

ABSENCE IS PRESENT

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Abstract

Absence Is Present is a short film about emotional aspects of immigration. It's a story about two women: a daughter in Canada and a mother in Serbia.

The daughter (Jelena), who is a young immigrant with a degree in Economics, seeks an appropriate job in Canada. As she does not have any "Canadian experience" she has to work in all kinds of menial jobs: a worker in a chicken farm or a worker on an assembly line of gingerbread houses in a biscuit factory, etc. This is mainly why Jelena's mother Rada is reluctant of the idea of her daughter being an immigrant.

The film begins with the mother fainting on a street and losing the family dog Srećko. Throughout the rest of the film she searches for the dog throughout the ruined city of Belgrade. While she is trying to learn more about her diagnosis, she discovers her doctor's incompetence in the corrupt and chaotic Serbian health care system. This is when the mother slowly begins to understand her daughter's motivation for radical move to leave the country and move to Canada.

The story is an emotional voyage of a mother who has to let her daughter go. The plot gains an ironic twist: as Rada comes to the realization that while her daughter has to freely live her own life, the illness makes her more in need of her daughter. The purpose of this thesis paper is to examine and lay bare my creative process over the course of making the short film *Absence Is Present*.

Acknowledgements

In the first place, I wish to express gratitude to Tereza Barta who supported me to start and finish this project. She has patiently read every draft of the screenplay and viewed every draft in editing. She lent me her best friend Cara (an adorable dachshund) who accomplished the Stanislavski method perfectly as an actress in my film. Most importantly, with her personal immigrant experience Tereza helped me to understand myself better, as well as many pertaining aspects of my project. I believe that she helped me to make this film equally universal and personal.

I wish also to thank York Film Faculty for providing me with a great platform of knowledge, which helped me to produce and direct this film, throughout which I matured as a director. Wonderful and thought provoking discussions in the classes of Phil, Brenda, Nico, Ali Kazimi and others helped me to expand my horizons and think outside the frame. My professors helped me to mature from my predominantly conservative/TV/Hollywoodish/shot-counter-shot way of directing to Bazin-Bresson-haiku-Tarkovsky-documentaries-experimental universe. Although my film has nothing to do with experimental films I feel like I produced an almost experimental film in comparison to what I had produced earlier. With my previous feature length film, I started to think about long takes. But that was only an act of intuition. I could learn all this from books, but it is far better when someone learns it through well-conceived assignments of the professors willing to encourage their students to go beyond the limits.

I wish to thank professor Seth Feldman for reading my screenplay and helping me to make dialogue sound more natural in English. His advice for the Belgrade part of my shoot was very simple and substantial. Reminding me to watch again de Sica's *Umberto D* made me aware of the emotional aspects of a film where a dog is an important dramatic element.

Tarkovsky's and Bresson's films and books influenced me a lot. Tarkovsky in his book *Sculpting In Time* and Bresson in his *Notes On The Cinematographer* helped me articulate so many thoughts on the aesthetics of cinema that I previously felt only intuitively.

Finally, I wish to thank to my colleagues Daniel Valle and Erik Anderson for being the crew for my film. Daniel's skill and creativity as DOP was immense. And Erik —as a renaissance personality he accomplished both of his roles perfectly: as sound recorder and as actor.

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The Origin and The Development of an Idea

From a formal point of view, the aim of my Thesis project was to help me develop my directorial vision, to encourage myself to do things that I have never done: long takes, depth of field, mixing fictional with documentary and generally experimenting with several cinematic genres.

My previous feature length film *Devil's Town* (2009) like most of the films that I have produced so far, such as *Dolphins Are Mammals* (1997), is a story inspired by my personal experience. All these stories revolve around the social paradoxes and the irrational/illogical social behaviour patterns rooted in the culture and the politics of my country which has been through the unsettling times of the Second World War, the Civil War and the Titoist regime. Here is an example: *Dolphins* is a short film based on an occurrence that I have experienced myself. My elementary teacher bullied the male students, mocked and derided them publicly when someone would say or do something incorrectly. Once, she was making fun of me in front of the entire class because I said that "Tatars" were a people. (We were asked to enumerate examples of "peoples", such as French, Chinese, Americans, etc.) Until then, she had never heard of Tatars, so she openly mocked me for "inventing" things. At home I was also severely punished for contradicting someone who was older whose knowledge was validated by the government. *Devil's Town* is constructed like a mosaic of different short stories that intertwine while all evolving in the same corrupted and self-content post-Milosevic Serbian society. Some critic called my film "a little bit nihilistic" but I was so revolted by the society that I couldn't turn a blind eye to the crimes and to the injustices when having the opportunity to talk about them.

