

The Lesson

(Urok)

A film by
Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov



Toronto International Film Festival
Kutxa-New Directors Award, San Sebastian Film Festival
International Film Festival Rotterdam
Edinburgh Film Festival
Winner, Ingmar Bergman International Debut Section, Göteborg Film Festival
Special Jury Prize & Best Screenplay, Thessaloniki International Film Festival
Special Jury Prize, Tokyo International Film Festival
Best Actress (Margita Gosheva), Festival Premiers Plans, Angers
Nominated for the Lux Prize 2015

Bulgaria / Greece 2014 / 105 minutes / Bulgarian with English subtitles /cert. tbc

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FOR ALL PRESS ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT

Sue Porter/Lizzie Frith – Porter Frith Ltd

Tel: 020 7833 8444/E-mail: porterfrith@hotmail.com

FOR ALL OTHER ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT

Robert Beeson – New Wave Films

robert@newwavefilms.co.uk



New Wave Films
1 Lower John Street
London W1F 9DT
Tel: 020 3603 7577
www.newwavefilms.co.uk

SYNOPSIS

Nadezhda is a high school English teacher in a small town near Sofia who also works as a translator to earn some extra cash. Disturbed by a petty theft by one of her class she is determined to find the culprit. Whilst this episode unravels at work, her personal life also starts to change drastically. A bailiff notifies her that the bank is about to seize her house and put it up for auction because of unpaid mortgage payments. She discovers her feckless husband has frittered away the money. The translation company where she also works is evidently going under.

Determined to keep her house, she is forced to turn to a loan shark as a last resort. With repossession looming, she finds herself contemplating measures that run contrary to all the principles she teaches her students.

More information and links from www.newwavefilms.co.uk

Download photos from: newwavefilms.co.uk/press.html



CREDITS

Crew

Written & directed by
Cinematography
Editor
Sound
Production Design
Producers

Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov
Krum Rodriguez
Petar Valchanov
Dobromir Hristoskov, Ivan Andreev, Veselin Zografov
Vanina Geleva
Magdalena Ilieva
Kristina Grozeva, Petar Valchanov
Konstantina Stavrianou, Rena Vougioukalou

Produced by
CoProduction

Abraxas Films
Little Wing (Bulgaria), Graal Film (Greece)

Cast

Nadezhda
Mladen, her husband
Money Lender

Margita Gosheva
Ivan Burnev
Stefan Denolyubov

And with

Ivanka Bratoeva
Ivan Savov
Deya Todorova



THE DIRECTORS: Kristina Grozeva & Petar Valchanov



Kristina Grozeva, born in Bulgaria in 1976, graduated in Journalism at the University of Sofia in 2000 and in Film and TV Directing at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Art in 2005. She has received several awards for her short films, *Birds of Heaven* (Best Fiction Debut, Bulgarian Film Academy Awards 2008), and *Gap* (Special mention, Media School International Film Festival, Lodz 2009).

In 2008, Petar Valchanov (born in 1982) also graduated in Film and TV directing at NATFA. *Shock*, his first short film, was selected in the student programme at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival (2001), and *Resurrection* won the Best Film award at the International Student Film Festival in Velingrad (2003). Petar Valchanov and Kristina Grozeva directed the documentary *Parable of Life* (2009) together, followed by the award winning TV feature *Forced Landing*. Recently they wrote and directed the short film *Jump*, which received numerous prestigious awards, among them the European Film Awards 2013 at the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival and the Excellence Award for Best Picture at Busan International Short Film Festival 2013. *The Lesson* is the directors' feature-film debut.

Kristina Grozeva

Shorts

2008 *Birds of Heaven*
2009 *Gap*

Petar Valchanov

Shorts

2001 *Shock*
2003 *Resurrection*

Kristina Grozeva & Petar Valchanov

Shorts

2013 *Jump*

Documentary

2009 *Parable of Life*

Feature-length film

2014 *The Lesson*

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Several years ago the TV reported that a woman has robbed a bank in a small provincial Bulgarian town. Everybody suspected that she was a junkie, a criminal...

Nobody suspected that the bank robber was a decent school teacher with two master's degrees. The way it sounds – “Teacher robbed a bank!!!” It was precisely the contradiction within this phrase that made us look behind the tabloid sensation. This event from our reality left a deep trace in us and made us ask ourselves – what makes a decent person become a criminal?

We wanted to tell the story harshly, as a part of life. We strived to be real to the extreme, to create a painfully authentic film story. We got deep into the teacher's inner world, we tackled her inner conflicts, her fight with her own morality.

One of the main tasks for us as directors was to develop rich and deep human personalities. Together with the DoP Krum Rodriguez we decided that the camera had to be unnoticed and contemplative, to look carefully at the details and the action, without being obvious. The film was shot in a real provincial town. Most of the small parts were played by real people, not actors. Our main actors had to blend in naturally, they had to partner with the non- professionals, and their performances had to be as authentic and real as possible.

