



GOING FOR BOTH LAUGHTER AND TEARS

The Craft Of Mixing Humor And Pain

By **Andrew Horton** horton@screentalk.org

What films do I tend to like best? Well, I can get a kick out of everything from *I Married A Monster From Outer Space* to abstract experimental shorts. But given the choice, I love to watch and to write films that somehow make me both laugh and cry, sometimes at the same time or more often in an alternating rhythm of emotions.

But how to write such films?

Let's look at one recent example that gets high marks:

Two bumbling soldiers from opposing armies hurl insults at each other as one holds a rifle on the other, and then, in his ineptitude, loses control of it, and the other soldier takes control and hurls similar humiliations towards his "prisoner" in an isolated battle trench. The scene is somewhere in Bosnia during the Bosnian war, and the Serb and the Bosnian soldier then discover in their bantering back and forth that they have dated the same woman in a small town in Bosnia. Combining both slapstick farce and ironic humor ("You dated her too?") coming from so-called "enemies," Bosnian filmmaker Danis Tanovic's film, *No Man's Land*, walked off with Hollywood's 2001 Oscar® for Best Foreign Film.

This coveted award for a "Balkan film" that appeared as a darkly comic anti-war statement caught many by surprise who were expecting the award to go to the quirky French "feel good" farce, *Amelie*. Tanovic's tragic comedy about the Bosnian war which he had lived through personally as a young Bosnian soldier suddenly caught the attention of the millions

watching the Academy Awards show Oscar® night in March, 2002.

My point for screenwriters everywhere is a simple one: **don't be afraid to create memorable stories from tales that mix humor and hard times, comedy and crisis.** After all, isn't such a mixture of emotions closer to real life than the convenient genre listings in video shops and in so many Hollywood films?

What Tanovic and other Balkan filmmakers such as Emir Kusturica of Bosnia *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* (1981), *When Father Was Away On Business* (1985), *Time Of The Gypsies* (1988), *Arizona Dream* (1993), *Underground* (2000) and *Black Cat, White Cat* (2001) who have lived through the recent wars in Bosnia and Kosovo have to teach screenwriters around the world is that the twin Muses of laughter and drama often cross paths in touching and hilarious ways that affect us more than scripts written purely for one genre.

Remember that when Socrates and Aristophanes were ending their evening of fine conversation and wine in Plato's *Symposium*, they agreed that Tragedy and Comedy share many roots that cross each other. Far too often, we writers forget this valuable observation. Of course Balkan screenwriters are not the only storytellers who have mined this truth. Global examples include, from Italy, Roberto Benigni and Vincenzo Cerami's *Life Is Beautiful* which dared to take on the holocaust with humor dark and life affirming, while, from the States, so many of the Coen Brothers' scripts mix muses as in *Fargo* as we laugh out loud while human body

parts grind through a wintery wood chopping machine, and from the Czech Republic, Zdenek Sverak's Oscar® winning script for *Kolya* takes on the closing years of the Russian Occupation as it affects a middle-aged bachelor musician and a Russian boy with scenes both hilarious and tearful.

But I wish to take a closer look at Tanovic's craft and technique, for it may challenge each of us to go beyond our usual boundaries of approaches we take to our writing. On a personal front, I have learned much from working on Yugoslav scripts with Belgrade director Srdjan Karanovic including *Something In Between* and *Virginia* that "play" with serious topics without trivializing them.

What *No Man's Land* possesses and shares with so many films of the Balkans is a special blending of humor and horror, or the tragic and the comic, embracing verbal and physical/visual dimensions which are emblematic of a cultural spirit. Here are five craft pointers we can learn from Tanovic's and other Balkan films that may well work for our own scripts:

1) Comedy in the larger sense means some form of "triumph," not necessarily laughter.

A sense of "comic triumph" in a spiritual vein has existed in the cultures of the Balkans and especially the former Yugoslavia. The epic poems of Serbia, for instance, celebrate the Serbian spiritual victory over the conquering Turks during the Battle of Kosovo in the 14th century. The Turks, such poems declare, only

murdered and destroyed Serbs as living creatures, not as Christians and spiritual beings.

2) Irony is a powerful tool for any screenwriter and for almost every script.

Equally important to the humor and sense of comedy of these cultures, is a very strong sense of irony. We know that irony thrives on drawing attention between what could or might be and what, in fact, is actually reality. As practiced by Balkan filmmakers, irony often calls forth both tears and laughter as we “get” the difference between ideals and harsh realities, dreams and history.

The much celebrated director Emir Kusturica’s *Time Of The Gypsies* provides us with a clear example of such dark-yet comic-irony. Based on newspaper reportage of actual Yugoslav gypsies who not only worked in crime organizations throughout Italy but who also sold their own children into slavery, prostitution and crime, the film tracks one young boy’s odyssey from Yugoslavia to Italy in a *Godfather*-like tale (there are, in fact, many direct references to Copolla’s crime trilogy).

As Kusturica’s film ends, the young gypsy Mafia protagonist is murdered and, at the funeral, his five year old son steals the coins placed over his father’s eyes (an ancient custom) and runs out of the house. We can’t help but laugh at the son stealing from his dead father, but on the other hand, it is a “triumph” for the son has learned to follow in his father’s footsteps: to be a good thief! Such a moment is ironic, humorous, tragic and triumphant at the same time.

3) Open up a serious subject/issue with a simple, “absurd” (exaggerated) incident that mirrors the whole subject.

