The Lesson

Directors: **Kristina Grozeva, Petar Valchanov**
Country: **Bulgaria**
Date: **2014**

A review by Joe Leydon for *Variety*:

Loosely based on a real-life incident employed effectively by the filmmakers as a last-act plot twist, Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov's "The Lesson" is a spare, stripped-to-essentials drama about economic stress and mounting desperation that should resonate with a wide range of international audiences. The naturalistic style of the storytelling is stealthily enthralling, as is the lead performance by Margita Gosheva as a provincial Bulgarian schoolteacher who is slowly, inexorably driven to the edge by crushing debt. It may seem counterintuitive to suggest a no-frills film this bleak might have surprising commercial potential, but respectful reviews and, more important, appreciative word of mouth by ticketbuyers who empathize with Gosheva's character could stoke attendance for this potent "Lesson."

The deliberately paced, ineffably foreboding opening scenes recall the grim warning in Charles Bukowski's poem "The Shoelace" about "the continuing series of small tragedies that send a man to the madhouse." Nadezhda (Gosheva) discovers one of the young students in her English class has pilfered a small amount of money from her purse. The petty crime would be annoying, if not enraging, even under the best of circumstances. As we learn very early in "The Lesson," however, circumstances are far from good, and drifting toward dire, for the increasingly stressed-out schoolteacher.

Mladen (Ivan Barnev), her feckless drunk of a husband, has been unable to repair their junky camper, a failure revealed during an embarrassing attempt to sell the vehicle. Worse, he improvidently purchased spare parts with the money Nadezhda thought he was using to pay their mortgage. Faced with the prospect of foreclosure, the schoolteacher tries to claim payment she is owed as a freelance translator — only to be given yet another brush-off by a smooth-talking client who, in all likelihood, is even closer to bankruptcy than she is.

In her haste to meet a tight deadline — the bank will auction the family home in only a few days — Nadezhda is repeatedly impeded by capricious fate and bad judgment. She visits her long-estranged father (Ivan Savov), intending to ask for a loan, but twice lets her resentment toward Dad's ditzy young girlfriend get the better of her. Eventually, she borrows a hefty sum from a crass moneylender (Stefan Denolyubov), figuring, or perhaps hoping, she can repay the debt when she gets the long-delayed payment for her translations. This is a big mistake.

Echoes of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne (especially their "Rosetta") and even a few hints of Robert Bresson abound throughout "The Lesson," a film that occasionally achieves a downright discomforting level of verisimilitude. Grozeva and Valchanov favor fluid, continuous takes by lenser Krum Rodriguez for everything from charting domestic tensions and long-simmering resentments to tightening screws during conversations that percolate with the potential for physical violence. (By the way: There is no music on the soundtrack, and none is needed.)

A mercilessly protracted sequence that begins with Nadezhda's car breaking down, and continues with the schoolteacher's frantic rush to make a bank payment, is much more suspenseful than most setpieces in

glossy high-end thrillers. But wait, there's more: The capper for the sequence is one of the few unabashedly upbeat moments in the entire film. So, of course, it's not entirely surprising when the infectious joy it generates proves brutally short-lived.

The filmmakers have peppered the supporting cast with real-life residents of the provincial town where "The Lesson" was filmed, and the blend of professionals and nonprofessionals is impressively seamless. In the end, though, Gosheva overshadows everyone else onscreen — even Denolyubov's progressively creepier moneylender — with her emotionally supple and richly detailed portrayal of a desperate yet tenacious woman who only gradually reveals herself as fully capable of going to extremes.

Thanks in large measure to the sympathy Gosheva elicits and the strength she conveys, Nadezhda's ultimate solution to her daunting problems comes off as equal parts triumph and tragedy. Indeed, a second viewing of the film underscores just how slyly Gosheva and her co-directors lay the groundwork for Nadezhda's actions to seem, given the particulars of her character and her situation, inevitable.

"The Lesson" earned for Grozeva and Valchanov the New Directors award at the San Sebastian Film Festival. Don't be surprised if other accolades follow.

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