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Friday September 23rd, 2016

Mustang (15)

dir: Deniz Gamse Urgüven

starring: Günes Nezihe Sensoy, Doga Zeynep Doguslu,
Tugba Sunguroglu, Elit Iscan, Ilayda Akdogan

sponsors: Autostar 2000

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The Turkish/French director Deniz Gamse Urgüven's *Mustang* has a structure that's a bit like a prison-break movie and a little bit like a body-count thriller: a stalker slowly winnows down a group of vulnerable women, until there are none. In this case, we are dealing with five sisters who, when their running free around their conservative village begins to set tongues wagging, are effectively sealed into their family home and, one by one, primed by their guardians for marriage. The equivalent of the stalking killer here isn't one unbalanced individual but rather the demands of a small-minded community, and the scene of the crime is the marriage bed, complete with splash of blood as proof of virginity - and heaven forbid it should be absent. (The film details at some length the process whereby doctors are routinely employed to provide official testimony to the presence of the maidenhead.)

The sisters range in age from pre-teen gangliness to late adolescence, and the two who initially distinguish themselves as distinct characters are the eldest Sonay (Ilayda Akdogan) who sneaks out for assignations with a chosen lover and freely discusses their strategy for making love without disturbing the hymen, and the youngest Lale (Günes Nezihe Sensoy), whose impulsive nature is on display from the start. But in the early scenes the sisters are presented almost as a single unit, lolling about together in a tangle of lank, bare limbs, recalling Adrian Lyne's *Foxes* (1980) or huddled together in a gesture of threatened solidarity, like a football team before a match, photographed by Ergüven from within.

These images of sisterly community are *Mustang's* most memorable moments, but taken altogether they aren't a sturdy enough base on which to build the film's ambitions towards tragic weight. If good intentions were the lone criterion for grading films - and with every week bringing an important issue to be unpacked, it increasingly seems that they are - then Ergüven's feature debut would be worthy of the glowing reviews it received at last year's Cannes festival. Its narrative confirms in no uncertain terms what its inscribed audience believes to be true: that a shadowy climate of religious fundamentalism fosters suspicion and body shame and forces secrecy, and this is not a healthy environment in which to raise young women who desire nothing more than light, open air and freedom.

Mustang, with its one-dimensional figures of conservative authority, is too narrowly Manichean to allow the troubling ambivalence of multiple perspectives, but at the same time it manages to seem curiously tentative. Part of the problem is that Ergüven pictures liberty more vividly than she does captivity;



Synopsis: Rural Turkey, present day. On the last day of term, a class of teenage schoolboys and schoolgirls bid goodbye to their beloved teacher Yasin, who is moving to Istanbul, and go to the beach. Among the group are sisters Sonay, Selma, Ece, Nur and Lale. When they return home, the sisters are violently chastised by their guardians - their grandmother and their uncle Erol - because word of their brazen play with the boys on the beach has scandalised the village. The family home is fortified to make it more difficult for them to sneak in and out, and the girls are told that they must marry, beginning with the two eldest Sonay and Selma. Before the matchmaking commences, the girls have one last taste of freedom, slipping out of the house to travel to a football match. Wilful Sonay manages her pick of mate but Selma is not so lucky, and her boorish new husband's family questions her virginity when she fails to bleed on her wedding night. Ece's marriage is arranged next, but she begins to behave erratically and abruptly commits suicide. When Nur is readied for marriage, the headstrong Lale devises a plan to escape to Istanbul. On the night of Nur's intended wedding, the girls escape with the help of the truck driver who took them to the football match. They arrive in Istanbul, where they are welcomed by Yasin.

