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A perfect day: Does Italian passion make Özpetek perfect?

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Ferzan Özpetek, the Istanbul-born, Rome-residing movie director, has become the darling of Italy for the past decade. His films never fail to amuse, stimulate, surprise, anger – and now depress.

Every time they appear, they create a ruckus. It takes a Turkish director to make good Italian films nowadays. That's because Italians are often too depressed themselves to take an honest and detached look inside their soul.

Özpetek's "A Perfect Day," which inaugurates the Antalya festival later this week, is now the top of the Italian box office champions – if you drop all the Hollywood schlock which dominate the scene: Hancock, Burn After Reading and Kung Fu Panda. At the September Venice Festival, the applause for the film, which is an adaptation of Melania Mazzucco's best seller, lasted for ten minutes.

He rejects the label

Özpetek rejects the label of gay cult director even though sexual choice drives "Le Fate Ignoranti"(called "His Secret Life" in America and which tells the story of a woman who finds out that her recently deceased husband had a gay lover for years), and the earlier "Hamam" (Steam) in which a Roman architect falls for a Turkish young man. And there also is "Facing Windows" which deals in part with the past and an old man's remembrance of his male lover in Italy during World War II. And in Saturn in Opposition (Saturn Contro), a film on friendship, you feel the pain of the man whose radiant young boyfriend dies of a brain hemorrhage.

"What drives me nuts...when I go to a store in New York." Özpetek recently said, ``and I want to see if they stock my films – because I know they do—and so I ask "can I buy it?" and they tell me "No, we don't have it." And it turns out they do have it but it is in the "gay section" and that just drives me nuts! My dream is one day there won't be a "gay section." And of course, Özpetek is right .His stories reveal Italian Society, and it takes all kinds to compose it.

To such an extent that the Roman Catholic Church once praised the subject matter of his "Cuore Sacro" (Sacred Heart) as "strong, urgent and opportune" in a movie review website of the Italian bishops conference. Considering that most of Özpetek's earlier films had been labeled "unacceptable/negative" by the Catholic film commission, this one was a surprise. The film was roasted by many other critics, yet Ferzan tells me that the DVD today is a best seller in Italy and other places which shows that "maybe it was too early for its time."

That's also because Özpetek was able to show abject and realistic misery, and describe the "new poverty" of Italy, as he does in the many of his films. You see some of the neighborhood in "A Perfect Day," but it is a film with few rays of hope. One of the few happy moments comes when Serra Yilmaz serves up some scoops of ice

cream to Emma (Ferrari) after a day when she suffered unspeakable tragedies – including, an attempted rape in the Tiber-side woods by her violent ex husband. And yes, we miss the Turkishness and the gayishness of his previous movies. (And yes, we welcome the Sezen Aksu song playing in the background of a rich Italian children's birthday party.)

Dealing with otherness

What will Turkey say about this film in the midst of its current violent (in the southeast) season? Will Turks be shocked by the artificiality of The March of the Penguins, flashing on a TV screen while searing stabbing and shoving is performed next door?

"The climate around the world is of intolerance and violence against others," Özpetek told me in an interview. "This film is not just meant for Italy. It is what is happening everywhere." All right Ferzan— you wanted to show how human beings turn into monsters and show some compassion, and you were powerful at it but I still enjoy better your ``Turkishness and gayishness" in your movies. There are few directors who have the sensitivity to deal with the "other-ness", especially in a world where foreigners are stigmatized.

For example, Ferzan says "In Italy now, there is a resurgence of racism because of all the immigration to Italy. Immigrants are seen as the enemy." Similarly he is bitter about the United States, saying, "Every government in the world is setting out to get richer. Money is God. When you try to come in to the U.S. you are always looked as if you were a terrorist." But, he also noted that when he went to New York a few weeks ago, an Italian- American border guard flashed a smile and started talking films. "They could do this all the time and put everyone at ease and create a good atmosphere, but they just won't do it." Or will they? Come U.S. elections, November 4!

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