My immigration to Canada has drastically changed my life. It appeared that all that troubled me in Belgrade, was now a distant memory. However, I had to face new problems such as the fact that my pockets were very empty and that my extensive work experience was useless. My films successes in International Festivals, the positive critical reviews that amassed in prestigious publications such as *Variety* impressed no one. I wrote over a hundred emails to film companies who were looking for assistants, editors, etc. and ALL my messages stayed unanswered. I was soon to learn about the insurmountable obstacle of "Canadian experience".

“Even a Canadian Diploma in knitting is more useful here than a PhD in Film Studies from Serbia or Europe.”- told me Ljubomir Balac, a civil engineer from Montreal who needed about 5 years to get a job in his field, at an entry level. (Now, twenty years later, he is a major engineer in Montreal.)

I was ready to accept any kind of jobs and I soon started to film weddings, which was a very poorly paid work. In the end, I took a course which prepared me to become a security guard and I have obtained the license for this occupation. I was thinking to make a complete change, maybe even to become a gardener, truck-driver, forklift operator or whatever.

Yet when York University accepted me into the MFA program in Film Production I felt my professional experience had been finally validated and I regained a bit of my self-confidence. Subsequently, I met other immigrants from Serbia who were already established and adjusted to the new country, and my first impression of Canada started to change from dark and poetically pessimistic to realistically optimistic.

Nevertheless, I still had the feeling that it would take me at least 3 to 5 years to acquaint myself with this country in order to be able to make a film here. In the beginning, I felt that my parents’ and some of my friends’ advice was true: ”Don’t go there. Canada’s culture is too different from the Serbian one.”

I didn’t have a precise story in my head but I knew that I want to make a film about the experience of immigration: parents who don’t support their children who emigrate to far lands and make them feel even worse. And I wanted to make an emotional film. When I left for Canada, our dog Masha stayed with my mother and my stepfather. They didn’t want to let her come with me and frankly, I was happy about this decision as in hindsight I don’t think that as a newcomer I could handle one more problem : caring for a dog while being a tenant in a basement within a city where the majority of buildings and houses don’t accept dogs. For the last fifteen years Nikola, my stepfather, has been on dialysis. In Serbia the system of transplantation and donation of organs is in its incipency and has been opposed by a large segment of the society. Now Nikola,

who had had two heart attacks, shares the duty of walking Masha with my mother. Needless to say, my second big nightmare is that one of them could lose my dog in the streets of Belgrade.

The story was waiting for me.... I just had to connect the dots.

So, the elements of drama were:

- a possessive mother who opposes her daughter's wish to emigrate.
- a daughter who is lonely and who struggles to survive in Canada while she tries to get her academic credential validated.
- the lost dog.

An avalanche of ideas, thought and images overwhelmed me. However, I did not find myself confident enough to tackle any of these impressions. After few weeks of rumination, I had the first draft of the story for my first Canadian film.

A mother fights against her daughter's decision to emigrate. In spite of it, the daughter has left Serbia and she now lives in Toronto, Canada. One day the mother faints in the streets of Belgrade and loses the family dog (the element of tension). During her illness she must fend for herself within the corrupt health system of Serbia. To make the matters more complicated, she has now to find the lost dog too.

Throughout her meandering, she understands that her daughter is better off being far away from the corrupted Serbian society. However, the choice is hard to make: being separated from her daughter or having her nearby in a time of great need. Both of these women are caught in a "Catch 22" situation. Serbia is a country with perhaps the highest percentage of unemployed in the Europe. If the daughter returns, she would be jobless, penniless and desperate. The salary that the mother earns won't be enough to sustain both of them. Yet, she feels the duty to be by her mother's side as she is now sick and alone. On the other hand, the mother too needs to have her daughter closer by, yet she is willing to sacrifice her needs for the sake of her daughter's chances to a better life.

We witness their connection via Skype which besides the necessary exposition will provide the audience with the feeling of a painful separation. The virtual world of online communications, where distance and yearning are so painfully present. So, this is how I constructed the story of the film. Although it's a bit traditional in form, I believe that fictional films have to contain a change in the main character as central element of drama. The change in this case would be the mother who comes to terms with letting go of her daughter despite her increasing need for her presence.

Once I knew what my story should be about, writing the script took me no time. My past experience taught me that what matters is the clarity of the story and the character development. The details of the dialog and the meticulous blocking of the action are adjustments that I always work with the actors while on the set. What is important for me is to stay truthful to the meaning and to the purpose of the scene.

During my undergraduate years of study, when working with actors, I often found a better rhythm to a scene or more creative solution to a moment during the rehearsal time. "A scenario of literary qualities is only useful as a way of persuading those on whom a production depends of the viability of a projected film." - wrote Andrei Tarkovsky in his book *Sculpting in time* 1986. and "The scenario dies in the film" (p. 134).

