



Berlin Golden Bear winner *Grbavica*

Grbavica - Three women, war, and the healing power of film

Jasmila Zbanic's film *Grbavica*, winner of the Berlinale's Golden Bear 2006, tells the story of single mother Esma, her teenage daughter Sara and their lives in contemporary Sarajevo, where the wounds of war have barely begun to heal.

While war raged, Esma was brutally raped, like many other women just like her. And in that act of singular barbarity, Sara was conceived. Esma spends most of the film in a desperate bid to keep Sara from finding out the truth about her origins.

Grbavica is war seen through its lasting human consequences. There is no spectacle here, no heroics. This is war as experienced by women in their hearts, souls and wombs, across the generations. It is a mournful, yet also hopeful, celebration of their courage, endurance and capacity for healing, in a still beleaguered and shell-shocked country.

The making of *Grbavica* is itself a story of three European women, their bond of friendship, sense of history and a shared passion for the medium of film.

As in the film, the focal point of their story is Sarajevo.

"I first came to Sarajevo in 1994 to do a short documentary about young people and their lives." says *Grbavica*'s Austrian producer Barbara Albert. Barbara was a student at film school back in Vienna and the war in the former Yugoslavia had just ended. Accompanying her, operating the camera, was Christine A. Maier, a fellow Austrian film student who shared Barbara's ambition of documenting the aftermath of war and its

wider meaning for Europe. It was while selecting young Bosnians for their student short that Barbara and Christine met Jasmila Zbanic, a Sarajevo film school student.

The friendship was immediate. “Christine and I were struck by Jasmila’s grace and generosity. Right away, she invited us to stay with her family, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.” Little did they know then that the spark of student friendship would lead more than a decade later, to that unforgettable gala night in Berlin, the applause of their peers and their hands clutching the coveted Golden Bear statuette.

Barbara and Christine returned to Vienna, to graduation and to shoot Barbara’s first feature film *Nordrand* together, which was in competition at the Venice Film Festival in 1999. In the same year, Barbara, together with three student fellows, founded the production company coop99. Back in Sarajevo, Jasmila soon embarked on the dual challenge of motherhood and film making. By 2002, she’d done sufficient work on *Grbavica* that the project was admitted at the Berlinale’s prestigious Pitching Point, an event at which young film makers presented projects to seasoned professionals and were offered feedback and guidance. Producer Boris Michalski (Noir Films) was amongst the panel of industry insiders who heard Jasmila’s impassioned pitch. Boris latterly became the project’s German co-producer.

By then, Barbara had produced and directed her second feature while Christine was on her way to becoming the well-respected cinematographer she is today. Throughout these absorbing times, the three women never lost touch and when she had the first draft of *Grbavica*, Jasmila immediately thought of Barbara. “I received the script in early 2003 and liked it immediately. It breathed of Sarajevo, its poetry and its tragedy. It’s a city I knew well by then I felt it was a pivotal place in the history of our generation of young Europeans.”



[Innocence and loss - Sara plays in the crisp Sarajevo snow](#)

Barbara shared Jasmila’s sense of urgency about *Grbavica*. Rape as a collective trauma for so many women in the former Yugoslavia was an issue largely passed over in the diplomatic wrangles of the war’s aftermath. And rape was also a broader metaphor for the trauma or fratricidal European wars and the violation of human dignity they entailed. This was a film whose time had come.

The story behind the making of *Grbavica* is one of genuine cooperation by producers and film agencies across the region of Europe most directly affected by the war in former Yugoslavia and its consequences.

From the start, Roland Teichmann, director of the Austrian Film Institute, was impressed by the filmmakers' dedication and their belief in the power of film to heal Europe's historical wounds. His faith in the project is behind the decision of the Austrian Film Institute to increase its contribution to the budget from 30% originally, to 40%, in spite of outside criticisms (Bosnia/Herzegovina contributed 26%, Germany 23% and the balance came from Croatia). "We believed in this strong and passionate European project," says Teichmann. "This had nothing to do with historic ties between Austria and Bosnia and the Balkans; it was about contemporary life in Europe, where we live, about the wounds of war and the desire to know where we come from. The film tells European history that needed to be told and seen. It is political but, above all, human."

The composition of the *Grbavica* crew reflected the idea of the film as a wake up call to all Europeans everywhere. Made up of Austrian, German and Bosnian nationals, with Christine as the cinematographer, and Barbara's production partner Bruno Wagner as coordinator, it came together under the common sense of urgency and commitment conveyed by Jasmila and her cast.

Grbavica's spectacular Berlin win in 2006 launched the film into a high profile international career. By 2008, it had been distributed in cinemas in over 20 countries worldwide, to critical acclaim. Although it was never designed as a popular commercial film, its integrity and dramatic treatment of the consequences allowed it to break out of the art house market in which many low budget films are often confined.