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Crossing (15)

Dir: Levan Akin

With: Mzia Arabuli, Lucas Kankava, Deniz Dumanli

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Synopsis: Retired teacher Lia travels to Istanbul to look for her niece Tekla who left neighbouring Georgia for a better life. She is joined by the tearaway brother of one of her ex-pupils who is looking for a new life away from Georgia. They meet newly-trained trans-rights lawyer Evrim. These three join forces to comb the city on a journey which brings them into close contact with the city's trans community.

Istanbul is a place people go when they want to disappear. At least, that's how it seems to Lia (Mzia Arabuli), a retired history teacher who travels from Georgia to search for Tekla (Tako Kurdovanidze), her estranged trans niece. She reluctantly brings along Achi (Lucas Kankava), a restless teen whose mother went to work in the Turkish capital and never returned. The lives of the unlikely duo change after they meet Evrim (Deniz Dumanli), a trans rights lawyer who helps them to navigate her world. As they experience the city's hidden corners, they realise that leaving home is not only an act of severance, but an opportunity for self-expression and new connections.

Crossing is the emotionally rich, deeply humane and politically resonant fourth feature of Swedish-Georgian director Levan Akin, whose *And Then We Danced* (2019), Sweden's Oscar entry, faced a harsh conservative backlash in Georgia because of its storyline of romance between two men in a traditional dance ensemble.

Crossing gives timely visibility to an exodus of LGBTQ+ Georgians who feel there is no safe future for them in their home country.

Through Tekla's backstory, which emerges gradually, we understand the precarity of trans lives and the daily risk of violence in Georgia's very patriarchal society, where her family drove her out of home. She got away alive, but a boy in the next village whose identity fell under scrutiny was shot dead by his father, who claimed it was an accident.

In this difficult terrain, Akin creates a beautifully poetic sense of place. From the wooden coastal houses of Batumi, a long bus ride takes Lia and Achi over the Bosphorus Bridge, and they settle into a low-end Istanbul hotel room flooded with neon light. Long weaving shots lead us through the uneven, cat-filled streets and cramped corridors of the city, where the *ezan* is called out from mosques and homeless kids try to hustle a few lira from passers-by. Dancing in restaurants recurs as a spontaneous way for the characters to



bond, and a soundtrack of Turkish pop and folk classics entwines with their emotions. It's a testament to Akin's empathetic respect for difference (and his family's connection to Turkey) that none of this feels voyeuristic or exploitatively touristic.

Strong performances across the board bring to life multifaceted characters whose flaws and quirks are key to their disarming vulnerability. The stern Lia makes sanctimonious comments about refinement and shuts down callow but resourceful Achi's chatter, but her plastic bottle of Georgian brandy is always close for a sly swig, and the armour around her feelings of fading desirability soon falls away. Evrim is warm-hearted, canny and resilient. As a trans woman, she is used to the romantic and professional obstacles thrown in her way by society. Recently qualified in law, she works for next to nothing at an NGO, Pink Life. She endures coldly averted gazes while her documents are being authorised for female status, and helps her fellow trans residents, who have few viable employment options and predominantly resort to sex work. Their guarded, protective evaluation of Lia's enquiries about Tekla's fate, questioning – in a witticism-filled gathering of tea and cigarettes – whether she would even want to be found, reveals a network of care within a void of institutional disdain. An unexpected bloom of romance appears for Evrim by way of a cute pirate taxi driver, offering upbeat respite.

Tekla proves hard to track down in the dense, transient environment of Istanbul's margins, and her absence remains haunting and palpable. Akin does not offer a sentimental ending for easy solace, but an unexpected fantasy twist that honours both the power of the imagination and the reality of grief. Lia's quest becomes as much an internal reckoning with her own prejudices and mistakes as it is an attempt to find Tekla and re-establish a relationship to fulfil her sister's dying wish.

Akin offers a moving portrayal of the bonds that can form between people who, on the surface at least, have little in common. In the rooming houses of Istanbul's red-light district, where women shout down from the windows and camaraderie unites them through the

walls, the director explores alternative means of belonging. The beating heart and hope of *Crossing* lies ultimately with collective activism rather than with family.

