

A Tragicomic Note



FINALE OF 'THE CONCERT':
Filmed in Paris's historic
Theatre du Chatelet

In 'The Concert,' Romanian Jewish film director Radu Mihaileanu tells a Jewish story of the Communist era

Bernard Dichek

THE NEW FRENCH FILM, "The Concert," tells a complicated but dazzling story about Jews, music, Communism and the vagaries of circumstance.

A Russian musical conductor was fired from Moscow's Bolshoi orchestra during the Communist era because he refused to get rid of the orchestra's Jewish musicians. Thirty years later, Andrei Filipov, who now works as a concert hall cleaner, intercepts a fax inviting the Bolshoi Orchestra to perform in Paris as a last-minute replacement for the San Francisco Philharmonic. Filipov

concocts a scheme to perform the concert together with his old time Jewish musician buddies, a scruffy group of taxi drivers, pornographic film sound specialists and flea market salesmen.

For reasons that are not immediately clear, Filipov insists that the orchestra be accompanied by a well-known and non-Jewish violinist called Anne-Marie Jacquet (Melanie Laurent).

The unraveling of Jacquet's true identity and her relationship to Filipov leads to a dazzling climax that makes such good use of Tchaikovsky's "Concerto for Violin and

Orchestra" that some viewers may think that the music was written for the film.

Many viewers will also find themselves overwhelmed by the celestial beauty of lead actress Melanie Laurent and the transformation that she undergoes in the final scene from being an aloof classical musician celebrity into a vulnerable endearing person.

But others will be put off by the dramatic comedy's earthy and slapstick humor and its stereotyped depictions of Jews, especially that of a yarmulke-clad Jewish musician called Victor, who spends his time in Paris selling caviar out of a suitcase.

RADU MIHAILEANU, WHO wrote and directed the film, rejects the notion that the film has anti-Semitic overtones. "Stereotypes are the basis for comedies and in our film we have all kinds of stereotypes including French stereotypes and vodka-drinking Russian stereotypes," Mihaileanu tells *The Report* the day after the film's Israeli premiere at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque in early April.

Mihaileanu, 52, a Romanian-born Jew who fled from Communist Romania to France in the 1980s, explains that the characters in the film reflect the lives of people of his father's generation.

"My father got a special permit to leave Romania and visit Paris in the 1970s. He had no francs or dollars. The only way for him to have money to buy food for himself in Paris was to sell caviar that he brought from the delta of the Danube. So it's true [in the film] that those guys coming for three days to Paris aren't at all interested in doing the concert. They really are much more interested in making money so that they can live better in Moscow. That's the way it is for those poor guys."

Mihaileanu notes that this is not the first time that a film that he has made with a Jewish theme has been controversial. When he directed "Train of Life" (1998), a film based on his father's experiences during the Holocaust, he recalls, some people chided him for dealing with the subject of the Holocaust in a tragicomic style similar to that of Roberto Benigni's "Life is Beautiful."

"I'm a Jew and I know who I am. I say to people, listen, this is my story and the story of the Jewish people is my story. Elie Wiesel said it very well: 'When we lived a tragedy, in order to not go completely mad we came back with humor. That's our way to survive.'"

Mihaileanu has black tousled hair and speaks English in a mixed Central European-French accent and in a passionate tone that resembles the voice of the Nobel Prize-winning Holocaust survivor and author that he has just quoted. And like Wiesel, who is known to be well-versed in French philosophy, Mihaileanu also studied the works of the French existentialists, but under different circumstances.

"In our home my father had a big library...the outside row contained books in Romanian that were permitted by the authorities," recalls Mihaileanu. "But behind them were hidden rows of forbidden French books that my father smuggled into the

country from France."

Among those books were the works of French philosopher André Malraux, which Mihaileanu's father translated into Romanian. It was Malraux, when he became France's



RADU MIHAILEANU: Life energy with a crescendo

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Minister of Culture, who arranged a permit for Mihaileanu's father to visit France.

As both of Mihaileanu's parents were staunch anti-Stalinist communists, his first exposure to Jewish culture did not come until he was 20 years old, when he landed a job performing in the Bucharest Yiddish Theater.

"Much of what I know about being Jewish came from reading the works of Sholem Aleichem and Issac Bashevis Singer. Reading those texts caused something to resonate within me about my Jewish identity."

Mihaileanu points out that he doesn't remember personally experiencing incidents of

anti-Semitism in Romania, but he realized that it was his father's Jewishness that kept him from advancing at the newspaper where he worked. "Even though he had changed his name [from Buchman] during the war, when he became a communist, my father stayed in the same junior position at the newspaper for more than 30 years because everyone knew he was Jewish. The senior editor was a communist party member who was never even at work."

In 1980 Mihaileanu, aware that his own prospects of advancing professionally in the theatrical and literary milieu of Romania were limited, requested a two-week permit to visit his grandfather who lived in Israel. After staying with him in Bnei Brak, Mihaileanu decided not to return to Romania. Instead he went on to Paris, where he began to study film.

