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## Divorce Albanian Style

Bijan Tehrani

5 Stars - Excellent

★★★★★ 5 / 5 (1 Votes)



Adela Peeva

**DIVORCE ALBANIAN STYLE** is the story of love and separation that takes place in the surreal world of 1960s communist Albania. As told by survivors of this extraordinary period, *Divorce Albanian Style* reveals the experience of the many thousands of families that were forcibly separated by the totalitarian regime of Enver Hodja, the longest-serving European dictator of the 20th century.

Near the height of his mania, in 1961 Enver Hodja broke off Albania's relations with the Soviet Union. Albanian men married to foreign women were forced by the state to split from their wives - women from all over Eastern Europe - who were subsequently expelled. The official reason was alleged espionage. Hodja quickly created a mechanism to deal with those who refused to leave. KGB-trained secret police collected "evidence", minor clerks became "investigators", carpenters were made into prosecutors and labour camps expanded.

The women who stayed - and their husbands - spent years in prisons, the last released in 1987. *Divorce Albanian Style* tells the stories of three of these couples, and of the apparatchiks and officers of the secret police who changed their lives forever.

**Adela Peeva**, Director of the *Divorce Albanian Style* is a member of the European Film Academy and the Board of European Documentary Network (till the end of 2004) as well as a jury member of the European Film Academy for best documentary "Prix Arte"

Her films "*Whose is this Song*" and "*Divorce Albanian style*" are the only Bulgarian films in the whole history of Bulgarian cinema Nominated by the European Film Academy for Best European film. Some of the films of Adela Peeva she made in the period before 1999 were banned by the communist

authorities including *Mothers* and *In the Name of Sport*.

*Divorce Albanian Style* has won numerous awards at international film Festivals, Here are a few of the awards listed here: - European Film Academy Award Nominee - Best documentary 2007, - "Best Bulgarian Documentary 2007" award of the National Film Centre, - "Best documentary film director 2007" award of the Union of Bulgarian Film makers, - Human Rights Award, XIV Sarajevo International Film festival 2008, - "Special Commendation" Award Prix Europe 2008 - Best Television Documentary, - "The Best Documentary" and "Audience Award" SEE Film Festival, Los Angeles - 2009

**Bijan Tehrani:** How did you first encounter the subject for "*Divorce Albanian Style*"?

**Adela Peeva:** I was filming my previous film, which also participated to the South East European Festival, last year. It was called "*Whose Song Is This*", and it is about a song everyone in the Balkan countries is quarrelling about. Everyone wants to appropriate this song. So I was filming in Albania, and a person approached me there and asked me to talk with me. I thought that he wanted to tell me something about the origin of this song, but he said no. He spoke Bulgarian, and he told me his story. He was married to a Bulgarian lady, they came back to Albania, and then in the 1960's there was a law that said that all Bulgarian men who were married to foreigners had to leave the country, and they had to expel them and divorce. I was very shocked. Although Albania is not very far from Bulgaria, it was a really isolated country. I asked him if it was just his story, and he said no, and that thousands of couples had the same fate. The next day I was surrounded by five other men who had the same fate. Luckily, I had a camera with me because I was filming my previous film, and I made my first interviews with them. I was absolutely convinced that I had to make this film, and it took three more years to make this film, to find financing.



**BT:** I find it interesting that even though this film is about certain individuals, the film rose to another level, and I think this story could apply to any country under a dictatorship. This is a story about what happens to people living under a dictatorship.

**AP:** Yes, you are absolutely right. It looks at first glance that this is a local subject, but it is global. Even at the premiere in Bulgaria people identified with what happened there, and they asked me why I didn't make a film about Bulgarian stories. Although, Albania was really the most severe form of the communist dictatorship, it is similar to other countries. It is not only a story about Albania, but also about dictatorship.



**BT:** How did you find the couples in the film?

**AP:** I found two of them while filming my previous film. They came to my hotel, and they told me their stories. Then I traveled to Poland to see the wife of the Albanian man who married the Polish lady. Then I

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Vasil

went to Russia, and this is how I found some of the couples. There are thousands of couples, and I have filmed more than three; I filmed about seven or eight stories in Russia, Poland and Albania.