Credits

Lia	Mzia Arabuli
Achi	Lucas Kankava
Evrin	Deniz Dumanli
Ruso	Nino Karchava
Zaza	Levan Bochorishvili
Nona	Nino Tedoradze
Giga	Giga Shavadze
Izzet	Bunyamin Deger
Gülpembe	Sema Sultan Elekci
Ahmet	Metin Akdemir
Gülsen	Oksan Büyük
Young trans girl	Yasmin Ada
Young trans girl	Suzan Fadil
Aynur	Mehtap Ozdemir
Dr Erol	Mehmet Isyar
Ösge	Derya Gunaydin
Ömer	Ziya Sudancikmaz
Arya	Beril Soydan
Mustafa	Soner Yalçın
Ramaz	Levan Gabrichidze
Seval	Seval Kiliç
Bulut	Bulut Sezer
Ceylan	Bergüzar Mercan
Tekla	Tako Kurdovanidze
Director	Levan Akin
Screenplay	Levan Akin
Cinematography	Lisabi Fridell
Editing	Levan Akin, Emma Lagrelus
Production design	Roger Rosenberg

**Turkey, Georgia, Sweden,
Denmark, France 2023. 106m**

Another view

The last promise that Lia (Mzia Arabuli) made to her sister before her death was that she would reunite with her niece, Tekla, after many years of estrangement. After gleaning from an old student that Tekla has left Georgia for neighbouring Turkey, Lia makes plans for a long journey to Istanbul. Sensing an opportunity to get away from his bullying half-brother and forge his path in a new country, cheeky chappie Achi (Lucas Kankava) begs Lia to let him come along for the ride, claiming he knows where her niece might be staying. A reluctant Lia permits Achi to accompany her, and together they set off on Tekla's trail.

Following his breakout drama *And Then We Danced*, Akin now immerses the audience in the bustling Turkish capital, from its lively nightlife to the famous street cats prowling in and out of frames at will. Details about the trio of central characters emerge slowly but surely, creating bright portraits of people who are flawed but trying to learn from their mistakes all the time. As in his previous films, Akin doesn't settle for the unrealistic comfort of easy answers and happy endings, challenging his characters to confront their pasts. While the film does feel a little clichéd in its odd couple premise, the tenderness and grace with which Akin tells this

story counterbalance this, and *Crossing* has a bright sense of humour which cuts through some of the tension inherent in a culture clash narrative.

The three central performances work well together, with Mzia Arabuli portraying Lia as a woman struggling with the weight of personal and familial regret, while Lucas Kankava presents the lovable rogue Achi as cocksure but ultimately caring. Meanwhile, Evrim is an empowered woman with a clear idea of the life she wants to live. She's kind and compassionate to those who need her help, with a steely determination even in the face of discrimination and medical bureaucracy. In one moving scene, she fills out paperwork at a hospital, only to be interrupted by a curious stray cat. Evrim sets her paperwork aside and allows the animal to climb into her lap for a fuss. It's a wordless indication of where Evrim's priorities lie, and how the film encourages gentleness and understanding. Sweet without being cloying, it's a love letter to the commonalities between Georgian and Turkish culture; one that encourages empathy and reminds us it's never too late to change for the better.

Hannah White: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday March 21st, 7.30pm Radical (Mexico 2023. Cert 12a)

Radical is set in a poorly-run school located in an oppressive environment in a northern Mexican town rife with drug cartel violence and demotivated students. The run-down facilities and lack of educational resources mean the teachers do little but concentrate on getting their classes to pass government-mandated standardized tests that do nothing to inspire actual learning. But new teacher Sergio is determined to try something new. Based on a true story, Radical is a film in the best traditions of inspiring school-set dramas, which has you rooting for all concerned. A genuine feel-good crowdpleaser.

Annual General Meeting

Our AGM will take place on Friday April 11th. This is your chance as members to hear from the committee on how the Society is doing and their thoughts on the future.

As you may have seen from the email earlier this week, the evening will include a film. We hope to reveal the title at the next film and the meeting will take place after the film has been shown.