Credits

Günes Nezihe Sensoy	Lale
Doga Zeynep Doguslu	Nur
Tugba Sunguroglu	Selma
Elit Iscan	Ece
Ilayda Akdogan	Sonay
Nihal Koldas	Grandmother
Ayberk Pekcan	Erol
Bahar Kerimoglu	Dilek
Burak Yigit	Yasin
Suzanne Marrot	Aunt Hanife
Erol Afsim	Osman

Director	Deniz Gamse Urgüven
Written by	Deniz Gamse Urgüven, Alice Winocour
DoP	David Chizallet, Ersin Gök
Editor	Mathilde Van de Moortel
Art Director	Serdar Yemisçi
Music	Warren Ellis
Sound	Ibrahim Gök
Costume	Selin Sözen

France/Germany/Turkey/
Qatar, 2015
97 mins

there is no choking claustrophobia to lend the film an edge of genuine, cornered animal desperation. Much of the film is seen from the perspective of the youngest sister Lale, and her voiceover, coming to us from a safe space at an undisclosed point in the faraway future, acts as a soothing guarantor that all of this will pass. The sense of slow smothering is expressed only in the most literal-minded visual terms - workmen building household fortifications - and there is none of the feeling of mounting cabin fever that might lend terrible immediacy to the off-screen suicide of one of the sisters, precipitated by sexual abuse within the protective walls of home. This plot turn occurs abruptly, and the brusqueness with which the pall of mourning is blown away once she's played her role as sacrifice to narrative exigencies betrays the earlier establishment of sisterly solidarity. Lacking either breadth of social vision or a constricting force that might really discomfit an audience, *Mustang* steers the comfortable middle road that often garners acclaim but never touches the queasy, perilous heights of art.

Another View

Turkish-French film maker Deniz Gamze Ergüven's stunning debut feature has already proved a hit on the award's circuit. This tale of five orphaned sisters growing up on Turkey's Black Sea coast recently walked away with the *Prix Lumière* for Best Film and collected four *Césars* including Best First Feature and Best Original Screenplay. And it's not over yet. The Turkish language *Mustang* is the French entry for Best Foreign Film at 2016's Oscar ceremony.

It's easy to see why *Mustang* has proved such a big hit. Ergüven's well-crafted film deals with the subject of arranged marriage with great sensitivity and a welcome lack of political grandstanding. What stays most in the memory is how the lives of these intelligent, vibrant, young women are threatened by an older generation determined to hold on to out-moded traditions. The light, almost frivolous tone of the opening scenes gradually gives way to a darker more sinister mood, but *Mustang* is ultimately an uplifting story beautifully told with tremendous performances from the five lead actresses,

It's the beginning of the summer and to celebrate the end of the school year Lale (Güneş Nezihe Şensoy) and her four elder sisters spend the afternoon playing on the beach with some of their male school mates. Their innocent horseplay soon sets off a scandal in the village. To save the family's reputation and prevent the girls from causing further upset, all five are confined to the house. Gone are the modern clothes, cell phones and computers to be replaced with shapeless, dung-coloured robes and days spent learning how to cook and sew. And it's not long before a male relative Erol (Ayberk Pekcan) begins to arrange marriages for the elder sisters. But the feisty young women are reluctant to give up their freedom and are not easily defeated. Each finds a way to rebel against their inevitable fate.

It's a shock to see isolated rural Turkey and the portrayal of an existence that sits at odds with modern day life in the West. Erol and his male friends are arrogant, despicable characters drunk on their own sense of importance. But it's even worse to see

how the older women are complicit in the Erol's plans for the young women. No one, even the girl's grandmother, will stand up to this brutish man even when she knows his interest in his nieces is not entirely innocent. Comparisons have been made with Sofia Coppola's *Virgin Suicides* and even Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in Ergüven's depiction of female sexuality. That said Ergüven's film is in a class of its own and well deserving of the awards it has garnered so far.

Judith Prescott: frenchcinemareview.com

Lincoln Film Society - AGM 2016

The AGM will take place on October 14th at The Venue. It will follow the showing of Rams. The annual report will be made available on the Society's website and emailed to members before the meeting, along with the agenda.

Our next screening - Friday October 14th, 7.30pm Rams (Iceland 2015. Cert 15)

How is it possible to make such a captivating film about prize-winning sheep and two surly, grown-up men who, in spite of being next-door neighbours, have not spoken to each other for 40 years because of a grudge? Well, director Grímur Hákonarson has done it - and the result is quite simply an experience.

It's got humour, pathos, spectacular scenery, some pretty nifty animal wrangling and an ending that will break your heart. If you saw *Of Horses and Men* in our 2014-15 season and remember what their footballers did to ours in France this summer, you know that Iceland is full of surprises. Prepare to be entranced.