I think that a film is the artistic expression of the director's vision and I cannot see a screenplay more than a literary sequence of the actions that need to be filmed. This being said, I think that the art of writing screenplays is the most important part of the filmmaking process - after all, the quality of a script is the main reason for why a particular film is being produced. Every director knows how difficult it is to find a good idea for a film. Every director is chasing after a well-developed storyline and after interesting characters. The literary quality of the written screenplay becomes secondary.

Things can even stay confused on the paper, as long as the director has the entire film clearly in her/his mind. To sum up, the quality of an idea is the most important reason for making a film. To argument my point of view, I will mention some classic films and some quintessential scenes

that I believe could not have had any particular strength and appeal when read from a piece of paper. The cinematic atmosphere, the acting, the lighting could have never been described merely with words. It was only on the screen that the idea behind those images became clear, emotional and memorable.

Take any of the Bella Tarr's films ; a fifteen minutes scene of a herd of horses running on a foggy day through out of a Communist Hungarian town - how can that sensation be described in words or how can the words convey the invaluable cinematic value of that moment?

- *The Kids* (1995) by Larry Clarke. I try to imagine how this film would have looked if written: far-fetched stories about promiscuous teenagers. It was only on the screen the film could work because Larry Clarke used to hang around a lot with his subjects so they would become unaware of his camera. The moments of spontaneity he would catch on his camera could not be described on a piece of paper, without losing something of their value. The director was one of the most prominent US documentary photographers.
- *La Haine* by Matthieu Cassovitz (1995.). What would it be without energy of the actors and their improvisations based on their real life experiences and the documentary visual style it has?
- Any film of John Cassavetes. Especially *Shadows* (1995). Actors' improvisations are quintessential to this film.
- Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* (1975), which was perceived as an almost pointless film screenplay that was too personal. Only Andrei had the film in his head. Many scenes of Andrei Rublev (1966) and *The Stalker* (1979) cannot be described with the words. The scene when the three men are moving slowly in silence on a railway track vehicle —these five minutes of silence —what can be their artistic value on a paper?

And many others....

BUT since I am not a director of a big fame I need to persuade somehow the professors and the crew that I was going to produce a film that is well conceived. So, I used all my literary and dramatic skills in order to shape my story in a form of a well-written, well structured screenplay.

A good screenplay signifies for me:

1. A well developed main character (or characters.)
2. The relations/interactions between characters.
3. The change in the characters' evolution. Since ancient Greeks discovered the mechanism of constructing drama in artistic creations, the weight has always been put on the changes of the main characters and the decisions they have to make.

I was also searching for some images that would interest me visually, for some images that will carry the subtext of my message beyond the obvious story plot. The image of Belgrade, which I carried in my head, as one of the greyest city of Eastern Europe with the largest amount of graffiti per façade. I was also haunted by images of dog asylums in Belgrade. There were many stray dogs roaming on the streets of Belgrade and some good hearted citizens tried to save them from their imminent demise. I knew I could access one of those places. The asylum could add to the general feeling of Belgrade as a city of decay and economic disaster, a place to which nobody returns. Hundreds of dogs behind the cages, nineteen-century façades ruined by the graffitis, the parks crammed with jobless youngsters who are very often drunk, these were the images of my city, Belgrade that haunted me. I hoped that from those images the spectator can understand that:

- An average citizen of Belgrade is very poor.
- Youngsters have no prospect.
- Everything is in a state of decay.

One of my collaborators for the Toronto part of the shoot on this project, later said that I “had luck with this film because everything I needed would somehow fall in place before the camera”. Actually it was exactly the other way around. I was just opened for changes of the scenes and I adjusted them to the circumstances that were uncontrollably occurring before the camera on the set. Instead of panicking that things are not working as I previously imagined, I was just playing with the possibilities that were in front of me, as long as the initial intentions of the scene stayed the same. I would come to the set with a sort of plan in my head. Once on set, other possibilities

arose and new options were opened to me in terms of blocking the action, or camera angles or usage of different lenses. As for the actors' performances, I must confess that I enjoyed very much the unpredictable approach to the scenes that the actors can bring along when acting the scenes for the first time. I have learned not to limit the actors any longer – as I used to do it in the past – but to allow them to grow in the character and merge their vision of the parts with mine. As a director, I am obsessed not to lose the spontaneity of the actors in front of the camera and I limit my interference in their acting only to the moments when I feel that there is not more truth in the scene or when the scene derails from the intended meaning. The film is following the characters in unpredictable circumstances of their lives so it has to unfold in an unpredictable way...

But before I move on to another topic I'd like to say a few words about the original 3D facet of my project, since initially I had the idea to shoot it in 3D. Yes, I was “infected” with the 3D “virus” idea during the classes of professor Ali Kazimi. Stereoscopic 3D would give us an unforgettable possibility to travel through Belgrade and to capture its notoriously grey streets. Also, the S3D would accentuate the distance between mother and daughter when they would talk on a Skype as the only 2D images left would be when they see each other on a computer screen.

