

1st May SEEFEST LA 2017: THE CONSTITUTION



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A scene from *The Constitution*.

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By Ed Rampell

The 12th annual South East European Film Festival Los Angeles kicked off with a gala screening at the Writers Guild Theater in Beverly Hills of writer-director Rajko Grlić's *The Constitution*, a stellar must-see movie full of humor and humanity that set the tone for this filmfest. I say that because sometimes cinefiles "suffer" through specialty cinema (especially those bearing English subtitles), but *The Constitution* reminded me of the joy of discovering those "foreign" films by Luis Bunuel, Francois Truffaut, Ingmar Bergman, Jean-Luc Godard, et al, at an arthouse that transported us beyond Hollywood glitz and glamour to a more "sophisticated" cinematic view of the world beyond our shores.

Much of *The Constitution* is set in an apartment building in Zagreb, the capital and largest city of Croatia, which had been part of Marshal Tito's Yugoslavia until that nation-state's rather violent breakup in the 1990s. Zagreb was also a world capital of animation, and all this is important subtext for fully appreciating *The Constitution*. In it, Grlić -- who was born 1947 in Zagreb, has been making films since the 1970s and was nommed for Cannes' Palme d'Or for 1978's *Bravo Maestro* -- explores homophobia, inter-ethnic tensions, animal cruelty, class

differences and police excessive use of force as a metaphor for the collapse of Yugoslavia and its aftermath.

Two sets of four very different people live in the same Zagreb apartment building: Protagonist Vjeko Kralj (Nebojša Glogovac) is a nationally prominent, influential academic, who cares for his aged father Hrvoje Kralj (longtime Zagreb actor Bozidar Smiljanic), a veteran and rightwing Croatian nationalist. Even as Vjeko is his caregiver the macho Hrvoje looks down on his cross-dressing son (think Archie's disdain for Meathead in TV's *All in the Family* series). Through a chain of events they come into close contact with neighbors Maja (Ksenija Marinković) and Ante Samardžić (Dejan Aćimović). They are a married couple who apparently haven't received the word that they are middle aged and overweight, as they cavort like twenty-somethings, which only enhances their charm.

Maja is a nurse who comes to assist with Hrvoje's care after a gruesome gay-bashing incident sidelines Vjeko. In exchange she asks the professor to help Ante pass a police exam, which is how Grić rather cleverly works in the new, tolerant, multi-cultural eponymous constitutional rights. How many movies can you think of where entire passages from a constitution form part of the dialogue? But this is done with wit in an engaging way that grows naturally, organically out of the plot. In doing so, *The Constitution* provides a film frame for the framed rules of Croatia, accomplishing this in an highly amusing way.

Like the complex father-son interactions, the relationship between the professor and his police pupil is interesting and fraught with strain. At the core of their clash is something very Yugoslavian -- Vjeko is a Croat, while Ante is Serbian. Even though he married a Croat and fought on Croatia's side during the war for independence, he is still, if surreptitiously, a Serb and, worse still, a member of the police force, so therefore frowned down upon by the gay Croatian as an "oppressor."

What's great about *The Constitution* is that none of the characters are one-dimensional celluloid stereotypes -- they are fully fleshed out individuals with the complexity, nobility and folly that is all part of Homo sapiens' condition. This may be truer of Ante than any other character -- the large officer of the law is also a biker with a soft spot for dogs who longs to raise a child with Maja, whom Ante is a loving husband to. The macho

Ante also goes on a manhunt to find and bust those who committed a hate crime against Vjeko. People are complicated!

The Constitution is one of the most human films I've seen in a long time. Grlić seems to be asking the same question poor Rodney King pondered 25 years ago, hard on the heels of another civil war -- the L.A. urban rebellion -- which was, "People, can we get along?" Grlić's answer to that simple if profoundly philosophical question is no utopian fantasy, as it ends on a note that will make animal rights advocates hopping mad. All doesn't end well -- Grlić, who now lives in Ohio where he is an Eminent Scholar in Film at Ohio University, Athens, seems to be saying that even in a constitutional democracy that respects human and ethnic rights, life may be better, but still isn't perfect.

The Constitution, which has won awards at several filmfests, including Santa Barbara's, is in the tradition of the great Belgrade-born director Dusan Makavejev. It richly deserves to be theatrically released in this country. If promoted properly it would likely find an American audience (are you listening, Gregory Laemmle?). In the meantime, for cineastes, this is one of the great things about living in the world capital of moviedom -- even if Hollywood studios don't distribute pictures like *The Constitution*, film fetes like SEEFest do.

The brainchild of Festival Director/Founder Sarajevo-born Vera Mijojlić, SEEFest presents panels, parties and screens features, shorts, animation and documentaries from countries such as Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Moldova, Montenegro, Turkey, Kosovo, Georgia, Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Belgium, Greece, Azerbaijan and Iran, providing them with a coveted toehold in La-La-Land. And giving Angelenos a rare opportunity to peep through a window to the East.

The South East European Film Festival takes place in L.A. through May 4. For more information: <http://seefilmla.org/> [<http://seefilmla.org/>].

Posted 1st May by [John Esther](#)

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