

Programme of Danish Film Screenings at the Danish Institute at Athens 2019

“Aspects of Danish Cinema”.

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Screening on the 21st of February 2019

The Bench (2000) by Per Fly

It is our pleasure to introduce you tonight to the third year of Danish Film screenings organized by the Danish Embassy and the Danish Institute at Athens.

Since 2017, we have had the chance to watch selected movies by renowned and awarded Danish directors of modern dynamic European cinema. All of them have influenced significantly the map of Global Cinema, by presenting a variety of movies – all rich in theme and form and with a high level of quality. We started out watching a movie by the emblematic director, Th. Dreyer, then watched movies from the Dogma 95 movement (Thomas Vinterberg and Lars Von Trier) and returned to melodrama by Susanne Bier.

We decided to start this season with a less famous Danish director in Greece, Per Fly, with one of the movies from his Social Trilogy, called “the Bench” (το Παγκάκι in Greek). In the Programme of Thessaloniki International Film Festival where the Trilogy was screened, the following is written: “the three movies reflect the state of modern society as it is experienced by European citizens. Each one has focus on a different social layer and the result is an outstanding sample of Political Cinema (www.filmfestival.gr/el/professionals/media-press/930-new).

In an interview, Per Fly said the following: “When I made the movie “the Bench”, I decided to make a movie that reflects reality by drawing elements from raw material. It was inspiring to talk to people that actually lived the life of my characters and to spend time with social workers instead of just sitting in my office and writing my story. The research was extremely creative. I believe that each time you make a movie, you make sacrifices and that sacrifice might be facing tough reality and placing your movie within that reality” (Interview with Flix critics, Nikos Tsagkarakis in Copenhagen 2011).

In the movie, Per Fly and screenwriter Kim Leona touch upon basic social issues occurring in a developed European society like the Danish - unemployment, marginalization of mid- aged people, alcoholism and gendered violence, especially in dysfunctional families and mostly with female victims.

In October 2018, we had the chance to learn more about the Nordic Noir Crime Literature genre at the outstanding Crime Conference: “Nordic Crime Fiction: A look into Nordic societies?” Just as in this movie, crime literature reflects the Scandinavian societies and its prosperity and priority to its Welfare state citizens, but with a certain “vulnerability”.

Nevertheless, Per Fly denies this complacency by posing his camera and the audience's focus on a humble place – a bench in front of a workers building complex – a meeting place for unemployed, poor workers, fringes and losers. Each one reflecting the wounds and pathology of the system through their life stories.

The protagonist Kaj (played by actor Jesper Christensen), is a representative example of such a unique hero who once used to be part of middle class society, working as a cook, but now lives alone in a depressing flat and works in a government programme for unemployed.

In spite of his miserable condition, destroying himself every day with his addiction to alcohol, he is characterized by some pride and obstinacy when protesting against the offensive behaviour of the responsible leader of the government programme and thereby losing his poor and diminishing position as a gardener.

The dull daily routine at the Bench, changes when a young woman and her 6-year-old son move into the Workers Housing Complex, where Kaj lives. The young woman (played by Stine Holm Jensen) is a victim of family violence by her violent husband and she urges to start a new life, while trying to balance being a single working parent. She not only has to deal with the difficulties of finding someone to take care of her son, but also has to endure the sexual aggressiveness of Kim (played by Jens Albinus), a young doctorate candidate with whom she is forced to share the flat.

The penetrating glance of the director reflects the issue of internecine violence in all its varieties, proving that the educational and social level of the offender is often indifferent.

Liv urges for the support of Kaj and in spite of his initial denial, he finally agrees to take care of little Jonas.

The revelation that Lis is the daughter that Kaj abandoned twenty years earlier, plays a catalytic role. For the first time in his life, he is responsible for another person. He is strong and defends his daughter and grandchild until the end.

The outstanding performance by actor Jesper Christensen, who is an acknowledged actor known for his political integrity, dominates the movie.

Per Fly: "I went through the script with Jesper for a whole year during which he spoke with alcoholics and actually spent time with them rather than just reading about them". When talking about the trilogy, Fly stresses: "Each story represents a different social class of today's Denmark. We approach each social level from the relevant optical angle. All three stories have a male protagonist hovering between logic and emotion" (<http://flix.gr/articles/per-fli-o-danos-poy-den-akoloy8hse-to-dogma.html>)

It is important to also notice the importance of the music, supporting the narration in this cruel and at the same time very affectionate movie.

“The Bench” was a huge commercial success in Denmark and gave Per Fly the Robert Award for best movie, best script and best male actor from the Danish Film Academy. Similarly, the movie won the Bodil Award for best movie and best male performance from the Danish Film Critic Association.

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