

MACONDO

A film by Sudabeh Mortezaei



Austria 2014, 98 min, German and Chechen with English subtitles

Berlinale Official Competition, Berlin 2014
London Film Festival 2014

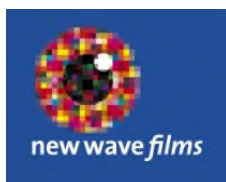
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SYNOPSIS

Eleven-year-old Ramasan has come to Austria from Chechnya with his mother Aminat and two younger sisters. They live in the Viennese neighbourhood of Macondo, where numerous refugees and asylum seekers await a better life, under the close control of Austrian authorities. His father was killed in the conflict with the Russians, or at least that's what they believe happened to him. In traditional Chechen society Ramasan is now considered the man of the house in charge of his mother and sisters. He also speaks much better German than Aminat and so must translate for her in her dealings with the authorities. One day Isa, a friend of Ramasan's father from the old days, arrives at the same block of flats, giving Aminat the watch and family photo his dead friend always carried with him.

Ramasan's life is thrown into disarray as he warms to this new potential father figure. But Isa is secretive about the past, and Ramasan (who feels he must still protect the image of his dead father) is also worried that Isa will get too close to his mother...



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CREW

Written and directed by
Cinematographer
Editor
Sound Design
Sound
Production Design
Costumes
Casting
Production Manager
Producers
Production Company

Sudabeh Mortezaei
Klemens Hufnagl
Oliver Neumann
Atanas Tcholakov, David Almeida-Ribero
Atanas Tscholakov
Julia Libiseller
Carola Pizzini
Eva Roth
Sabine Moser
Oliver Neumann, Sabine Moser
FreibeuterFilm

CAST

Ramasan Minkailov
Aslan Elbiev
Kheda Gazieva
Rosa Minkailova
Iman Nasuhanowa
Askhab Umaev
Hamsat Nasuhanow
Champascha Sadulajev

Ramasan
Isa
Aminat
Rosa
Iman
Askhab
Deni
Champascha

Austria 2014, 98 min
German and Chechen with English subtitles



SUDABEH MORTEZAI

BIOGRAPHY

Born 1968 in Ludwigsburg, Germany, to Iranian parents, Sudabeh Mortezaei grew up in Tehran and Vienna. She received her MA in theatre and film studies from the University of Vienna in 1994. After completing UCLA's certificate program in Film, TV, and Digital Entertainment Media in 2003, Sudabeh worked as an assistant director and production manager and directed several short films before making her feature-length documentary *Children of the Prophet*.

Macondo is her first feature-length fiction film.

FILMOGRAPHY

MACONDO

2014, 98 min

IM BAZAR DER GESCHLECHTER (Documentary)

2009, 85 min

Best International Documentary, DocsDF, Mexico 2011

Main Award, Espiello Ethnographic Film Festival, Spain 2011

Nomination Best Documentary, Austrian Film Award 2011

CHILDREN OF THE PROPHET (Documentary)

2006, 86 min

Competition First Appearance Award, IDFA, Amsterdam 2006



Interview with Sudabeh Mortezaei, January 17, 2014

The title of your film, *Macondo*, is named after a very special place, a settlement on the outskirts of Vienna: Can you tell us how you got to know this place and what it is about it that fascinated you?

I discovered Macondo by accident. I had heard that there was a settlement on the outskirts of Vienna that had been housing refugees since the 1950s, mapping the wars of the past decades like growth rings in a tree.

On the grounds there is a garrison that dates back to the monarchy, which they started to adapt in the 1950s to accommodate the first wave of refugees from Hungary.

They were followed by asylum-seekers from Czechoslovakia, then Chile, and Vietnam... The name Macondo was given to the settlement by the Latin American refugees who also lived there. Some residents have stayed, and new buildings were continuously added. Now it is a settlement where some 2,000 people from more than 20 countries coexist, all of them have fled from their native countries. Reflecting the recent migrations of refugees, most of the new arrivals come from Chechnya, Somalia, and Afghanistan.

How did you make contact with the residents?

My work with documentary films makes it easy to approach people in a candid way. They sense that I'm genuinely interested in their situations, and this allows personal relationships to develop.

