

With his 2011 Cannes sensation 'Once upon a Time in Anatolia', the great Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan turns his contemplative eye on a police investigation. He talks to **Geoff Andrew**, and overleaf shares his insightful personal diary of the editing process

JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT

Had one of Terrence Malick's infrequent epics (and a history of the universe at that!) not played in competition in Cannes last May, the Palme d'Or would almost certainly have gone to *Once upon a Time in Anatolia* (*Bir zamanlar Anadolu'da*). As it turned out, the Turkish film's writer-director Nuri Bilge Ceylan had to be content with sharing the Grand Prix (the second prize) with the Dardenne brothers. But however strong the Belgians' *The Kid with a Bike* was, it didn't feel as audacious or groundbreaking as Ceylan's idiosyncratic and magnificent variation on the *policier*. For many, *Once upon a Time in Anatolia* was not only the most remarkable of the director's six features to date (no mean achievement in itself, given the consistently high standard of his work); it was also the finest film in Cannes – and, for this writer, the greatest of last year.

Long and slow but wholly engrossing from the opening shot onwards, the film's lithe narrative – seemingly digressive but in fact meticulously constructed – begins at dusk and ends around the middle of the following day. It follows the search, by a small town's team of police, a prosecutor, a doctor and various drivers and diggers, for the body of a man buried out in the steppes after a drunken brawl. The man who confessed to the killing is also with them, though he can't recall the exact location of the makeshift grave; nor, for that matter, will he say what the fatal argument was about. Not that some of the search party seem particularly concerned with finding out, so preoccupied are they with discussing their own problems and indulging in petty rivalries.

As the rambling, shambling, for some time seemingly futile investigation proceeds, Ceylan uses it as the framework for a richly quizzical meditation on a range of themes: the mores and manners of provincial life; the way we're shaped by where we live; the balancing of ethics and pragmatism; our responsibilities to our loved ones; and our need to hold on to the banalities of life when faced with misfortune, absurdity and death. Though packed with piercing insights, the film never feels solemn, overloaded or excessively 'arty'. That's thanks partly to Ceylan's sure grasp of the subtle rhythms of human interaction, and partly to dialogue that – echoing Ceylan's beloved Chekhov – is at once strangely unemphatic yet allusive and resonant. But it's also down to the dry,

dark but often illuminating wit that made parts of his earlier films *Clouds of May* (*Mayis sikintisi*, 1999), *Uzak* (2002) and *Climates* (*Iklimler*, 2006) so amusing. Then, too, there are the evocative 'Scope images shot – as for *Climates* and *Three Monkeys* (*Uc maymun*, 2008) – by Gökhan Tiryaki, but as elegantly composed and exquisitely atmospheric as Ceylan's own extraordinary work both as photographer and as his own cinematographer on the films up to and including *Uzak*.

What follows is a distillation of two interviews, one conducted in Cannes, the other in London. Though the plot details of the murder investigation are not the most significant aspects of Ceylan's film, they are of course crucial to the experience of watching it unfold, so I've endeavoured to remove any parts of our conversations that might have constituted narrative spoilers.

Geoff Andrew: Could you explain the genesis of 'Once upon a Time in Anatolia'?

Nuri Bilge Ceylan: The idea came from a real story. One of my friends, Ercan Kesal – who also acted in and worked on the script of both this film and *Three Monkeys* – is a doctor, and as we know from Chekhov, doctors have lots of stories. And Ercan had lived through something like this. He told me about it over dinner one evening. In Turkey doctors are obliged to spend two years in Anatolia, and when he became a doctor, back in the 80s when he was about 25 years old, he went to the town where we ended up shooting this movie. He spent about five years there, and during that time he had to go one evening with the police in search of a body; it took until morning to find it. And he told me that by the end of the night the people on the search had become quite friendly towards the culprit, sharing cigarettes with him and so on. But then when they found the body, all Ercan could feel towards the culprit – just as the others did – was anger.