Solution No.1 : to use a professional rig. But I needed a trained person who would be in charge of that rig on a set. Not feasible due to my limited budget.

Solution No.2 : use the S3D camcorder that Professor Ali Kazimi offered me. I experimented with it already in some other assignments and the result was interesting.

But despite of my 3D enthusiasm, I literally couldn't immediately see many features of the S3D that Ali talked about in the class, because I have a discrepancy of diopter. My right eye sees with a diopter +0.25 while my left eye sees with a diopter +5.75. And everything I see with my left eye I see blurred. I had a virus when I was two years old, and the virus “burned” a bottom of my left eye and made me see the world half-blurred. So my left eye provides to my brain only provisory sense of the third dimension. All in all, I realized that I couldn't clearly judge over the third dimension, especially with a DOP that knows very little about the S3D.

On the top of it, the camera was 60i, which was the television format which I find totally inappropriate for the cinema art. The 60i picture is so realistic that in an eye of a beholder it can easily destroy an illusion of a fiction. All in all, the S3D would accentuate some features of the story, but the story itself worked well independently from the S3D. So, I decided to shoot in standard 2D format rather than to make a bad S3D film.

On the other hand the DSLR provided such a good cinematic image. Although it often had shallow depth of field, there were ways to contrive, depending on the lenses. And Djordje Druzetic, my Serbian DOP , found the lenses with a big aperture that provided bigger depth of field. At the end we shot the film in cinemascope ratio 2.35:1 in HD.

Sculpting In Budget

or

Depth of Pocket

Belgrade, April/May 2014.

When I got to the breakdown of the screenplay I began to ruminate how to go through the production of this film without paying more than I could afford. The strategy was to adjust the screenplay to the available circumstances, while preserving the integrity of the story.

The most difficult issue was that the film had to be shot on two continents. The most important decision was to decide what to shoot first: the Serbian or the Canadian part. In the end, I decided to first shoot the Serbian part. To a large extent because, that was a territory well known to me. I could find a crew and the actors very quickly. Over there I know many cameramen who do commercial stuff but who would always find few extra days to shoot something that has artistic value. Djordje Druzetic is one of them and he was free around the 1st of May (which is a Holiday in Serbia). Once I pinned down the shooting period, everything fell into place.

I had to book the actors and locations in advance. Although I hoped for the best, I too had to prepare for the worst, yet I have tried not to be overwhelmed by anxieties. I was frightened by the possibility that I would have to shoot all by myself while recording the sound and directing the actors and booking the locations but when Djordje confirm his availability, I immediately rushed and bought my ticket for Belgrade. I knew I could rely on him because of our previous collaboration —we did some wonderful gigs, such as a video for Le Courvoisier.

Next vitally important elements were the two actresses. Acting can bring screenplay into life or not. From my previous experience I knew that it is the last thing that can be compromised. Without good acting there is no possibility of evoking true emotions. I needed an actress around 55

years of age and I shortlisted few of them who were available. I started negotiations with Jasna Djuricic, an actress who won the Golden Leopard in Locarno with *White White World* (2010). But soon, it happened that she had too many things in her schedule. Then I remembered Dragana Varagic, a Serbian actress who lived in Toronto for about twenty years but she recently moved back to Belgrade. Being “new in the town”, she was available for about 4 days. I was very happy that she was available since she was one of my favourite actresses.

I believe that the director is indubitably responsible for creating for the actors the context that can stimulate spontaneity, freshness and truth in their acting . Unfortunately, only few directors are capable of doing that. Most directors I know try to limit their actors’ acting, pushing them to fit into the pre-imagined characters. Because they do not let themselves open to the actor’s impulses, they become incapable of recognizing moments of truth and authenticity born in front of their eyes. Actually, working with actors is the most delicate part of director’s job. It all begins with casting, then it continues with a good communication actor-director, then it should be followed by the freedom given to the actor to explore their roles and the sensitivity of the director to recognize the truthfulness in those moments.

The beginning of the shoot was scheduled for the 2nd of May — I wanted to let people rest for the 1st of May so I booked my ticket for April 18. This way, I had less than a fortnight to prepare everything.

Things started to slowly fall in place. Djordje invited his friend Ljilja to help with the make-up and a couple of students from the Art Design (Mila and who worked with him on his commercial projects. Their job was not to complicate since we needed only small changes of the set dressing. Hajduk, a senior sound recordist and an engineer with whom I worked on my feature film, offered his help as well. All in all, it seemed that I picked the right timing for this production. I scheduled the shoot for the 2nd of May.

