

media luna new films



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Cannes
Un Certain Regard

Student

Studyent

(Kazakhstan)

By Leslie Felperin

A Kazakfilms, Kazak Ministry of Culture, Kadam presentation. (International sales: Media Luna, Cologne, Germany.) Produced by Limara Zheksembayeva. Directed, written by Darezhan Omirbayev.

With: Nurlan Baitasov, Maya Serikbayeva, Edige Bolysbayev, Bakhytzhan Turdaliyeva, Aruzhan Sain, Amangeldy Aitaly, Asel Sagatova, Darezhan Omirbayev. (Russian, Kazakh dialogue)

A roughly faithful adaptation of Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," despite its setting in contempo Almaty, Kazakh filmmaker Darezhan Omirbayev's "Student" unspools a stark, Bressonian tale of a young man who commits an almost random act of murder. With its deadpan perfs, retro visual style and crime-story plot, the pic almost feels like an Aki Kaurismaki movie but without the jokes or rockabilly music, just the despair. "Student" is bound to study abroad at fests, especially given Omirbayev's reputation (after "Killer") as one of Kazakhstan's most accomplished helmers, but distribution will be minimal beyond the CIS and Germany, where so many Russian-speakers reside.

A snappy opening sequence finds college kid Ali (Nurlan Baitasov, a filmmaking student of the director's) working as a runner on the set of some tacky local production. The film-within-a-film's director is played by Omirbayev himself, who's taken aback when a student reporter tells him she thinks he knows nothing about young people today, setting up the generation gap that will rep a core theme throughout.

Later, in a university lecture hall, Ali listens to a professor (Aruzhan Sain) unabashedly preaching social Darwinism as a fitting philosophy to guide Kazakhstan into the future. Seemingly deciding to test his own fitness for survival, Ali shoots a local corner-store

owner and a femme customer who unluckily stumbles onto the scene, and makes off with what little money is in the register.

He uses part of his ill-gotten gains to help out the family of a drunken poet (Edige Bolysbayev) who was once a feted literary star of the socialist state but has fallen on hard times. Ali falls for the poet's pretty, deaf daughter, Saniya (Maya Serikbayeva), paving the way for a denouement that cleaves fairly closely to Dostoyevsky's redemption-rich template.

As he did with "Killer," Omirbayev once again offers a quietly scathing portrait of his homeland, which, on the evidence here, is on the verge of losing its soul in the pursuit of Range Rovers, banal soap operas and other ephemeral pleasures. It's a slight surprise that Omirbayev doesn't follow Dostoyevsky to the letter and have Saniya prostitute herself to support her family, a prospect that would have taken things to their logical conclusion, but perhaps he felt that would have been one humiliation too many.

Otherwise, there's much to admire in the film's elegantly classical tempo and the way Omirbayev achieves so much with so little, such as a dream sequence in which Ali finds himself in a car with all four of the most important women in his life: Saniya, his mother, his sister and the woman he shot. Pic also offers a some nice offscreen action, with sound effects working overtime to fill in the ellipses. Perfs, from a mix of non-pros and pro thespis, are deliberately withholding and unemotive, adding to the air of quiet desperation.

Camera (color, HD), Boris Troshev; music, Baurzhan Kuanys; sound (Dolby Digital), Ilya Biserov. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard), May 17, 2012. Running time: 92 MIN.