I felt that such a story, such a situation, might enable me to deal with the darker side of human nature. So the three of us – my wife Ebru, Ercan and myself – began to work it into a script. Of course, Ercan had forgotten many of the details, but we would obviously have changed things a lot anyway. And of course I added quotations from Chekhov – we even give him a credit!

GA: But it's not just quotations: there are also little events reminiscent of Chekhov's stories. The film seems imbued with the spirit of Chekhov.

NBC: Probably – I don't know. I love Chekhov, as



THE SCENE OF THE CRIME
Clockwise from top: director Nuri Bilge Ceylan; the searchers stop at a fountain on the steppe; the victim's wife (Nihan Okutucu); DA Nusret (Taner Birsel); suspect Kenan (Firat Tanis, right in main pic) with Commissioner Naci (Yilmaz Erdogan)

you know, but I can't see the film the way you can. But I should say that the characters are definitely very Turkish. Happily, audiences in Turkey have responded to the film well, and seem to find it very authentic. Maybe all that shows is that Chekhov wrote in a way that was universal in its relevance.

GA: Like your earliest features, this new film feels very personal.

NBC: If you want to be 'realistic', you must start from specifics. Fundamentally, wherever we live, we're pretty much the same and share much the same main values. So while I make movies that are very 'local', people all over the world seem to understand them.

GA: But do you yourself know Anatolia very well?

NBC: Oh yes! I spent my childhood in an Anatolian town. My father was a bureaucrat there, and I remember a great many details about those small-town bureaucrats, so when Ercan told me his story, all that came into play as well. For instance, how they used to try to humiliate each other – there was always some sort of conflict going on, some struggle to gain power or authority. My father found it very difficult being with them, especially as they'd separate themselves from the townsfolk, socialising in different places and so on.

I'd wanted to make a film about such people for a long while. And I knew it wouldn't be that easy to watch, because they're not exactly likeable! I knew the film would be long, maybe even tedious in places. Well, not tedious – that's too negative! – but I did want to break out a little.

Compared to literature, where you've a lot of freedom in what you write, cinema seems bound by strict 'rules'. The market pushes you to make films that last 90 minutes or so, or at least feel like that. But I wanted to break with that – I wanted audiences to feel at least some of the frustration the search party feel. My box office is pretty modest, and I thought that those people who insist on seeing short, fast movies are probably not going to come to mine anyway. So I didn't really need to worry about them.

GA: Let's return to what it's like in Anatolia. It intrigued me how, when your characters insult each other, they often do it by insulting the villages they're from.

NBC: That's what happens! Even when my parents were having an argument, they would blame one another's roots! That's how people think they can cause the most pain, by laying the blame on something the insulted person can do nothing about.

GA: I was fascinated by the gulf between the opinions of the local police chief about how justice should be meted out, and those of the doctor and the prosecutor, who are from the city. Was that discrepancy in their notions of crime and punishment important to you?

NBC: It comes down to different personalities as well as different backgrounds. But it's true the doctor and prosecutor have had more of an education. Indeed, that's why I chose to have the prosecutor tell his own story to the doctor – it shows there's that link between them. But it's not just about education – I felt both men had a melancholic side.

GA: The doctor is a city type living in the country whereas you – as we know from 'Clouds of May' and 'Uzak' – grew up in the country but live in the city. Is the doctor the character closest to yourself?

NBC: Definitely. He's the character I know best, so

THE SECOND MARATHON

Nuri Bilge Ceylan kept a diary while editing 'Once upon a Time in Anatolia', as he tried to give shape to footage from troublesome night shoots. These extracts were originally translated into French by Burçak Taran, then into English by Suzy Gillett

Tuesday 22 December 2009

It has been about ten days since we wrapped the shoot. After eight weeks of shooting, the return to normal life – those apparently insignificant rituals of daily routine – is abrupt, dreamlike. The day after tomorrow a new marathon will start.

