

# Savouring the momentum: Festival celebrates the renaissance of Turkish cinema

by SONJA GRGAR

The inaugural Vancouver Turkish Film Festival (VTFF) is capitalizing on an extraordinary year that at once celebrated the centennial of Turkish cinema, as well as delivered an unprecedented calibre of recognition and the highest number of films ever made in an industry that merges eastern and western aesthetics.

"Turkey has [always] been a bridge between Asia and Europe. Turkish cinema, dating back to 1914, combines Europe's artistic sensibilities with the colourful complexities of the Middle East. As a result, our films are visually very compelling," says Eylem Sonmez, VTFF president and co-founder.

Both Sonmez, who is also a veteran Vancouver-based production coordinator, and local filmmaker Hakan Burcuoglu, VTFF director and co-founder, wanted the festival to serve as a platform that will raise the profile of Turkish cinema in Vancouver by presenting culturally specific stories which resonate well internationally.

## The Turkish connection

Burcuoglu says that the local Turkish community is quite small and consists of only about 5,000 people. However, Sonmez explains that the number of Turkish students coming to study in Vancouver has been on the rise recently.

"There are many Turkish students coming to get their film education in Vancouver, but they usually go back to Turkey to continue their career because Turkish cinema has been growing at a very fast speed in the last 10 years," says Sonmez.

Composer Rahman Altin, who successfully splits his career between Turkey and Hollywood, also testifies to the changing conditions within the Turkish film industry.

"In Turkey people are discovering the power of communication, so finding funds for projects [there] seems easier nowadays than in the U.S.," he says.

## A complex identity

Altin composed the score for VTFF's closing film *The Butterfly's Dream*, a sentimental romance



▲ *My Child* depicts a parent group that courageously fights for the rights of their LGBT children in Turkey.

that resurrects real life stories of two lesser-known Turkish poets who died in the 1940's. It is the biggest budget film to come out of Turkey to date, and a symbol of the growing prowess of the still largely state-funded Turkish film industry.

In addition to attracting as wide an audience range as possible, it was vitally important to Sonmez and Burcuoglu to represent the complexity of Turkish culture at VTFF by offering a selection of mainstream, arthouse, short and documentary films.

"We are not defined by our stereotypes. Turkish cinema is very diverse, and we want to surprise Vancouver audiences," says Burcuoglu.

*Silent*, another VTFF film and winner of the 2012 Cannes Film Festival's prestigious Palme d'Or award for best short film, illustrates this diversity by depicting the perspective of the country's oppressed Kurdish minority.

The film is a touching story about a Kurdish woman who, while visiting her husband in prison, is forced to be silent be-

cause only Turkish language is allowed to be spoken in that setting.

## Shifting political consciousness

The documentary *My Child* is another VTFF offering, and conveys the stories of an activist parent group that fights for the acceptance of LGBT rights in Turkey. Director Can Candan heard the parents' stories at a university conference, and was immediately moved to make a documentary about their struggle.

"I realized that the very act of these parents sharing their stories publicly and openly was a tremendously powerful political act. This was happening in an extremely homophobic and transphobic society where LGBT people are constant targets of hate crimes," says Candan.

To his surprise, Candan had little trouble securing the necessary funds for *My Child*, and the film has been released theatrically in Turkey, had been commercially distributed on DVD and online, and was received extremely well within the country.

"Documentary in Turkey has become an area of opposition and activism with more and

more diverse voices being expressed," says Candan. "We designed, structured, and promoted *My Child* to resist any attempts at marginalization."

He feels that the democratic aspirations of Turkish people when it comes to LGBT rights are far ahead of the country's conservative and oppressive political leadership. And though his film has garnered significant support, Candan says that it is still challenging to secure funding and wide distribution for independent documentaries in Turkey.

This is why both Burcuoglu and Sonmez are excited to contribute to the longevity of the blossoming Turkish cinema by having VTFF serve as an international platform for the nation's filmmakers.

"Films are particularly poignant and powerful snapshots of the truth, beauty and struggle of people in a particular place, and for this reason I believe that Turkish cinema will bring a [fresh] perspective to Vancouver audiences," says Sonmez.

Vancouver Turkish Film Festival runs from Jan. 23-25. For tickets and information, visit [www.vtff.ca](http://www.vtff.ca)



▲ *The Butterfly's Dream's* international success is a testament to the growing power of Turkish cinema.

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in France or Québec, as the future of the French language lies in Africa. According to the Organisation Mondiale de la Francophonie, 85% of francophones will be living on the African continent by the year 2050. By then 750 million people will be speaking French, and the language will be tied into increasingly multilingual national contexts. No doubt regional accents will intensify and possibly even supplant the traditional French accent, that is to say the accent of those who imagine themselves without one.

Here in Canada my traditional French accent is rather well received, certainly better than a Québec accent is in France. Being a Québécois in France is to be the country-bumpkin cousin that makes you smile. The cousin who amuses you with

their colourful expressions that no one dares to use in France. It's clear that Québec folklore and camaraderie have no place in the business world of France, particularly not in the media, which is my domain. Quebecers are seen as much less credible from the point of view of high French society (mainly Parisians), who believe themselves to be speaking the "true French," that which is the most neutral.

So, my Québécois friend, you will have to tone down your accent the same way a Belgian or even a resident of Marseille or Toulouse would if you want to work in the French media, unless of course you become a sports-caster. You have to realize that discussing rugby with an accent from the southwest of France, well, that's a good thing.

What a shame that France, a supposed welcoming land, is

depriving itself of so much multiculturalism. Is there but one good recipe for beef bourguignon, a Paris-Brest pastry or poutine? Vancouver attests to just the opposite each day with its intermingling of cultures and the resulting creativity. Vancouver has shown me that there is no "good" or "bad" French, no "good" or "bad" accent, but that there exists in fact as many varieties of French as there are francophones. So I can go back to perfecting my "FranQuéGlish" without shame. A "FranQuéGlish" that reflects my life, my experiences and the cultures that I have made mine. And that's only the beginning. ☞

*Speaking with an accent implies appealing to the sentiment and then everything is turned upside down.* – Arthur Schopenhauer

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