Was your original intention to make a documentary film?

No. From the start I wanted to make a film that straddled the line between fiction and documentary.

What I didn't want was for the people in the film to tell the stories of how they fled. That would have easily made it voyeuristic: "Aha, how exciting, they've experienced such horrible things." Instead what I wanted to do was develop something distinct, something from within, by working with the people and using their stories to create a strong narrative that is rooted in an authentic world.

I think that the fictionalization even helped people open up more easily in front of the camera – the distance let them disclose more about themselves.

It wasn't the classical refugee story I was after. Rather I wanted to counter the ominous catchword "integration" with a view from within. Typically, the integration debate talks about the people rather than involving them in the discussion – people are treated like a topic or an issue. This view from outside is the prevailing view in the media. But I was interested in the inner perspective. I had, after all, experienced the process myself ...

You came to Vienna from Tehran at the age of twelve ...

Yes, we may not have had to flee for political reasons, but I know from experience what it is like as a child at such a tender age to be suddenly thrown into a brand- new culture and have to struggle to gain a foothold. "Arriving" is difficult: your body is here, but your emotions are slower to catch up ...

Are your own memories the reason you tell the story of "Macondo" from the perspective of a child?

Absolutely. Childhood is such an essential moment in time where so many possibilities still lie ahead. I already knew German when I came to Austria, so I didn't have a lot of the

integration problems one typically has in a new country, but for many years I still had the feeling of not being accepted by the majority of the population.

This, of course, is even more extreme with children from an altogether different social class who perhaps don't speak German either.

I was also interested in something that many children who have emigrated or fled from a country are confronted with: being forced to grow up too quickly. They learn the language of the host country faster than their often traumatized parents and assume the role of a go-between. It's an opportunity, but as a result they have to take on too much responsibility too soon. That is a heavy burden for a child. Psychologists call this phenomenon "parentification".

Was the boy who played Ramasan also an inspiration for the role itself?

No. I researched the story in a documentary way, but I used the stories people experienced and told me about and condensed them in the film into a single narrative. I wrote the lead role of the child in this way and then cast it, the same went for the male lead Isa and Aminat, the mother. The inspiration for these characters came from real people, but the people who played them were non-professional actors cast for the roles. From the beginning an important part of my way of working was that the roles were not played by professional actors but were, to a certain extent, lived out in front of the camera by normal people who have had similar life experiences. For example the refugee counselor and the social worker really work in those professions. A few smaller roles were inspired directly by the people who played them.

I imagine Macondo as a small village community: How did the residents take to you when you conducted casting there?

That was an exciting experience indeed, especially for the children. I spent a lot of time there long before we started working on the film. I held film workshops for children and teenagers there. That was actually a precursor to casting. Several of the children who participated in the workshops are now in the film, but Ramasan wasn't one of them. The adult residents were more skeptical. Due to the political persecution they have experienced they are more wary of strangers. Strong participation and integration of the residents was very important to me. I didn't want the film and the film team to be seen as outsiders; I wanted us to work together with the residents on a project and to integrate people in the settlement into the process on different levels. For example, in addition to several of the cast members and many extras from the documentary parts, some of the men from the settlement helped with set design and furnishing the apartment. And instead of typical film catering, several women from Chechnya and Somalia cooked for us. We always tried to maintain a respectful rapport with one another and to convey the sense that we were all equals.

How did you find Ramasan?

It was clear that the lead role would carry the story. It is a very demanding role. We absolutely had to find a boy who could really live out all the facets of his part in front of the camera.

We conducted normal casting sessions and also scouted the Chechen community for boys between the age of 10 and 13. We improvised small scenes with them, situations intended to see how the actors would deal with certain emotions. But we intentionally avoided actual scenes from the screenplay.

Ramasan doesn't live in the Macondo settlement but with his parents and three sisters in a council housing estate. He is eleven and just started middle school. I was immediately struck by his incredible sense of self-confidence, he is tough, sensitive, and intelligent – the perfect mix for this role.

But you don't speak Chechen. Wasn't it hard to tell if an actor like Ramasan was good?