Thursday 24 December 2009

In the evening [DP] Gökhan [Tiryaki] came over. We watched what we had filmed. Sometimes we were unhappy, at other times satisfied. But we were really happy with the shots around the fourth fountain. [The film follows the search for the body of a murder victim, which the murderer dimly remembers burying by a fountain out on the steppe. So during the course of a night, the investigators drive the murderer from one fountain to the next, in search of the right one.]

Friday 25 December 2009

We started editing today.

From the start I had wanted to film the first fountain scene in one long wide shot. This was the first scene we had with the actors – the first time we would discover, finally, truly, what the performances were like. As with my previous films, we hadn't done any read-through or prior rehearsal. I'd felt very nervous when the cars set off from the hill and started their slow approach. The vehicles arrived in front of the fountain, stopped, and the actors spread out and started to act. But how? I had no sound feed in my ears. The sound technician arrived in a panic.

As I'd wanted the blue of night, we didn't have much time. We immediately went on to do the second take. Still no sound feed. As I couldn't hear anything, it was impossible for me to direct the actors. Precious minutes ebbed away. It wasn't a good start to the shoot.

I looked at the scene we'd shot. It clearly wasn't working. The actors had all gone off in different directions, each one acting his piece in his own way. It felt false. Because of this scene I was deeply worried about the rest of the film.

Sunday 27 December 2009

Today we started on the second fountain.

The first half of the film takes place in the fields, in the middle of the night. An incredible cold reigns there. For us behind the camera it was more or less bearable – we'd wrapped up in padded jackets and Arctic wear. But the actors had to wear the costumes for their scenes, and these costumes didn't keep the cold out.

As the only light sources would be the headlights of the cars and moonlight, we had to conceive a very strong moonlight. We'd even brought with us an enormous helium balloon, but

it was unusable because of wind. We had to come up with another solution.

Gökhan managed to create a very beautiful light by putting a 25-kilowatt light inside a handmade soft box, which they put on a crane and elevated to a height of 30 or 40 metres. The result proved to be quite extraordinary – well beyond what the helium balloon offered. Apart from that, we replaced the headlights of the cars with much stronger bulbs, as the headlights had to cut through the moonlight.

With our modifications, the immeasurable immensity of the steppe capitulated slightly at our insistence.

Friday 1 January 2010

New Year. This afternoon, as if weighed down by the accumulation of fatigue from all these years, I lay down on the bed and fell asleep, fully clothed, for several hours. When I opened my eyes, I had the impression of waking up with a new form of perception. In the silence, before my eyes, in a fluid fashion, the immobile objects in my room

It's obvious that we should slow down the rhythm of our lives so that our senses are sharpened

surrounded me with infinite affection, as if the doors of a different level of perception had just opened. I stayed lying there with my eyes open for over an hour.

My senses felt completely alert. This state allowed me to take enormous pleasure in life. I understood that I don't truly feel the emotions of everything I live, because we live at such a frenetic rhythm. It's obvious that we should slow down the rhythm of our lives so that our senses are sharpened. Here resides my reason for liking films that are slow in pace – and my desire to make this kind of film. This state of mind that I felt on waking today can only appear through a slow and languorous rhythm.

Monday 4 January 2010

Today we reworked the dialogue scenes from the interior of the car, which we'd edited quite quickly yesterday. Watching them I understood once again how right my decision to work with Yilmaz [Erdogan, who plays Commissioner Naci] was. Yilmaz is a very intelligent, inventive actor who really listens to the actor in front of him. (Unfortunately it is a rare quality among actors.) During the

takes, if the other actor's acting changes by a millimetre, it's reflected in Yilmaz's acting.

Tuesday 12 January 2010

Today we checked the material for the fourth fountain. My first impression is that the images and sound have started to improve.