The elements that I had in place before coming to Serbia were:

- the location of a dog shelter and the people who worked there and who would be my documentary “actors”(or “models”, as Bresson call them.)
- the location of the mother’s apartment — which I managed to secure before arriving to Serbia. A friend of mine, who has an atelier, emailed to me the pictures of his place. The atelier looked a little bit run down (the intellectuals of Belgrade are generally poor people), therefore the location fit with what I had in my mind for the mother’s place.
- the part of the mother’s best friend. This was one of the compromises I had to make because this part went to a friend of mine who let us in the atelier (Ana Stefanovic-Bilic). Since I didn’t have a precise idea of the mother’s friend/neighbour character, I accepted this compromise. If I had any budget for this film, I might have been less lenient (which I usually am — when I shoot films with the budget.) But, this being a completely no-budget film production, I was happy that I could find this helper. Besides Anna is an actress who has been working for a long time in Germany and Austria and I knew that she is a professional as well.

Djordje is certainly a meticulous DOP and he likes to pre-plan every shoot. This was quite a problem since we were working in rather improvised circumstances. I was concerned how will he react to these shooting conditions.. I encouraged him to take a camera in his hands and simply try what he feels it works best, to improvise under uncontrollable circumstances, gaining the best out of their unexpectedness.

For example, he asked me “where will we find a park full of youngsters?” to which I replied “In a park full of youngsters.” Djordje presupposed that we would close a park and bring dozens of paid extras + police to keep the order, as we did a couple of years earlier for a feature length film. This time it had to be different. I asked my brother to bring his friends and gather around one of the benches. We bought them beers and soon, the park was crammed with young people, as it would usually be in the night. I know the local park well and I expected the park to be filled with youngsters in the evening. That started to happen recently, because of the high unemployment and that is why it was important to me, as one of those images that haunted me. So, after few hours, everyone was used to see us there, couple of guys with a camera, hanging around without big lights. So we could freely improvise and also film them. Dragana was wired with a

radio mic, and she went around with posters of the lost dog asking everyone in the park if they have seen it.

So we had some true reactions and we filmed some realistic moments of Belgrade by night. All the people we had in the scene were non-actors that we found in that location. (At the end we did not even had to use my brother's friends !)

We employed the similar method when shooting the scene in the dog asylum. The woman with whom Dragana speaks is in fact the asylum care taker. She thought that we were filming a documentary and proceeded to tell Dragana everything about the dog asylum, with truthfulness and authenticity of a real life conversation. Dragana almost fainted when she saw hundreds of lost dogs caged, their eyes begging you to adopt them, and when she felt an awful smell. The scene needed to be emotionally strong and my actress's reactions could hardly be feigned or faked. We just captured her spontaneous and honest response to that place. The locations in Belgrade were carefully chosen. When I was browsing through the stills of the Belgrade streets I noticed a homeless person sleeping on a bench in a park with a bottle of beer beside him. I wanted that image for the scene when Dragana/Rada searches for Srećko, the lost dog. So I brought my cousin who was visiting Belgrade (he lives in San Francisco) and offered him the role of the "drunk on a bench". He always wanted a role in one of my films. This was his moment. He got to play the drunk and homeless person who sleeps on a bench.

The second day after my arrival to Belgrade, someone knocked on my door. It was a father of a sick child who was authorized to go around and collect donations for his child's treatment. It was a very emotional moment and I wanted to insert a similar scene in my film. I called a friend actor and I added that moment to the scene where Rada returns home after losing the dog. As she approaches her house the desperate father approaches her. Each struggling with their own sorrows, each feeling their own desperation.

It was my father who suggested that I film the first scene of the film in Belgrade instead of Toronto. I was supposed to film a butcher in Belgrade and rearrange it so that it looks like in Toronto. Yet my father suggested locating it in a poultry farm in Belgrade, as it would look same as any in Canada. Since I could get a free access to one of the poultries, I followed his advice. I

phoned my supervisor Tereza and she said that it's OK to change the location provided that Jelena still works in some poorly paid job, below her professional training. That's how Jelena's first scene working in an Ontario farm, was actually filmed in Belgrade.

Now, let me say few words about the choice of the actress for the main role —Jelena Asanovic. I deeply believe that Stanislavsky's method is the only method that can elicit truth from the actor. Maybe there are different approaches to it, different schools, but the foundation stays always the same; helping the actor through the work of imagination, concentration and affective memory to draw from her/his own experiences the believable moment of emotion and genuineness. In Novi Sad, the cultural capital of Serbia, there are two professors at University of Arts and they are profoundly dedicated to the “method” acting. Actors Boris Isakovic's and Jasna Djuricic recently started to train new generations of actors. I will say only this: with her first main role in cinema (in a pretty average and pretentious film, in my opinion) she won Golden Leopard at Locarno. Many other awards ensued. The awards are not proof of quality, of course, but I am trying to bolster something that can be illustrated only once seen on the screen. (Here, I am talking again about the limitations of a screenplay.) I took some of their students for my previous TV film about the human trafficking and these two girls Ivana Vukovic and Ana Mandic were so magnificent that I did almost entire film in the first take. They recreated the truth so well and truthfully that they could make a stone cry. And finally they won national awards for these two roles. (So this is a link to *The Sisters* (2011), my TV movie. Please take a look from minute 28 on. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pGn6pCYxCU>)

