

FILM REVIEW

***Ustav Republike Hrvatske: Ljubavna priča o mržnji.* (The Constitution),** dir. Rajko Grlić, 2016. Zagreb, Blitz D.O.O. 90 min. Color. Croatian.
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The Constitution weaves together several of the topics that dominate the public discourse of the western Balkans nowadays: matters of co-existence and intolerance, extreme nationalism, living together in the aftermath of an extreme split, but also issues of gender identity, homophobia, intra-generational communication, care for the elderly, responsibility to parents, and class divisions.

The story evolves between four characters who live in the same old apartment building in Zagreb. On the one hand, there is Vjeko Kralj, a fifty-something history teacher by day and a cross-dresser by night, mourning the loss of his long-time lover to suicide. At home, Kralj is taking care of his elderly bed-ridden father who is a retired Ustasa officer, homophobic and violent even if incapacitated. In public Vjeko is often the victim of homophobic attacks. On the other hand, there is the childless, mixed-ethnic couple, Maja and Ante (a Serbian man who has changed his name and is now preparing to take a Constitution exam), who together gradually befriend Vjeko.

In terms of style, this is a fairly conventional low budget production, mainly consisting of interior scenes that take place in two apartments. The main artistic achievement of the film is in depicting the persuasive transformation of Vjeko Kralj into a woman through make-up and dress, as well as the representation of the bed-ridden old amputee who is nonetheless full of anger and fury. The sentimental music that dominates some scenes is a drawback; the camerawork is competent yet conventional.

The Constitution is driven by anti-nationalist sentiments and wants to expose many aspects of intolerance. However, even though it is clear where it stands ideologically, the film does not go deep enough in offering a radical denunciation of the fascists' leanings and extreme nationalism found in Croatia; these are judged in a somewhat timid manner, somehow not rocking the boat too much. It may well be that this is the way the director wants it: we must find a way to live together somehow—the die-hard nationalists and those Serbs who have opted to stay, the extreme Catholics and the atheists, the transvestites and the homophobes. It is only in a single scene of the film where a more radical statement is made, one that suggests that Croatia does not seem to make adequate provision for the rights of its various minorities, be they Albanian, Gypsy, Jew, Serb or homosexual.

Rajko Grlić, the director—who also co-scripted the film—is one of the best-known figures on the Croatian film scene. Now 70, and belonging to the so-called Prague group (of Yugoslav directors who graduated at FAMU), he has managed to sustain a solid career through the decades—not least as he emigrated and worked in the US. Whilst he is best known in America for *Đavolji raj/That Summer of White Roses* (1986), I personally much prefer his sensitive adaptation of Dubravka Ugrešić's *U raljama života/In the Jaws of Life* (1984). In Yugoslavia's aftermath, Grlić has been a vocal critic of nationalist excess. He also developed a highly successful small film festival in his native town Motovun.

It may soon be quarter of a century since the official demise of Yugoslavia, yet for many of the directors from this region, entering co-production across the borders of the newly-minted states is the only meaningful form of filmmaking. It not only makes it easier to put a budget together, but also ensures that the film will be shown in a wider territory. In the case of *The Constitution*, Croatia and Serbia are the main co-producing parties, with minor participation from Britain and the Czech Republic.