As sound is an element that can be done in the studio, I don't give it much attention while I'm shooting. From time to time, the boom operator makes himself noticed by getting the boom into shot. Between the DP and the boom operator there is often an atmosphere of terror. It's completely normal. The boom operator makes his calculations to get as close to the actor as he can, by centimetres.

Towards the end of the takes of the third fountain, I vaguely noticed that the boom operator was no longer being terrorised. Each time I thought about it, I forgot about it. And then, during a close-up on Arap Ali [the driver, played by Ahmet Mümtaz Taylan], I heard Gökhan ask the boom operator what he was doing. I turned around. I saw that the operator had put the boom on the ground and was trying to record the sound *beside the camera*. If he had chosen the classic position, with a microphone above the head of the actor, he could have got as close as 15 centimetres, rather than two metres! I immediately asked him why he was doing it like that. He just looked at me stupidly.

I went to ask Mehmet Kiliçel, the experienced sound recordist – without getting a satisfactory response. Long silences, furtive eyes. That evening I went to see Mehmet in the studio and asked him to play some of the recordings for me to listen to. As I had suspected, it was a catastrophe. For a start we had no 'boom' sound – they had relied on the radio mics and the sound was full of rustling of clothing. At this point I decided to replace the boom operator.

Happily the sound recorded by the new team for the scenes of the fourth fountain is clear and impeccable. In sum, we were happy in our work today. The sound is clear, the shots impeccable, the light is good. The result reflects what we had written.

This evening, at home, [Cannes Film Festival artistic director] Thierry Frémaux telephoned. He thanked me for the book I'd sent him. Then he asked if the film would be ready for Cannes. I told him it would not be ready. I told him the film was complicated and that I wanted to avoid any rush. He asked me to see if there might be a possibility somehow.

In the end it was a year later, in 2011, that 'Once upon a Time in Anatolia' made its way to Cannes, where it was shown in competition and won the Grand Prix.



THE SCRIPT Ceylan, centre, with his two co-writers: his wife Ebru, left, and doctor Ercan Kesal, right



THE SET-UP Ceylan, left, on location with director of photography Gökhan Tiryaki



NIGHT SHOOT To create a moonlight effect out on the steppe, a 25kw light was raised on a crane



THE EDIT Ceylan in post-production on 'Once upon a Time in Anatolia' with Bora Göksingöl

Nuri Bilge Ceylan *Once upon a Time in Anatolia*

◀ it was easy to create him. Especially his nihilistic attitude! He reads a Lermontov poem, for example, which is pretty nihilistic. But also he's rather distant from the world around him, and I'm like that. He's not as close to other people as the local townsfolk are.

GA: To me the film is about how we can never really know why people do what they do. We may have our suspicions as to their – and our – motivations, but that's all.

NBC: Life's often very ambiguous, so why not the cinema too? Generally, our attitude to life means we not only protect ourselves but deceive ourselves. Perhaps that's the most difficult thing for us to understand – that we don't even know the reality about ourselves!

With regard to ambiguity, literature has an advantage over cinema because it uses the reader's imagination so much more. In the cinema, if you don't ensure that the audience's imaginations are activated, you can't go very deep. So I try to include lots of ambiguous details, so that everyone has to try to create their own 'reality' for the film. That said, ambiguity is certainly not the same as arbitrariness. Ambiguity should always be carefully worked out. As a director you always need to know the answers to any questions raised in your film.

GA: You shoot the autopsy very carefully: you show almost nothing of the examination, and just use dialogue and sound.

NBC: I don't like showing blood and things like that, and if you can do things with sound, it's so much better. It allows viewers to imagine it themselves. That way they feel it's real.

GA: As with your earlier films, I was impressed by the honest, insightful way you deal with men and masculinity. Not just the rivalry between the characters, but how, for example, if a woman comes up in their conversation, they often feel a need to comment – however briefly and irrelevantly – on her appearance. That focus on male behaviour and psychology seems to be a constant in your work.

