

NURI BILGE CEYLAN'S VISUAL MEDITATIONS

Justin Chang

Nuri Bilge Ceylan 52, has made a series of painstakingly crafted films in the last two decades, some of which have won awards at various festivals, besides offering him a special position with international film lovers. His films include 'Cocoon', 'Small Town', 'Clouds of May', 'Distant', 'Climates' and 'Three Monkeys' for which he won the award for Best Director in the 2008 Festival de Cannes. Justin Chang, Senior film critic and editor for film reviews at Variety, LA, offers insight into his recent film, 'Once Upon a Time in Anatolia' that just won him the 2011 Grand Jury prize at Cannes.

After the intense dramatic exertions of 'Three Monkeys,' Nuri Bilge Ceylan seems to have deliberately moved into less accessible, more oblique territory. The drama unfolding just offscreen is, in fact, as rife with deception, betrayal and violence as that of 'Three Monkeys,' but this time the director seems to be observing it all from a mournful side angle. Yet despite or perhaps due to its relative lack of incident, 'Once Upon a Time in Anatolia' feels like the more mature work, suffused with a wry, tolerant humanity that finds its chief expression in the strong, character-rich performances.

An overnight search for a missing body yields a quietly poignant autopsy on the human condition in 'Once Upon a Time in Anatolia.' Ceylan's sombre, rigorous new feature is a meditative procedural that expands what would normally consume the first five minutes of a "Law & Order" episode into a slow-moving, nearly three-hour portrait of men at work, taking stock of the enormous social and moral burdens they bear.

Anatolia's imposing title and 157-minute running time would seem to signify a butt-numbing



Synopsis

A family dislocated when small failings blow up into extravagant lies battles against the odds to stay together by covering up the truth... In order to avoid hardship and responsibilities that would otherwise be impossible to endure, the family chooses to ignore the truth, not to see, hear or talk about it. But does playing "Three Monkeys" invalidate the truth of its existence?



Synopsis

Life in a small town is akin to journeying in the middle of the steppes: the sense that "something new and different" will spring up behind every hill, but always unerringly similar, tapering, vanishing or lingering monotonous roads.

endurance test for all but the most hardened festival and arthouse patrons. Doing little to quell this perception, more than half of this intensely male-centric film unfolds under cover of darkness, as a prosecutor, a doctor, several police officers and two murder suspects navigate the sloped, winding roads of the Anatolian steppe in search of a corpse; its eventual discovery around the 90-minute mark drew sarcastic applause from some of the press corps assembled at the film's first Cannes screening.

Ceylan's characters themselves would probably sympathise. Though never less than professional, they're an impatient, exhausted bunch, having spent hours driving around with two self-confessed killers, Kenan [Firat Tanis] and Ramazan [Burhan Yildiz], who can't remember exactly where they buried the man they bumped off a few days earlier. In the film's many establishing and re-establishing shots, the darkness is penetrated only by the high beams of three cars winding across this barren yet beautiful terrain, captured in Gokhan Tiryaki's stunning widescreen compositions.

Along the way there's plenty of downtime, during which glum officials crack jokes and bicker over their next course of action. Commissar Naci [Yilmaz Erdogan] gruffly orders his men around and occasionally rebukes Kenan, whose connection to the crime supplies one of the few surprises in the script [which the helmer penned with his wife, Ebru Ceylan, and Ercan Kesal]. The two most developed characters are older prosecutor Nustret [Taner Birsell] and younger doctor Cemal [Muhammet Uzuner], whose mild disagreement over the meaning of a seemingly random anecdote speaks volumes about their disparate worldviews: one hopeful, one skeptical.

Ceylan is as calculatedly withholding a storyteller as ever, and as one might expect, 'Anatolia' never comes right out and explains itself, though the script suggests the film has much on its mind: the consequences of adultery; the suffering of children

and the limited hope for the future they represent; the shortage of resources in a rural village where the men enjoy a late night repast with the mayor [co-scribe and Ceylan regular Kesal]; or the recessive role of women in Turkish society, underlined by the presence of only two actresses in brief, virtually dialogue-free performances. Also, its unflinching observations of the legal and medical establishment frequently rivet. However specific its concerns, the film feels universal in its diagnosis of collective malaise.

This is a story overshadowed by death, allowing its characters to reflect on their lives. Though its glacial pacing will represent a significant hurdle for many viewers, the film grows steadily more involving as dawn breaks and the men make their way back home, and its unflinching observations of the legal and medical establishment at work frequently rivet. Visually, it's as gorgeous a film as Ceylan has made. Tiryaki works a steady stream of miracles in the nighttime passages; rarely have faces been more beautifully illuminated by firelight, in images that have the graceful glow of a Vermeer painting.