**BT:** There are some very tragic stories in the film. How painful was covering these parts of the story?

**AP:** Painful for them or for me?

**BT:** For you as a filmmaker.

**AP:** Yes. It was very painful. There are theories that if you want to make a good film you have to keep your distance and not be in love with your characters. But I don't believe in this. I make emotional films, and do not stop myself from feeling sympathy to these people, and to be emotional with their stories. The characters feel that you are emotional and have

sympathy for their stories, and they reward you by being honest with you. This is how my films work. But yes, it is tough, but when you want to tell your stories as truthfully as you can, this is very important.

**BT:** How did you come up with the visual style of your film?

**AP:** I really wanted the stories of these couples to be the most important thing. I tried to use a very classical way of telling the film. I am a story teller, and sometimes they are fairy tales or dramas, but the most important thing is to really tell the story. The country is not well known, so first of all I had to deal with the problem of telling the audience what happened and how it happened, so they can follow the story. From the very beginning, the most important information about the context must be told. But the most important thing was that everything was subordinated to the fate of these characters.

**BT:** How challenging was bringing in people who belonged to the old regime to talk about why they did what they did?

**AP:** I was asked this question very often, and asking me how I convinced them, well, I am asking myself this question again and again. I have very good collaborators, and an elderly person who knows everybody, and what the collaborators did I could never reward them enough. They did this job because they really wanted this film to be made. So, I knew the name of one of the men in the Secret Police, and I asked a collaborator to find him, and he did. I told him openly that I was making a film about the mixed marriages, and what happened, and I told him that I wanted his opinion so that I don't make a film with just interviews of the victims. I told him I wanted his point of view. This is how I convinced him. When I first met him I was in the research stage and didn't have a camera with me. He told me his reasons for doing what he did, and was convinced that he was defending his country. I told him I was going to come back with a camera, and he said he would tell me the same story. But when I came back to Bulgaria I would say that I was a little bit disturbed because I didn't think he would actually agree to come back again and tell his story on film. But he came back and did tell his story on film. This I can't explain; is it really that he wanted to convince the audience that he was doing the right thing? I don't know. It is so complicated, the way people think. But I succeeded by telling him the truth: that in case he did not accepted my proposal to participate in the film, that this film would only be the voices of the victims.



Pandi Konomi

**BT:** How have Albanian audiences reacted to this film?

**AP:** This film has not premiered yet in Albania. One of the big Albanian TV networks requested the film. But in a month, elections will take place, and from what I have been told by this TV network, I had the feeling that my film would have been used for propaganda for the elections, and I did not want this. I am trying to find independent distributors who will organize and help the premier so that I will have the premier in an independent surrounding, because this film could be very easily used for political propaganda and these people do not deserve the tragic stories this way. I don't know how Albanian audiences will react, but I was in the US at universities, and there were some Albanians there. Also in Los Angeles there were some Albanians, and they were deeply impressed, and wanted to know why an Albanian did not make a film about their own problems. I also had a screening in Boston in the Museum of Fine Arts, and it was a predominately Albanian audience, and the reactions were very emotional as usual.



Barbara

**BT:** What will be your next project?

**AP:** Right now I am doing a film about the Mayor of Sofia from 1924 to 1944, when Bulgaria was Allied with the German side during World War II. He was one of the most successful Mayors, but when communism came he was put in the National Court and was put into prison. My main concern with this was to study what the role of the individual is in a very complicated time. Could you say that one is a communist or fascist just because he happens to have lived in such a period? I think the individuality of the person is very important, and you can't judge all the people the same way who have lived under a certain system. I also am thinking about a Bulgarian pilot who was fighting against the American bombing of Sofia, and Americans bombed us at the end of the war. It was absolutely not necessary to bomb Sofia. Because he couldn't do anything else, he used his plane to crash into American planes. He was the first Kamikaze pilot, and a hero of Albania. But when communism came he was no longer a hero. I

want to explore how to judge people like this who are in complicated situations.

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