protagonist resorts to an extreme act of violence to make sense of the world. *Student* (repped by Media Luna Films at the AFM) is easily one of the most passionate films Omirbayev has made in his 20-year

career. A graduate in mathematics from the Kazakhstan State University, Omirbayev then studied film in Moscow, worked as a teacher and a programmer before becoming an editor at the state-owned Kazakh Film studio. He made his first short film, *Shilde*, in 1988 and won a Silver Leopard award at the Locarno Film Festival for his first feature, *Kairat* (1991). His 1998 film, *Killer*, won the Un Certain Regard prize at Cannes.

Student made its bow at the same sidebar at Cannes in May, and was subsequently shown in a number of fall festivals, including Busan, where Omirbayev talked to *The Hollywood Reporter* about the inspiration behind his film and what it means as an analogy for contemporary Kazakh society.

Why did you decide to adapt Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* for the screen?

I like the composition of the story: it's like a very small person against the whole world, like David against Goliath. Also, this novel has some scenes which I really wanted to shoot, like the murderer's reaction after he committed the act. In Dostoyevsky's novel, the lead character kills an old woman; in my version,

it's a bit different. My story shows a very big social problem in Kazakhstan, when capitalism came in and divided people into the rich and the poor. The society became not so good, and people lost the ground beneath their feet, and a direction to lead their lives.

Do you think the moral behind Dostoyevsky's story mirrors what's happening now in your country?

The situation about the second part of the 19th century, when this novel was written, and of Kazakhstan nowadays, has its parallels. Before Kazakhstan deserted the old communist system and embraced the free market, all people were equal; but when capitalism came people were divided. It was like a shock to everyone back then, when we were at the beginning of the whole process; now we can see the whole situation and make some definitive conclusions about it.

This film has some parallels somehow with your 1998 film *Killer*, in which a man agrees to kill a journalist for the sake of money. Can *Student* be seen as an update of that story?

The idea of *Killer* came to me when I read a report in a newspaper about something similar. But *Student* is much more serious. *Killer* is not so similar to my soul; Dostoyevsky's tale is much deeper than that. Still, *Killer* won a prize at Cannes; *Student* was just shown there without getting anything. But I think *Killer* was the weakest film of my career.

How have things changed in the past decade or so for filmmakers who now operate in an economic system driven by entrepreneurs looking at the bottom line?

The situation has become stable in the past few years; mostly all films were still shot on government money [through the state-backed Kazakh Film studio], but we have

private companies too. About ten films a year are made in Kazakhstan. A lot of directors still shoot films on government money, but then these films have no way to recoup the costs as the government is the owner of the films, [but] nobody is interested in promoting these films. But private companies, who are owners of the films and are very concerned about the future of the film very much. I feel so sad because nobody wants to take care of the films when they were released.

Does this predicament also apply to your films?

Student was shown in many festivals, good and big ones, but in [Kazakhstan's capital] Almaty there were no screenings for our audiences because no one was interested. We didn't make DVDs. It's a little problematic to show this film in Kazakhstan because it's more philosophical, it's not just entertainment — but then again it's not only a problem for Kazakhstan. I feel very moved that the Busan International Film Festival has built such a beautiful cinema centre, but I regret it's come a little bit late — the cinematic art is dying, around the world.

Have the changes in Kazakhstan impact how you and other filmmakers work?

We were still making films so we aren't suffering that much! But normal people suffer a lot. During these years when we changed from one system to another, from being part of the Soviet Union to becoming an independent country, the [average] length of a Kazakh person's life decreased by ten years. And I think the cinematic art is necessary to people, to help them to understand how to survive.

So is *Student* actually a reflection of your frustration with the current state of things?

Every young man feels like he has to be strong and fight against the system; this will pose difficulties to his own development. But when that person grows older, gets married and has a job, he makes compromises. But some mad men like me are still thinking of fighting against the whole world ... I make films because I want to speak out about how power is not equal in society. And I regret there isn't a large audiences for watching these films. **VITA**

Vital Stats

Nationality Kazakh
Born March 15, 1958

Film in AFM *Student*

Selected Filmography
Kairat 1991; *Cardiogram* 1995;
Killer 1998; *Shouga* 2007

Notable Awards

Silver Leopard and Fipresci Prize at Locarno, *Kairat*; Unesco award at Venice; Jury Award at Honolulu, *Cardiogram*; Un Certain Regard prize at Cannes Jury Award at Nantes IFF, *Killer*; Jury Award at Eurasia IFFSpecial Jury award at Nantes IFF, *Shouga*