

Interview: Cristian Mungiu Stages Last Exorcism in ‘Beyond the Hills’

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CHICAGO – Five years after revitalizing the Romanian film industry with his 2007 Palme d’Or winner, “4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days,” filmmaker Cristian Mungiu returned to the Cannes Film Festival with his eagerly awaited follow-up, “Beyond the Hills.” Mungiu won the screenplay prize while his leading ladies, newcomers Cosmina Stratan and Cristina Flutur, each received acting accolades.

Art house audiences in Chicago will have the chance to catch Mungiu’s chilling drama when it opens Friday at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. The fact-based tale centers on two old friends, Voichita (Stratan) and Alina (Flutur), who reconnect at an isolated monastery that appears to have been frozen in time. Though Alina expects her friend (and former lover) to leave with her, Voichita opts for a life of devout worship with the nuns rather than embrace mortal pleasures. Alina’s enraged acts of rebellion are interpreted by Voichita’s fellow nuns as demonic possession, thus inspiring them to utilize a primitive form of exorcism. Mungiu chatted with Hollywood Chicago via e-mail about directing non-actors, building the monastery from scratch and collaborating with cinematographer Oleg Mutu.

HollywoodChicago.com: I was at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007 and clearly remember the excitement surrounding “4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days.” What impact do you feel that movie had on the Romanian film industry and its reputation worldwide?

Cristian Mungiu: It brought a lot of reputation to the Romanian cinema, a good deal of attention to the other films coming from the country in the next years and it generated a lot of Romanian Film Weeks in festivals all over the world. Still, it didn’t really have an impact on the local film production. Today, Romania produces some 6 to 10 films a year, same as before the Palme d’Or. Only the state subsidy for each production is significantly smaller today, while the interest of the local audience for Romanian films watched in theaters remains small. Nevertheless, the vitality of the Romanian art-house cinema is obvious, even in these circumstances – there was the Golden Bear for a Romanian film this year – but we can’t develop an industry given the response from the audience.



Director Cristian Mungiu on the set of his film, Beyond the Hills.

Photo credit: Mobra Films/Why Not Productions/Les Films Du Fleuve/France 3 Cinema/Mandragora Movies/IFC Films

HollywoodChicago.com: The performances you’ve elicited from actors with little to no experience have been remarkable. What is your

approach to working with inexperienced actors? Is rehearsal important to you?

Mungiu: The most important thing for me is to find the right actor for the role – experienced or not experienced – that is: somebody close to the fictional character in terms of personality, looks and attitude, and capable of understanding and delivering the logic of the text and of the subtext. During the casting, I am seeing all the actors myself and I am seeing the ones on the short list a lot of times before I make the decision. I read with each of them all their dialogue so that at the end of the process, I pretty much know what I can expect from each of the actors. We rehearse quite a lot and we shoot quite a lot of takes (often 20, sometimes 40 in “Beyond the Hills”) but it is probably more important that I give the actors a very clear idea about what I expect from them in terms of intonation, rhythm, speech habits, emotion, body language and manner of interpretation. I act a lot for them.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there a backstory for Voichita and Alina that you created for the actresses in order to give them a sense of their characters' history?

Mungiu: There is that scene of nudity and intimacy, for example – the actresses needed to know for that scene what happened long ago with their characters even if it is not explicit in the film, so I told them.

The actors had access to the biographies of the real characters and they had their own biographies as fictional characters, but at the same time I am not insisting on this kind of approach when I work. There is the danger that the actor will start being conceptual and look for cheap psychological motivations for his acts, which is something to avoid. In real life, most of us do not know precisely why we act the way we act in a given situation – at least we can't verbalize about it in a concise and coherent way. For me, it's more important that each moment of the film is believable and [accurate] in terms of the characters' reactions in the given situation and it's less important if the actors can or can't say precisely what was in the mind of their character when they did this or that.

HollywoodChicago.com: To what extent do you feel Voichita becomes disillusioned with the monastery throughout the course of the film? At one point, she appears to be attempting to escape.

Mungiu: It is very likely that she will be leaving. I also believe she is disappointed at the end. I believe she thinks more with her own mind than before, I believe she started having doubts, I hope she understands that responsibility and guilt are personal even when the decision belonged to somebody else; but I don't believe she lost faith. We talked about this a lot when we were shooting. And I rather think that Voichita gets back to town not to escape – there is no escape from feeling guilty and the town can hardly be a refuge for a believer – but because repenting and paying for your sins is the first step in being forgiven. But that's my supposition, who know what's in a character's mind?



Cosmina Stratan and Cristina Flutur star in Cristian Mungiu's Beyond the Hills.