Generally speaking, I don't believe that auditions are the best way of choosing actors. In auditions, actors are always a little bit too stiff or too prepared. Perhaps they can be helpful in order to find good actors for less important roles, which are usually served better by non-actors. However, when actors prepare for their entire role — like they do when they know that they've got the part — then they show their real capabilities. For that reason, I think that instead of making auditions and/or watching clips, a good director has to go everywhere around a given country, watching absolutely all the student plays he can, just as the good connoisseur of wines goes to all the places around a country to taste the grapes from all the different soils.

I admire Bresson for his efforts to experiment outside of the French industry standard framework, which was typical for the fifties, and which relied on actors who were imitating reality. Imitators are always imitators and a camera catches the truth mercilessly. Instead, Bresson insisted on non-acting, or so-called “modelling.” And as he could not always elicit a full palette of emotions from his “models,” he would limit their acting — or “being” as he used to call it — to mere mechanical execution of an action described in a screenplay. In this way, he contrived the truth on the screen, but it was not often totally true— for example, the scene in which Mouchette is obviously crying artificial tears. Nevertheless, I agree that it’s better to use good non-actors than bad - average actors.

I also admire his practice to seldom let life happen unexpectedly or uncontrollably in front of the camera. However, just to make things clear, in terms of acting I stick to Stanislavsky’s “method” and the teachings that derived from him, such as Stella Adler’s and Lee Strasberg’s, who developed their own “methods.” The choice of actresses in Toronto who spoke Serbian, or any ex-Yugoslavian language, was almost non-existent. I had to find someone for that role back in Serbia. I had a few options for Jelena’s role—mostly Boris’ and Jasna’s students. However, as I could not properly pay anyone for the part, I was limited to actors who would work for the benefit of their portfolio. Jelena Asanovic accepted to work because she had appreciated my previous body of work and was not overbooked.

I had to book a dog in advance. There was also an option to film with my own dog, but that would be one more problem to handle. I needed an obedient dog and someone to take care of it during the shoot. One month prior to my coming to Belgrade, I posted the problem on my Facebook page. Zoran Andrejin, an actor, said that he had a dog that he could train for the scenes. The risk wasn’t too big; I wouldn’t ask much from the dog, just to follow the actress and occasionally stop and sit. Zoran developed a strategy for how to make Dasha, his dog, do all this — by putting her favourite toy in an actresses pocket.

I admit that I had luck with Dasha. She was an incredibly obedient, charming, and friendly dog. In return, Zoran asked to play the doctor. Zoran was great in the role and the risk paid off once more. (Lucky for me, as in this film I had no other option than to take risks.) He is from Novi

Sad, works in some small theatre, and didn't have many chances in his life to act in films. (Film production in Serbia is limited exclusively to Belgrade.)

To sum it all up, in Belgrade I was my own AD, location manager, 2nd AD, 3rd AD, production manager, production assistant, and on set I didn't have time to direct anything. (Maybe that's why it looks good?) I would often be very tired of organization. But the shoot was well prepared and went well. During the shoot, I was mainly thinking about food for the crew and/or the locations. Luckily, the choice of actors was good; they played truthfully and I went back to Toronto with my biggest concern being whether Jelena could obtain a visa to come to Canada. In the event she couldn't, I had a back-up solution: to dub a Canadian actress. But that would be merely a contrivance to make a thesis film to get a degree, which I didn't want.

Toronto shoot, September 2014.

The first and the most important thing to decide about the Toronto shoot was the beginning. I could film in August, but everybody was away on holidays and the air ticket for Jelena would be very expensive. That's why I opted for the middle of September. (If anyone thinks that these decisions have nothing to do with film as an art form, he/she is wrong!) Later in September, Jelena would be fully booked by the theatres in Novi Sad and Vranje. Theatres in Serbia usually have a break until mid-September, and that's the second reason why I decided on the middle of the month.

In Toronto, there were several unknown elements:

- apartment
- bakery
- dog
- other actors

The subway scene I decided to shoot with a small DSLR. We needed to look like tourists who were taking photos rather than a film crew.

I asked my supervisor Tereza Barta to lend me her dog Cara. Cara didn't have overly complicated tasks in her "role." However, she needed to spend a couple of days away from home with more-or-less unknown people. She knew me, but she was never all alone with me. In order to get her used to the idea that she might be away from home with me, I went over a couple of times to Tereza's place to bond with Cara. So, when we finally came to take Cara for filming, she didn't complain too much. We fed her well and we played with her and she was happy.