In *No Man’s Land*, two men in tattered boxer shorts, wave handkerchiefs as they shout and dance about in an open field. They could easily make us laugh if this were all we knew about them. But they happen to be on a Bosnian battlefield, and the troops on either side refuse to shoot since no one knows which side they’re on. It’s a moment of joyful but darkly ironic laughter in Tanovic’s film. What we understand is that the opposing armies don’t know that one of the two men is a Bosnian and the other a Serb. Yet without uniforms they simply appear to be two guys taking time off from war to have fun.

The time period of Tanovic’s film is late in the Bosnian conflict after the Dayton Peace Accord when thousands of UN Peacekeeping troops were in place. The location is an isolated battle trench in which an inexperienced Serbian soldier, Nino (played by Croatian actor Rene Bitorajac) and a cynical Bosnian soldier, Ciki (played by Bosnian actor Branko Djuric) wind up holding each other prisoner in a dan-

gerous stand off in “no man’s land” between Bosnian and Serbian lines.

Such is the simple yet effective set up for Tanovic’s film. But this is only the beginning of what is contained in this unusual anti-war film.

4) Devise a strong plot “twist” which amplifies the situation/topic you wish to explore.

Tanovic adds one more narrative element that drives his engaging tale in both comic and tragic directions: between the opposing soldiers is a Bosnian “corpse” with a land mine underneath him that will explode if the body is moved. The final twist is that the corpse is actually only unconscious and awakens to his tragic reality that threatens all three of the soldiers. Cera, the “corpse” (Croatian actor Filip Sovagovic) was only wounded and placed on the mine as a dangerous “joke” by two Serbs as a trap for any Bosnians finding their fellow soldier.

And surrounding both warring sides is the UN which continually says, “We are here to keep the peace but we are not allowed to do anything or get involved.” Tanovic’s deftly executed film should make viewers everywhere uneasy about even those United Nations members who wish to be active in keeping peace rather than passively “camping out” in a troubled land. The film clearly echoes the tragedy of Srebrenica, for instance, where thousands of Bosnian prisoners were allowed by UN forces to be taken by Serbs from UN camps to their execution and disposal in mass graves without protest.

5) Make sure you have a distinctive subplot to further amplify your thematic concerns.

The mixed drama and dark comedy of the three men in *No Man’s Land* then becomes forgotten as the real power struggle is between CNN-like media giants and the UN administrators who want to maintain a “good image.” Tanovic’s savagely satirical point is well taken. With the UN forces arriving in Bosnia too late to save the lives of several hundred thousand innocent women, children and aged folk—not to mention warring military—the Allied Forces were still not given permission to “act” in ways that could have stopped or averted further conflicts, killings, and acts of destruction. That no overwhelming international outcry has emerged concerning the slaughter of thousands of innocent Czechs by Russians during the past few years is clearly explained by the absence of a similar group of international journalists covering the Czech-Russian conflict.

The second half of *No Man’s Land* goes far beyond any of the current Hollywood war films in revealing this “second war” connected to any war being conducted these days. Again,

we are speaking of the conflict between peace-keeping troops and the often-ambiguous role of the media in covering such action when the terms “fast breaking” and “shocking” are more important than in depth or thorough coverage.

No happy ending comes of all of these efforts in Tanovic’s film. Even the German anti-mine expert brought in by the UN throws up his hands, explaining that a mine of this sort, situated as it is and “activated”, cannot be de-activated.

I do not wish to spoil the actual ending between Nino and Ciki for those who have not seen the film. But it is fair to explain that the final shot begins with a close up of our wounded Bosnian on the mine—still alive and conscious, but now abandoned by all. The camera becomes a rising crane shot which ends up being one of the most satisfying examples of how a single shot can capture mood, theme, and even a metaphor in a film.

Cera will surely die for there is no solution for his “explosive” situation. And his ending is all the more tragic because of the stoic expression on his face as he accepts (what else to do?) the fact that the whole situation—of Bosnia, of the peacekeepers, and the Media—is so absurd that no crying, shouting or protest would do any good. Finally, that Tanovic leaves us with the bomb yet to explode, metaphorically and thematically suggests that this war and its situation, is not over. The peacekeepers are still in place and there is still no real peace.

A happy ending? Certainly not, but the point is that with such a serious topic that Tanovic has taken on, his multiple uses of humor, irony, slapstick and comedy have all worked together to both feel the pain more intensely and at the same time gain some perspective on it. Screenwriting at a very high level, indeed.

As we wrap, let’s face once more that we are living in a post “September 11th world” and as writers and individuals, we are still trying to figure out in our own lives and work what that means. Some are escaping into writing patriotic war movies in which Americans kill hundreds and thousands of foreigners “heroically,” ranging from *Black Hawk Down* to *We Were Soldiers*. And, straight on comedy from *Mr. Deeds to Goldmember* once more proves that in hard times people do want a laugh that will help them forget their troubles if only for a few hours.

But I predict that we will also see more memorable films that both make us laugh and make us think and feel for those who can’t find happy Hollywood endings. ■

Andrew Horton is a SCREENTALK Staff Writer and the Jeanne H Smith Professor of Film and Video Studies at the University of Oklahoma, an award winning screenwriter, author of *Writing The Character Centered Screenplay* and as *Laughing Out Loud: Writing the Comedy Centered Screenplay* and the forthcoming *Screenwriting Around The World*, all with the University of California Press.