NBC: I just make films about what I ask myself about the most. I don't think I'd make a movie like Bergman used to, where he'd try to understand a woman or women in great depth. It's not because I don't respect women or anything like that; it's because my main instinct, my main purpose in making a film is to try to understand my own soul – which happens to be a man's soul. I know the darkness in my own soul, the weakness of my own heart – I'm not someone especially good! And I can see the things other men do. So those things are what my films deal with.

GA: Is that why you work with your wife Ebru on the script? Does she provide another perspective?

NBC: She does help, of course. But I don't think I'm one of those people who just doesn't understand women – I try, after all, to understand what it is to be human. And I sometimes find women stronger than men, for example. But for me making films is an attempt to learn more about my dark side, and by that to give some meaning to my life.

GA: Perhaps that's why it feels as if you're trying to push further forward with each film – to do something new and a little different. They're all immediately recognisable as your films, but there are real changes from one to the next. This time there's a change in scale – it feels noticeably bigger, even while it retains the intimacy of your other films. Did you feel you were pushing yourself?

'Doctor Cemal is the character I know best, so it was easy to create him. He's rather distant from the world around him, and I'm like that'



CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

After the group scenes of the first half of *'Once upon a Time in Anatolia'*, Doctor Cemal (Muhammet Uzuner) emerges as the focus of the narrative

NBC: Yes. Writing the script was hard this time, especially as there's far more dialogue. We worked very hard on making it authentic – which may mean it loses some nuances in translation, I'm afraid. But it's a difficult process anyway. The three of us get together every day; we talk mostly, then I give Ebru and Ercan 'homework' for each scene. The next day they bring their homework, and we talk again. And all the good stuff they've brought, I collect and use. Because while I too, like them, provide details for each scene, it's I alone who work on the overall structure and story, the bigger picture.

GA: Like your last film *'Three Monkeys'*, this was shot digitally. How has that affected the way you work?

NBC: Well, post-production was quite tedious, because there were problems transferring to 35mm, so sometimes I wished I'd shot in 35mm. Also, digital technology is changing all the time, so what you learn on one movie won't necessarily help on the next. But it can of course make some things easier. More importantly, it's cheaper if you have a high shooting ratio, as I do. Having a low shooting ratio can make actors nervous and I don't want that. For *Uzak* I shot around 13 hours of footage; for this film it was around 120 hours! Then again, we don't rehearse – we just shoot everything! That way you sometimes catch things you might otherwise miss.

GA: But the look of this film is strikingly different from that of *'Three Monkeys'*, which was almost noir-like in its expressionism.

NBC: With *Three Monkeys* I wanted to create a look,

an atmosphere, entirely specific to that story – but it was just for that film. This time I wanted to go back to something more naturalistic. But out on the steppes at night, that's difficult. You can't just use the usual spotlights; to create the impression of moonlight, you need huge amounts of light, or it would look completely dark. So our 'naturalism' was very expensive.

GA: The films' visual styles may differ, but again, as in *'Three Monkeys'*, death seems to have a strong presence in this film. I'm not just talking about the body that provokes the search; death also figures, one way or another, in a number of conversations. It feels completely ubiquitous.

NBC: Death is everywhere, of course, but its presence can often be felt more in the countryside. In the West, especially in cities, we tend to try to hide it, but it's far healthier to acknowledge that death is part and parcel of life.

GA: Conversely, the new film is also to some extent concerned with children, or at least our responsibilities towards them.

NBC: After becoming a father, I became aware of and concerned with some different aspects of life. And as my son has grown, those changes in me have become even stronger. It's as if I've discovered new sources of love in my heart – I feel almost as if I was quite dry before.

But also, being a parent is perhaps the only real way to go back to childhood yourself – it's almost as if you can live your own life again. And I think all this has somehow begun to make itself felt in my last two films. Just like everything else, it ends up – completely by instinct – going into the things I write.

■ *'Once upon a Time in Anatolia'* is released on 16 March, and is reviewed on page 72