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‘Willow’ Review: Subtle, Profound Portrait of Longed-For Motherhood, Raised To The Power Of Three

Three stories of Macedonian motherhood echo across eras in Milcho Manchevski powerful, evocative, beautifully played drama.

By Jessica Kiang ▼



Courtesy of Banana Films

The wives are not old in [Milcho Manchevski's "Willow,"](#) but their tales have a folkloric resonance — even the two of the three that are set in the present day. Using a tripartite structure the director has been fond of in the past, notably in his Oscar-nominated, Venice-winning 1994 debut “Before the Rain,” Manchevski secures three outstanding female performances from his main actresses, each one leading her own story of motherhood’s griefs, guilts and impossible sacrifices. Often tragic, often cruel, “Willow,” as seen through DP Tamas Dobos’ graceful, radiant camera, still retains a lightness and an energy that manages to be, in the end, optimistic, less a story of the willow’s weeping than of its ability to bend with almost infinite suppleness without breaking.

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The first chapter is the most overtly mythic, set in the medieval Macedonian countryside where a young couple — the astonishingly blue-eyed Donka (Sara Klimoska) and her big, soft-looking husband Milan (Nikola Risteski) — are trying desperately to conceive. Having performed all the ritual superstitions to no avail, they visit a craggy-faced, sharp-tongued old woman (Ratka Radmanovic) who, it's said, can cure their childlessness. After mocking Milan for a while ("Are you putting it in the wrong hole?" she asks), "Granny" agrees to help them, but on one terrible condition: She wants their firstborn child. They will have many others, she assures them hoarsely, but she is old and needs someone to take care of her.

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Just as we've settled into this feudal, sackcloth world and its lush, honeyed imagery of stone bridges, wheat fields and river banks, we're transported across one quick cut to a traffic jam at night in rainy modern Skopje. Taxi driver Branko (Nenad Nacev) takes a reckless turn and hits an old man crossing the road. While Branko waits, first for the ambulance and then for the police, the rain collecting in his big beard, he is watched from an apartment balcony by Rodna (Natalija Teodosieva) who eventually goes down to him with an umbrella, for an unexpectedly endearing meet-cute. Their delightful romance unfurls to the rhythm of an offbeat rom-com — at least until, financially exhausted by IVF treatments, they finally conceive twins. At first it seems a double blessing but soon an impossible dilemma arises that drives a deep wedge between them.

Lastly, Rodna's sister Katerina (Kamka Tocinovski), a minor character in Rodna's section, gets her own chapter. Adoptive mother to orphan Kire (Petar Caranovic), she is strung out with worry over his sullen, unresponsive silence, embodying the ongoing exhaustion that comes from ferociously loving a child who does not, or perhaps cannot, love you back. But it's in the surprising yet credible turns this last story takes that Manchevski makes some of his most trenchant observations about motherhood, about how it's less a biological or even emotional bond with partner or child, than a series of choices, bargains and trade-offs the mother makes with herself, or the world, or the Fates. Even if there could be a faintly puritanical interpretation, considering which of the women is "punished" and which "rewarded," the independence of spirit of all three resists such simplistic reductions. The women may be united by motherhood, but they are, in every other respect, entirely their own people.

Manchevski brings minutely observed humor and pathos to events both momentous and banal. “Now rest,” says Donka to her “liege lord” husband Milan after a meal, “so the food will think a king ate it.” Rodna and Branko, even in the midst of their financial worries, share a fantastic, giggly, clumsy sex scene. Katarina relates her worries about Kire to Rodna while painting Rodna’s toenails. Tokens and motifs recur under the refrain of Kiril Dzajkovski’s folk-inflected score: the crushing of an apple, a fateful stone, old fertility rites like rubbing dirt on your skin when it thunders or eating three pieces of hail. And other asides have subtle, metaphysical meanings — such as Branko’s surname, which suggests an ancestral link to Donka’s beloved, contested firstborn child — all the more evocative for not being perfect parallels.

More ruthlessly geometric sensibilities might be unsettled by the apparent lopsidedness of Manchevski’s approach: One story set in a medieval, semi-mythical past, while the other two are interlinked and present-day. But “Willow” is not a film of linear logic, rather of allusions and assonance, of echoes and reverberations. Perhaps Donka’s story is the roots, Rodna’s the trunk and Katerina’s the branch, and the graceful, hopeful mirroring between beginning and end — a child is lost, a child is found — is simply the bend of this particular tree, unconsciously bowing down to its origins, buried deep in the earth of the long-gone past.

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Reviewed online, Berlin, Aug. 19, 2020. (In Sarajevo Film Festival.) Running time: 101 MIN. (Original title: "Vrba")

Production: (Macedonia-Hungary-Belgium) A Banana Film production, in co-production with Baba Film, Scala Prods., Pioneer Pictures, Tirana Film Institute, Saga Film. (Int'l sales: Reel Suspects, Paris.) Producers: Jane Kortoshev, Milcho Manchevski. Co-producers: Agron Domi, Ildiko Kemeny, Eleonora Petak, Hubert Toint, Executive producers: Nik Powell, Ian Prior.

Crew: Director, writer: Milcho Manchevski. Camera: Tamas Dobos. Editor: Nicolas Gaster. Music: Kiril Dzajkovski.

With: Sara Klimoska, Natalija Teodosieva, Kamka Tocinovski, Nikola Risteski, Nenad Nacev, Petar Caranovic, Ratka Radmanovic, Petar Mircevski. (Macedonian dialogue)

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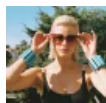
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