

THE Hollywood REPORTER

The director's latest film is screening on Saturday at SEEFilm Fest, which features South East European cinema.

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Croatian director **Arsen Ostojic**'s new feature film *Halima's Path* is among the movies screening at LA's SEEFilm Fest – a showcase dedicated to bringing South East European cinema to the heart of LA.

Halima's Path – which screens Saturday May 4 at the Goethe Institute Los Angeles, tells a devastating story from the Balkans civil war about a couple who stumble upon a terrifying truth years after "ethnic cleansing" had murderously torn the former Yugoslavia apart.

Ostojic's first film, the black and white *A Wonderful Night in Split* (2004) was Croatian candidate for a best foreign language Oscar and went on to win a total of 24 awards. His second film *No One's Son* (2008) was again the Croatian candidate for an Oscar and picked up a total of 16 awards around the world. [The Hollywood Reporter](#) caught up with the director prior to the SEEFilm Fest screening.

THR: What story does your film tell?

OSTOJIC: *Halima's Path* tells the tragic but inspiring story of a grieving, but strong-willed Muslim woman Halima who tries, without success, to find the remains of her son who was killed in the Bosnian War and buried in one of the many mass graves. She realizes that she must track down her estranged niece, who we find carries a mysterious connection to him.

After finding her, Halima discovers a horrifying fact from her worst nightmares and the spiral of tragic events from the past would continue in the present, disrupting once again the troubled lives of the characters.

THR: Why is it so important to tell such stories today? The war was a long time ago, why are such stories still relevant?

Ostojic: A part of the story takes place years before the war but most of it happens after the war. The war in the 90s was by far the most important event for the peoples of the West Balkan countries, a tragic event that greatly influenced their lives. It is impossible to neglect such a fact, no matter how much we all want to forget about it. This is not a war movie, but an intimate portrait of two women from one family and with this portrait I tried to tell some truths about us during this turbulent period of our history. This is why I think it is very relevant for the people of the Balkans.

THR: What does this story tell us that is important for audiences in the Balkans today? And audiences in the rest of the world?

Ostojic: The response from audiences, both from the Balkan countries as well as from countries where the film has screened, have been overwhelming. It is important to know that the film goes way beyond the actual war to become a strong, universal story about mother's love for her son. No matter where the film is screened, from snow-covered Estonia, foggy Germany to sun-drenched Egypt or Morocco, the audiences recognize sincere feelings and authenticity, told in a simple way with great actors and impeccable narrative flow.

THR: What prizes has the film won? Why do you think the film resonates with juries at festivals?

Ostojic: It is amazing for me to see that the film already got 12 awards from only seven festivals where it has been in competition. Among others in got a Grand Prix in Mons, Belgium and in Tetouan, Morocco, the Audience award in Cottbus, Germany, as well several acting awards for the wonderful actresses who portray Halima and her niece Safija. I do have to mention the audience award in Pula Croatia where the film managed to beat the most popular comedy of the decade in the region, achieving the highest audience vote in the modern history of this 59-year-old festival. Despite the fact that this is a serious drama, audiences and juries are deeply moved by it and it always becomes one of the most talked about films wherever it is shown.

THR: Where did the story come from? Is it an original script? Who wrote it?

Ostojic: Yes, it is an original script written by a very talented Bosnian screenwriter **Fedja Isovich**. The story is inspired by a true event from western Bosnia, where a couple from a village weren't able to identify their son's remains many years after the war ended. The writer's wife heard a snippet of the story on the TV news while she was cooking, told her husband about it when he returned home from work and he was immediately inspired, so sat down and wrote the story in a week, not even meeting the real couple. Of course, we used creative license and added dramatic elements into it.

THR: How hard was it to finance?

Ostojic: The film is a coproduction between Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It took us two years to get all the financing together. Most of the financing was provided by the Croatian Audiovisual Center; the fact that they approved the project was crucial in jump-starting the project. Still, the budget was limited, there wasn't any contingency, but we managed to shoot it on time and on budget in 31 shooting days, on location in Croatia.

THR: As a director from the Balkans do you worry at times that you cannot "escape" your region's recent history?

Ostojic: Why should I escape my region's recent history? At this point I do want to talk about issues I find fundamentally important for us, as long as those issues have some universal meaning as well. Nevertheless I do have to say that I have other projects in pipeline, completely different from local Balkan stories.

THR: What are you working on now?

Ostojic: I have two excellent genre projects in development in the States, with two different companies, as well as a powerful drama set on a Mediterranean island, touching the issues of the current war in Syria. I am also starting to develop another project for the Balkans, though it is going to be some sort of an erotic political drama. So, you see, I am not completely stuck on the post-war stories in my region!

THR: Given no restrictions -- all the money, the best cast, the dream team -- what film would you make and why?

Ostojic: One of the projects in the States, just to break away from Europe for a bit. But no matter which one I end up doing next, I do have to say that I am truly passionate about them all. They are all result of years of hard work and efforts to finally make them.