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An interview with Radu Jude on *It Can Pass Through the Wall*

Richard Raskin

Photo Silviu Ghetie

Do you recall what attracted you to Chekhov's "In the Coach-house" and what inspired you to retell this story in your own way?

A few years ago, I read everything by Chekhov. I discovered in his writings a vision of life that I felt very close to and I wanted to understand it completely, so I read all his works. While reading them, I considered exploring more deeply some of the stories by transforming them into films, either shorts or features. And since at the time I was trying to get funding for the feature film *Aferim!* and was fed up with the idiotic commercials I was directing, I wanted to make an independent film, without waiting too long for the financing. Why I chose this story? I don't remember, but I was and still am interested in death and things related to it. And this story also made me remember some of the things I experienced in my childhood, when I lived with my grandparents in the countryside. Then, there were all these stories in the press about a group of tourists who enjoyed their seaside holiday, despite the fact that someone was found dead close to them, less than 50 meters away. They were hounded by the press and I felt this was hypocritical, because we always enjoy life while others, sometimes close by, are suffering or even dying. I remember a day, years ago, when I had sex with a woman in my apartment, despite the fact that at the floor below someone had just died. Only the wall was between us, so only the wall made me not appear as immoral as the tourists from that press coverage...

There are a number of changes you made in the story. The grandson Alyoshka becomes the granddaughter Sofia. Was this because you wanted to cast Sofia Nicolaescu in the role of the child? You also gave her some things to do like showing the "hoop thing." And she has a brief dialogue with another child – perhaps your own son?

Yes, I definitely wanted to work with Sofia. She is a great actress and I had already worked with her earlier in a feature film. As for the other kid, my son was spending the weekend with me and I decided to cast him in a small part, since he was supposed to come to the shoot anyway. The "hoop thing" appeared because

Sofia was doing it at the time, so I put it in the film, as with a lot of other things that belonged to her, like her toys, etc.

There are a number of other changes as well. The card game becomes backgammon. The dead man is a neighbor rather than the master of the big house. One of the grandfather's friends is a blind man in your film. Can you recall why you made these changes?

Obviously, some changes had to be made in order to bring the story into contemporary Romania and at the level of everyday, common people. Then, the blind man is a reference to the blind man in Beckett's *Endgame* (actually, he even says a line taken directly from that play: "Poor dead people" or something like that). There are other quotes as well: the red balloon from Lamorisse and Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films. The backgammon is an ironic reference to the chess game in the Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*.

One of the most striking aspects of the film is of course your decision to tell the entire story as one continuous shot, with no cutting whatsoever. I understand that using long shots is a characteristic of Romanian cinema in general. But a shot lasting 16 minutes is extraordinary even in that context. Were many takes done until you had the shot you wanted?

It is a decision that appeared later, during the preparation of the film. First of all, I do not like cutting for its own sake and, secondly, we could afford only one shooting day, so this was easier, trying to make only one shot. We shot maybe 15 takes, but only 4 or 5 were complete. Then, Sofia got tired and we stopped.

Did your using one continuous take require directing your actors in a particular way? And can you tell anything about the ways you get such natural performances from your child actors as well as the adults?

Yes, it required a good memory, first of all. And I had cast another actor for the part of the grandparent and, after a few days of rehearsing the dialogue, I had to excuse myself and inform him we couldn't finish the film together. He had a memory problem and, despite all our efforts, he couldn't act. I felt sorry for him and the situation, but that was it. I then asked Mr. Arcudeanu. We had only two days of rehearsals left, but he was great. Regarding the "naturalness" you mention, I must say it is something I do not value too much. What interests me more is that the actors communicate something complex and nuanced with their acting, I don't really care if they appear natural or not.

One small touch that plays an important role in the look of the film is the red hat the grandfather wears. Is there a story behind that decision you made?

No, it wasn't intended to become a symbol, but if someone finds an interpretation for that, fine.

You made some important choices concerning the sound track, involving sounds heard during the opening and closing credits, and off-screen sounds during the body of the film. Can you tell me about these choices?

Well, it is a film built around what is heard outside of the frame, so Dana Bunescu, the sound designer, and I had to create these off-screen sounds – first of all in order for the story to be comprehensible. And then, the other idea we had was to stimulate the imagination of the viewers. So some sounds are not necessarily comprehensible, but the viewer can create his or her own story starting from them.

This film has done very well at festivals. Can you tell me what you personally see as its main qualities?

The Chekhov story and the acting.

Do you consider short film storytelling fundamentally different in any way from feature film storytelling?

Well, it depends how we define things. If we consider the narrative driven films, then, of course there are some obvious differences between the short formats and the long ones. (Although, there is also a difference between a one-minute film and a 20 minute one, just as there is a difference between a 90 minute film and a very long one, like Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, for instance, which runs for more than 9 hours...) If we think of another type of cinema, the more experimental one, or the one which is not narrative driven in a classical way, then there are no differences. A Jonas Mekas film has more or less the same structure, even if the film is short, long, or even very long. Or a Chris Marker film...

Is there any advice you would give to students making their own first short films?

I would like to, but I am not in a position to offer advice to anybody. I read somewhere about the advice Spielberg was giving to students: to work out, to stay in shape... Maybe that is good advice.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I miss you.

I miss you too, Radu, and look forward to seeing you soon at a festival.

12 April 2016