Photo credit: Mobra Films/Why Not Productions/Les Films Du Fleuve/France 3 Cinema/Mandragora Movies/IFC Films

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your inspiration for the design of the monastery in the film?

Mungiu: When you write, you imagine the space in a certain way and when we decided we had to build the whole thing, I just took some clay and designed a small scale model for the production designers. Later on, we went to visit the real monastery where the incident took place and we did quite a thorough research – putting together architectural elements that we considered to be relevant for the specific situation of that monastery: poor, not finished, not painted and therefore un-sacred, with no electricity or running water. Actually it's quite different from a traditional Orthodox church.

HollywoodChicago.com: What level of research went into your depiction of monastery life?

Mungiu: I didn't go to live in a monastery but I sent the main actresses to live with the nuns for a period. I had visited monasteries in my young age; I found a lot of footage on the internet of these so-called exorcism rituals (the benefits of having mobile phones) and also a lot of short films with church people preaching so it wasn't difficult to understand both the arguments and the stereotypes. There are thousands of pages, pictures and posts on the internet about the real incident itself. The non-fiction books also helped because the everyday life of the monastery was depicted there in detail.

HollywoodChicago.com: I'm always fascinated by your choice of framing. During the violent struggles between Alina and the nuns, the camera often focuses on the nuns while Alina's face remains offscreen. What motivated this decision and how close was your collaboration

with cinematographer Oleg Mutu?

Mungiu: I started working with Oleg some 18 years ago in film school. Everything we shoot is very precise and decided during rehearsals. The choice of framing comes from the style of story-telling and shooting: as you can see, there is just one shot for each scene in the film, which corresponds to the flow of time in reality (there is no editing in real life) and to the subjectivity of the point of view from which the story is told. Consequently, every time we stage a situation we need to understand what the essential of it is, because we know that in one shot you can't cover everything. I believe that in all the situations where you understand what happens without necessarily seeing it, it is a benefit to better show what the characters feel about what happens than what happens. Their reactions to the situation are much more important. Cinema starts when it stops being just an illustration of a situation.



Valeriu Andriuta, Cosmina Stratan, Teo Corban and Calin Chirila star in Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills*.

Photo credit: Mobra Films/Why Not Productions/Les Films Du Fleuve/France 3 Cinema/Mandragora Movies/IFC Films

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you arrive at the concept for that unforgettable final shot of the windshield doused in slush?

Mungiu: It was conceived while writing the screenplay and everything that happens on the street was also written down: the children that cross, the workers that dig the hole, the snow, the mud. Still, I always felt that it could be seen as something too planned and coming from the director even if it is believable in the given situation. For the first 20 versions of the rough edit, I cut before the windshield moment and I hesitated up to the last moment to include the scene or not. I knew that there were advantages and disadvantages either way. Finally, I decided to let it in, assuming that for some critics it's going to be a sign of the author intruding in his own story, but for the regular spectator, it is going to be a better ending.

HollywoodChicago.com: Out of all the footage left on the cutting room floor, what was the hardest to part with?

Mungiu: There is a great scene with the priest reading to the nuns some pages from a respected Orthodox father [recalling] his memories after seeing a possessed girl in Jerusalem. The priest in the film reads it while Alina is tied up and forced to listen. There are several scenes with the brother which I liked a lot, and some with the sick women in the hospital that were all really helpful in better understanding the mentalities of these people but [ultimately] the film needs to have what you feel is the right amount of facts and the right length. Most of the cut scenes are on the Romanian DVD, and some will probably make it to the American DVD as well.

HollywoodChicago.com: What have been some of the reactions that religious people have had to the film, particularly those involved in the production, such as the actress playing the mother superior?

Mungiu: Dana Tapalaga asked permission from her confessor to [act] in the film and she was advised to fight for the cause, although nobody ever mentioned specifically what that cause was. It was difficult both for her and for me because at some point she (and most of the religious people on the set) felt that we were playing with fire [when] we spoke about sacred things that we shouldn't be questioning. On the set, girls avoided entering the altar, although part of my decision of shooting in a built set and not on location came from this belief that actors should understand that it's just a set and God's wrath won't be cast on them. But you know, things have the power you invest in them and shooting the scenes with St. Basile's prayers was quite an experience. At the end of the day, Dana was nevertheless very generous and she understood that if you say what you consider to be the truth, you can't be wrong – and she did. She also said things that were strongly against her personal opinion.

'Beyond the Hills' stars Cosmina Stratan, Cristina Flutur, Valeriu Andriuta, Dana Tapalaga and Catalina Harabagiu. It was written and directed by Cristian Mungiu. It opened at Landmark Century Centre Cinema on March 15th, 2013. It is not rated.



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [13]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

matt@hollywoodchicago.com [12]

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