Most of these kids are bilingual. Their German is excellent. Besides, if you don't understand the language, you pay much closer attention to poise and body language. That can be advantageous. During shooting we had interpreters, one on the set and one at the editing table – they were able to judge whether the speech flow sounded natural.

What does your screenplay look like? Does it contain completely written out dialogue?

I did have a detailed screenplay including dialogue, into which I often integrated situations and sentences I overheard on site. But the actors never saw this screenplay – neither before, nor after shooting. I didn't want them to recite dialogue they had learned by heart; I wanted them to act spontaneously in the scenes.

Then how did you let them know what you wanted?

I only gave the actors a rough overview of the story in order to leave plenty of room for spontaneity. We shot the film chronologically, so that the actors could develop along with the story and also continue to develop the story. There were no rehearsals, I explained the scene to them, had them immediately improvise in front of the camera, and started shooting right from the first try.

How often did you really use this first take?

Often! And then again we'd discard others, but when we did another take, we were never trying to achieve a certain supposedly perfect result. Instead the intention was to maximize the potential of the scene in the improvisation. I'm very intuitive in the way I work. Through my background as a documentary filmmaker I always try to find a way to connect with each person, one that fits with his or her personality. Everyone has his or her particular character, one's own personality. To me it was important to allow this to come out in the scene.

How could you tell whether the actors would be able to work with each other if you never rehearsed?

That was something we were able to check for easily during casting by simply improvising everyday scenes. When, for example, we got down to the shortlist of actors to play the mother and Ramasan, we used improvisation to test whether the chemistry was right. But we still didn't include any scenes from the screenplay.

Was it a challenge for you as a woman to direct what essentially was – with the exception of the actress playing the mother – an exclusively male cast?

It was quite intense. The Chechen culture is very patriarchal. The role of men and the father figure is very important: the husband watches over his wife's honour. Interestingly, my role as the director was accepted by the lead actors, probably because they saw themselves as part of a team that was working together toward a common goal. A few extras, however, had a problem accepting the authority of a woman as the director.

“Macondo” tells the story of a boy who is in the process of developing his own image of masculinity ...

To me this is a really important theme in the film, questioning this ideal image of masculinity! Ramasan idealizes his father, but ultimately during the course of the film he outgrows this pattern that has him idolizing a man he hardly knew: the war hero, who he basically knows through the stories of others.

Then he gets to know Isa, his father’s friend, a war- scarred man who no longer fits this glorified image. Ramasan overcomes the symbolic dominance of his father. That is a key point for me.

One scene in the film takes place in a Chechen mosque during Friday prayer. Women aren’t allowed to attend – how did you resolve this situation?

It was very important to me to shoot in this particular mosque because I wanted it to be authentic. The Islamic religious community had offered us a much nicer mosque, but I wanted this basement mosque in Brigittenau, a blue-collar district in Vienna where the Chechen men really go. It took quite a bit of persuasion to get permission to shoot there. Our actors did everything in their power to get the imam to agree. And nothing was staged: in the film you see Friday prayer the way it is conducted every week.

But were you as a woman allowed inside?

To set things up, yes. During prayer only the cameraman and sound technician were inside. I was outside. But that’s exactly what interests me: where the documentary and the fictional blur, where you can’t tell them apart anymore. Of course I am always aware of what I want from a specific scene for the overall dramaturgy of the film. I use the documentary setting and all the spontaneous actions that evolve from that to tell another piece of the story. Two other examples in the film are a Chechen party with its dances and buffet or a German language class under the title of “Mama learns German” the way it is actually organized by the city of Vienna.

The film “Macondo” has been invited to participate in the competition of the Berlin Film Festival. How will all this attention affect life in Macondo?

Hard to say. The very fact that the film was made there – the whole summer that we spent in Macondo while shooting – has already played a big role for the residents. If we have managed to show a respectful picture and maintain equal terms, I will be glad and we can be proud of the result together. And by that I mean everyone, from the actors to the women from Chechnya and Somalia who took over catering. Everything was so personal and informal. I hope people can feel this and that the residents see it this way too. In this sense I hope that through all this attention we will generate something positive from the inside out. But otherwise, you can imagine that the people in the settlement have other much more pressing everyday concerns.