A bakery and an apartment were a bit more complicated to find. Especially since I didn't know too many people in Toronto. I wrote the scene in the bakery because I knew the people who owned it might let me inside, but in the end I was not really happy with the look of the location. I

was thinking of other places. The parents of the bakery's owners had a factory. I knew them because I filmed the wedding of their daughter in 3D in the summer of 2013. So, I told them that we wouldn't need to stop the production line of their cookies, and that we didn't even need to bring additional lights. I told them that we were going to be almost invisible - and they let me film inside. We used existing neon lights and I simply put the actress into the assembly line. She volunteered half an hour for the factory, we filmed her and that was it. I must point out that in this case we were really lucky because the owners of the factory are nice and friendly people who are also a little bit nostalgic and happy to see their countrymen.

There was a scene when one of the coworkers gives Jelena a ride to the nearest bus station. I choose Costa Tovarnisky for that role. He was a guy with whom I already shot one production assignment. He is very talented and experienced actor from Romania. We filmed in Costa's car (I have to mention that we didn't have money for a camera-car trailer in my budget). When we were rehearsing in front of the factory, two cars suddenly crashed and I saw three people lying on the sidewalk unconscious. I told Costa and Daniel to drive behind the factory and to film there in a parking lot without me. I went to check out what was going on with the unconscious people. Two weeks earlier I obtained a license in First Aid. Luckily, paramedics and the police came after one minute. At least I was able to help them to put a yellow ribbon around the scene.

Costa and Daniel came back with the scene and there was no time to film it again. Later in editing I decided to cut that scene. I thought that it wasn't necessary. For a role of a partygoer I utilized Bresson's method. I needed a person who was hyperactive and happy. I knew such a person. Diana Wong was a dentist who wanted to be an actress and whom I met while I was working as a background performer in the Toronto film industry. She was somebody who was always very positive and in a good mood. So, she was the exact opposite of what Jelena was supposed to be in the potluck party scene. For that scene I just needed Diana to be herself: happy and uplifted.

For the party scene I invited people that I knew personally and we had a real party. I told everyone that I would indicate when we would start and that they should only 'mime' instead of talking. Diana and Jelena were wired with lav mics and their rehearsal seemed quite spontaneous to

me. I checked the sound quality of their rehearsal and realized that it was still very good even when everybody else was talking. So I decided not to direct others to “mime.” And I told the cinematographer and the sound recordist to start filming the rehearsal while everybody else was partying. So we filmed the scene in the middle of the real party. Everybody thought that we were still rehearsing. And everyone was already used to the camera. (For that purpose we didn’t want to use big lights, such as Kinoflos and HMIs. I bought simple LED light strings that are usually used for parties and that was it. We had a 100% truthful atmosphere for the party scene.)

In room of my basement apartment, at my desk, we shot the Skype scenes with Jelena and her mother. Dragana (the mother) could not be on the other end of Skype, so I used existing Skype conversations that were previously recorded in Belgrade. Jelena’s acting partner was a computer. As the two women already recorded that Skype conversation in the same room in Belgrade four months earlier, Jelena was able to recreate her reactions and emotions.

For instance, I knew one person brave enough to play Rimbaud; Erik Anderson - a “debonair playboy jet - setting filmmaker” - as he describes himself - and fellow MFA candidate, who had proven himself to have first class acting chops in various exercises shot during the program. He was perfect Rimbaud. He ended up stealing the film with his comic timing and magnetic on-screen charisma.

To sum it all up, the shoot went flawlessly, and my collaborator was right - I had luck. I was quite lucky with the factory in Toronto and Dasha, Zoran, and his dog in Serbia. Now when I look back on it, the entire adventure of shooting a no-budget film on two continents was quite daring; going to Serbia, booking the crew and the locations in advance via Skype, filming with the unknown dog. I was not sure until the last moment whether I would finally obtain the permission to film in the dog asylum.

I don’t think that “fortune favours the brave,” but there is something to be said for it, because when someone crosses an ocean and can move only forward, there’s no way back. His/her brain works in totally different ways: the thoughts are super-clear, super-realistic, super-simple and super-practical. The way I approached and asked the dog shelter owners and the factory owners

would be quite different if I had other options and money. I believe that my subconscious arranged everything in a manner that allowed me to get whatever I simply needed to have. The same thing happened with the guys in the park. The stress was enormous and now when I look back, I'm not sure if I could repeat it. But I know there'll be some other film adventures that I will not be able to repeat either.

If I had just one assistant, I could perhaps pay more attention to the directing. I don't think that all the scenes were great. Some of them could be done better. But there are also some scenes that were more interesting than I planned.