AS A FILM STUDENT, MIHAILEANU became acquainted with the works of American and European filmmakers, such as Orson Welles and Ingmar Bergman, whose works weren't shown in Romania. When it came to the practical side of filmmaking, he began to probe the technical aspects of comic filmmaking. "I loved the films of Charlie Chaplin and I learned a lot watching the films of Tex Avery."

The influence of Avery, the Warner Brothers creator of eye-popping, exaggerated cartoon characters, such as Bugs Bunny and Woody Woodpecker, is very evident in the comic style of "The Concert."

"Rhythm is a key element in comedy," says Mihaileanu, who prepares his actors for comic scenes by having them watch Tex Avery films. "Watch the rhythm, I say to them."

Music is another key element in Mihaileanu's filmmaking style, which brings to mind the farcical humor of Serbian director Emir Kusturica ("Black Cat, White Cat"). In addition to his adept use of sound in the film's comic scenes, Mihaileanu's choice of music for the film's moving and dramatic ending is crucial.

"I was looking for some real Russian music with Slavonic soul to it. So I started listening to old LPs of Rachmaninoff and Shostokovich from my parents' collection," recounts Mihaileanu. "But when I heard the David Oistrakh version of Tchaikovsky's Concerto, I knew that it had the two elements I was looking for."

Those elements, says Mihaileanu were "a life energy with a crescendo" and something that conveys the feeling that "a human being

has the dignity and ability to push mountains." After casting the actors, Mihaileanu gave each of them a copy of Tchaikovsky's Concerto to listen to during rehearsals and preparations for the filming.

The production included filming locations in both France and Russia, including one particularly complex scene in Moscow's Red Square, staged alongside a weekly demonstration that is still held by a group of diehard Communists.

But it was the concerto finale, filmed in Paris's historic Theatre du Chatelet, that proved to be the most challenging. "It was a nightmare," recalls Mihaileanu. "Six months of work to prepare for it. A movie within a movie."

The "nightmare," he explains, was the effort involved in getting every small detail right.

First Mihaileanu worked with composer Armand Amar to edit the 30-minute long concerto down to about 12 minutes. He then had a professional orchestra record it in the style of David Oistrakh. "Although my composer was a big fan of [violinist] Leonid Kogan, I wanted to use the David Oistrakh interpretation because Oistrakh does it with such lamento, the notes are longer and the violin is almost crying 'ay ay ay.' I really tried to get that Oistrakh influence when we recorded it."

Most orchestral concerts are filmed from the perspective of the audience, but Mihaileanu, in order to maximize the emotional impact, placed his cameras within the orchestra close to their faces.

In order to show the metamorphosis that musical conductor Andrei Filipov undergoes in the course of the concerto performance, Mihaileanu used three different professional conductors as stand-ins, each of whom has a different conducting style.

"He [Filipov] starts out as a very shy conductor and then step by step he turns into a great conductor ending like [Leonard] Bernstein," observes Mihaileanu.

AS FOR THE HEARTTHROBBING performance rendered by the violinist heroine played by actress Melanie Laurent, Mihaileanu used a combination of technical wizardry, clever casting, and acting and directing skill.

In the scene where Laurent is shown playing the violin with great virtuosity, a special effect enables her hands to be seamlessly replaced by those of a professional violinist



HEARTTHROB: The violinist heroine, played by Melanie Laurent, listens to a Gypsy violinist

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who is the same size and has the same skin color. "We had Melanie work with a violin coach for four months," explains Mihaileanu. "In the end, about 80 percent of the time we see Melanie's right hand but for the left hand it was impossible. Tchaikovsky's Concerto is one of the most difficult concertos for a violinist to learn."

Mihaileanu had several reasons to choose Laurent for the role. She can look French, Russian and Jewish at the same time, which is important for the revelation of who her real parents were, he explains, and she has the ability to change from being a cold person "in a world of her own, like many egotistical musician friends that I have" into "a very warm human person that the audience can empathize with."

That remarkable change in character is exactly what Laurent achieves, in a memorable performance that reveals the range of her acting talent, something that is unrecognizable in the flat appearance she provided in her more recently made starring role in the film "Inglourious Basterds," under the direction of Quentin Tarantino.

Describing the acting process in *The Concert* Laurent notes during the interview:

"I let myself be totally submerged by the music and entered a trance state. I had to stop because I started shaking: I let go of my violin and fell about crying. I had the feeling that my body was becoming music. It was so violent I nearly fainted."

"The Concert" was a success at the box office when it was released earlier this year in France, where it drew more than two million viewers. The film also led to Tchaikovsky being rediscovered by French music lovers, with recordings of the Concerto rising to the top of the classical music best-seller lists.

"Not only that but because of the film my own children, who are 16 and 19 years old, started to listen to Tchaikovsky," Mihaileanu adds with a smile.

"The Concert" began playing in movie theaters in Israel at the end of April. In July, it will begin to play in the United States, where it is being distributed by Harvey Weinstein, an American film distributor known for his ability to spot European films that appeal to mainstream American audiences. Mihaileanu notes that Weinstein is optimistic about the commercial potential of "The Concert." He is predicting that it will do as well as Benigni's 'Life is Beautiful,' which made \$42 million." ●