Our goal was that the audience wouldn't be able to tell an actor from a non-actor in the finished film. Margita Gosheva is a real discovery for us in this sense. After she read the script we changed some lines and situations, but the main work was done on set when she was put in the real situations with the real class of 30 children. The sense of authenticity and real life was leading in each element – make-up, costumes, set design, light and sound.

In the beginning we started shooting just different episodes of the film as a teaser while we were trying to find money for the production, but the cast and crew were so inspired by the story that they didn't want to stop until we had finished the last shot. Everyone worked for deferred payments and we are truly thankful to the cast and crew who were fully devoted to the filmmaking process despite the minimal time we had for the shooting, and the difficult conditions we were working due to our micro budget. The film didn't receive production funding by the Bulgarian Film Centre – just like our previous film, *Jump*. Both films, we financed ourselves, looking for private investors willing to risk their money.

We're forced to make films without the support of the only national funding body we have in Bulgaria. Despite this we strive to keep making our films. *The Lesson* is the first feature in a planned trilogy. The three stories are inspired by the living reality, but we don't intend to tell biographical stories, we use this inspiration only as a creative start. The unifying element between the three stories is the theme of the quiet rebellion of the little person against the mercantile, soulless and cynical world we live in.

Kristina Grozeva & Petar Valchanov

Interview with Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov by Stephen Saito (during the Toronto Film Festival)

How did the film come about?

Kristina Grozeva: The film is based on a true story. Some years ago, a Bulgarian teacher robbed a bank and this event sunk deep in our minds. After our short *Jump*, we made a TV movie, but we dreamt of making our [first] feature and we struggled to make it, but we are very happy that this story was our first big work.

Petar Valchanov: Yes, and our idea is that this film will be the first part of a trilogy — three stories, inspired by true events, but they're not biographical stories. They're just captured from the newspaper stories.

I've read the second film in this trilogy will revolve around a train worker who discovers some money on the tracks and tries to return it to its rightful owner, and your short film *Jump* was also about someone from humble origins who gets in over his head when he has to take care of his cousin's expensive apartment. Is there something interesting to you about these characters who try to do the right thing in the face of their own economic issues?

PV: Yes, the interesting part is that this story can happen to everyone. And the joke was it happened to a teacher. Here in Bulgaria and everywhere, this economic crisis has pressed many into a corner and they don't have an option or a free choice. A wrong decision is in every direction.

KG: In fact, we were deeply interested by this situation of a teacher who robbed a bank because we discovered a deep contradiction. This is very shocking that a saintly person like a teacher can become a criminal, but in our times and the reality that we live in, it is absolutely possible.

The first scene of the film is a pretty brilliant set-up for the rest of it, where you can see Nadezhda collect money from her students to compensate for the money that's been stolen from one of them, followed by the fact that she barely has money herself. Was that written after you had most of the story worked out?

KG: When we wrote the script, we had many ideas for the opening scene and I don't remember how exactly this scene came up. The plot of the [student] who robs [their] classmates was something we made up, but this was very important for us because it's like a mirror — [the student] who is a little criminal and the teacher who finds them out.

PV: And this scene was very difficult because it was the first scene [we shot] and it was very hard for the actress because she's standing in front of these thirty kids. On a usual schedule, maybe it would be normal for this kind of scene to be in the middle of the shooting, but we were pressed for time and this was a micro budget production — the finance problem was with us in the production like our main character in the film. [laughs]

Was it a difficult film to edit? There's a lot of tension, but not a whole lot of action.

PV: Yes, actually that first scene [is a good example] because there was a lot of material and it was difficult moving the character [through] the story. We did three different edits [of the film]. The first one was two hours and 20 minutes, then we cut around 40 minutes and then another five. We also

had a lot of scenes that were only one take, which was difficult on the shooting period. It was also difficult because our idea was to not use music, so it was very difficult to build a sound.

With your background in documentary, was that an influence on the film's realism?

PV: We did one documentary two years ago and we created fictional elements [for it] and we discovered that we love to make this combination between documentary and fiction. That's [what inspired the] idea with the cast of *The Lesson* to maybe only use three or four professional actors and the other ones are not professional. The money lender (played by Stefan Denolyubov, who also starred in *Jump*) is professional, but the cop [who arrives to repossess Nadezhda's home] is not, as well as many others. But the style of shooting in the school was very close to the documentary style of shooting, which is what made it difficult for our actress

How did you become collaborators?

KG: While we were studying at the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts in Sofia, we worked together and we realized that we are more confident and creative on set with one another.

PV: It's easier with the responsibility because when she directs, I say, "Okay, she's taking the responsibility" and [vice versa] and it's good because we're more objective. For example, Kristina worked more with the script and after that, I had a more objective point of view. After the edit, which I worked more on, she carried this fresh point of view in and took it from a different angle, so it's funny and for us, it's very important to enjoy the work while we're doing it.

You can tell. There's a great underlying sense of humour in the film despite it telling a rather tragic story.

PV: Yes, this is very important point to us as directors and the stories that we want to tell. We want to tell dramatic stories, but with a bitter smile. For example, our previous short film, *Jump*, was more of a comedy with elements of drama and now it's the opposite. It's very important to mix these genres because for us this mix of humour and drama makes the story closer to real life.