I intentionally did not start to edit the film until after I finished the Toronto part of the shoot.

The EDITING

The first version of the film was 55 minutes long. That was the longest possible version of the film, which included all the scenes that we had filmed. I didn't want to watch the result immediately. I wanted to wait one more week in order to become more emotionally detached. In editing, a director has to deal with the existing footage and not with the ideas that he had before the shoot. Actually, a director never edits the great visual idea that he had before the shoot — only what he brought from the set. And due to the budget limitations there is always something that is “lost in translation.”

On the other hand, the editing is the only part of the process when a director has all the time in the world to decide which of the “darlings” he has to “kill”, and assess exactly what he hauled back home. I was tired and I needed some distance in order to clearly judge my footage.

One week later, after I saw the first cut, I had the feeling that the film should be radically reduced to under half an hour. (The second reason was for festivals, because they don't accept films that are longer than half an hour or shorter than one hour. “Mid-metrage” is almost a non-existent category in film festivals.)

And so I reduced the film to 28 minutes. I cut the scenes with the factory co-worker Costa, reduced the first scene in the egg farm from 8 minutes down to 2 minutes and I took away some “geography” scenes. It was much more condensed. I also reduced a very long scene in a dog asylum. (The first version was almost 10 minutes.) I decided to take a break again, and after another week I realized that the film was actually done with the air of a director who used to shoot feature length films. Short films are usually more precise, more concise.

“In fact making a short film is almost harder than making a full-length one: it demands an unerring sense of form.” - A. Tarkovsky

Berlinale rejected the film with the explanation that it was too long. Nevertheless, my personal impression remained that it was done in the style of feature length film. But, what's the style of short film directing?

Short films usually go straight to the heart of the matter. I am not a proponent of theories on how films should be made but I realized that the film looked like the first half an hour of an unfinished feature length film. That was probably because it ends in the middle of a problem that remains unsolved. The mother is sick and she needs help. Her daughter can't help her even if she comes back. The daughter cannot help her mother.

In a typical three-act structure of feature film, I would have to reveal if the mother was really sick or not. And I would have to show what the daughter decides in that case, which would probably be a central part of the drama: whether she stays in Canada, far away from her mother who needs her, or she decides to go back to an uncertain future.

Then I could decide if I wanted a sort of happy-ending or not. (Maybe the daughter finally finds better job in Canada, maybe the mother is not ill or maybe they find Srećko.) But, usually there's no time for epilogues in short films. The core of the tragedy was that they had NO choice.

Parents in Serbia have no choice but to send their children to other countries. In order to live, the young must leave. There's no alternative. North Americans probably can't fully understand that. They usually leave their parents and move to distant cities because they choose to and/or because they find a better job somewhere else. But it's not the same when someone must leave their own country and culture with no option of coming back. Having no options except to leave is humiliating and tragic.

Tormented by my own thoughts, one evening I had an epiphany on how to re-cut the film, making it concise and reducing it to a reasonable 18 minutes. Everything had to revolve around the core of the tragedy. One week later, I watched the 18 minute version again. This time I was sure that I had made the right choice in editing. I cut out everything that didn't revolve around the central idea.

Observations and conclusions

The only major objection that my supervisor, Tereza Barta, had about the film was the presence of the neighbour Jasna in life of the mother, Rada. In the first scene when we see Rada skyping with her daughter, Tereza told me that Rada could seem like she is betraying her daughter when she is provoking her in such a critical moment in the neighbour's presence. My parents used to make jokes in front of others about me moving to Canada — especially at my age. Maybe that's the reason why I wrote such a character in the screenplay — she represents the “others.”

The CMS student Peter Knowles discovered something in my work that I was never aware of. There's no father in any of my films. Fathers are either absent or bad examples. I lived without father, and that is probably the only reasonable explanation.

Tereza suggested that *Absence Is Present* is a short film, and that asking such questions in a film which is shorter than 20 minutes would be nitpicking. In my head he was gone. I decided on the title *Absence Is Present* after seeing a documentary *The Artist Is Present* (2012), about the life and work of Marina Abramovic. I thought that was an interesting play on words. Some suggested that “Srećko” would be more appropriate, but I prefer *Absence Is Present*. There is no rational justification for that. Under the pressure of producers I changed the title of my first feature film and I still regret. It's better to regret things that I've done with faith than things I've done without it. The only thing I might eventually regret one day is not trying to make *Absence Is Present* a feature length film. But that wouldn't have been a very realistic plan. Making a short film on two continents with no budget was already too complicated.

Nevertheless, I can use the short film in order to pitch the feature film in the future. I am still not so sure about that, but it will always be an option. In that case I think that I would have to entirely restructure the story and maybe use this thesis film only as an inspiration. Before writing a new screenplay I would have to find a new reason within myself to do it.

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