



Karlovy Vary
International Film Festival
Proxima Competition



SYNOPSIS

NIKOLA (34), a film director stuck in advertising, buys an old van to convert into a camper, dreaming of family road trips with his wife and soon-to-be-born daughter. When he learns that his late refugee grandmother's remains may be returned to her home village in Dalmatia, he embarks on this journey joined by his father, MIRKO (74), visiting the house he hasn't seen in 25 years, while gaining unexpected insights into parenting, family, the passage of time, and the blurry nature of memory.



CONVERSATION WITH NIKOLA LEŽAIĆ

by Ivan Ikić

I: You could say this is a transcript of an event you witnessed. But when did you first think that what was happening to you could become a film?

N: Actually, even before the trip, during a conversation with my dad — while I was on a commercial shoot, caught up in some bureaucratic mess with documents — I felt like I was in the middle of a movie. It seemed like part of a screenplay. When you work in this field, you naturally start to sense dramatic structures all around you. And when you add the story of my grandmother’s exhumation and her "journey," and the fact that I was about to become a father myself while my own father was nearing the end of his path, it was clear there was a film in there somewhere. So I already started the trip with a sense that there was a story present, and I was actively paying attention to elements that could become part of it.

I: But the script didn’t come right away?

N: No, I was still working on another project at the time — also a father–son story, but set far away, in Iran. I didn’t want to make another film so close to home. But when my dad died from COVID, and I was infected myself and couldn’t even attend his funeral, everything changed. While in quarantine, I wrote the first draft of the script in one sitting — out of necessity. It was a way of dealing with the loss.

I: How much did you distinguish between autobiography and fiction?

N: I didn’t really worry about that. Everything that happens in the film could have happened — maybe it did, maybe it didn’t. I tried to be specific, but I definitely invented some things unconsciously. It was important to stay true to the events, but even more important to stay true to what I felt. That’s the only truth that matters. In that sense, I wasn’t afraid to fictionalize certain parts, because I knew they were coming from the same emotional place. Writing was like reconstructing my own life — like I already had all the pieces laid out in front of me, and I just needed to arrange them into a film.

I: In the film, you're present as a character. That’s not fictionalized. How did you decide to put yourself in it — without distance?

N: Honestly, I didn’t even consider another option once I started seriously writing. Earlier, I tried to “externalize” the story — make the protagonist not a director, not me personally. But at some point, I thought — why should musicians like Dylan be allowed to sing about themselves, and we constantly hide behind fictional characters? There was something liberating in deciding: this is me, these are my emotions, my dilemmas, my relationships. And that doesn’t mean I was making a diary. It was more a kind of emotional truth that I had to leave untouched.





In general, I don't like films that emphasize being based on true events, because that's like a "cheat code" — people react differently when they know the story is real — they listen more attentively. That way fiction comes off as more authentic. I think that feeling the audience has — that they're watching something true but fictionalized — changes their experience. Flaws are more easily forgiven because it's "real." That's why I tried not to hide behind the mask of a fictional character, but to expose everything, like in *Tilva Roš*.

I: Yeah, here the actors play real people from real events, but they're not those people. That's the opposite of *Tilva Roš*, where non-actors played themselves in an imagined plot.

N: Yeah, it's a different dynamic. *Tilva*, although driven by real people playing themselves, is much closer to a traditional film. This one, though it might seem more traditional at first glance, is more like a transcript of real events with actors. I guess I'm drawn to those concepts that blur the line between reality and fiction.

I: But you didn't go so far as to play yourself?

N: I'm not an actor, and I think it would've felt unnatural to try — especially in a version where the other characters aren't the real people but actors. Professional actors bring structure, precision, and the necessary distance. By not being in the frame, but being in everything else, I could look at my own life as a story — and direct it, like a form of psychodrama. I mean, every film has its own path. Juraj Lerotić played himself in *Safe Place*, right alongside actors playing his family. Kiarostami often appeared in his films as a character, but not physically. And those are all valid paths — this one just felt right for this film

I: The film follows an emotional structure made up of small details and invisible threads that unfold over time. How conscious were you of the traditional dramatic structure while writing, given this focus on emotional development?

N: Quite a lot. There is a classical structure — the characters go on a journey, there are plot points, there's an arc, an ending — but the story carries you through internal threads. Small things, emotions, intimate relationships — they accumulate.

I: That reminds me of *The Wind Will Carry Us* — Kiarostami’s way of building meaning.

N: Absolutely. He leads you through details that, through repetition and accumulation, become metaphors. And here, in my own theory, you don’t quite know when the film actually begins — when all those accumulated small details start to work — but at some point, you realize you’re drawn in. And then, over time, you’re emotionally drained — but you can’t pinpoint exactly when that happened.

I: The film strongly explores the theme of home, of roots, of ruins—both emotional and physical. How do you see your family’s relationship to that space?

N: My father was an extremely rational man. When we went to the village, he showed no emotion toward the house he came from. He was indifferent. What mattered to him was that we were all together, having lunch. For me, on the other hand, that house was a kind of myth. I hadn’t been there since I was nine, and for a quarter of a century I had been building it up in my mind. He literally showed me the house overgrown with weeds and said, “Here you go, if you want a house. This is how they all end up.” That kind of rationality struck me more than any display of sentimentality. I realized that it’s not the physical place that connects us—it’s people, relationships, memories. And that’s exactly why that house, overgrown and abandoned, became a metaphor for everything.

I: Maybe the central theme of the film is memory — what’s real and what we’ve reconstructed?

N: Yes. The very act of constructing the story became a part of the dramatic narrative. Memory is a construction. Just like film. Some things that never even happened are now part of my memory because they made sense to be there. That process of building a narrative from the personal — like emotional editing — that’s the foundation of this film.

I: And finally — where do you see this film in the broader industry context?

N: I think this is a film that asks for trust — from the audience and from producers. Films like this are rarely made because they don’t offer ready-made formulas. In literature, you can just sit down and write, but film is an expensive game. That’s why I’m grateful I was able to make it by my own rules — for it to be my memory, my attempt to understand and preserve, and in the end, to share.







DIRECTOR'S BIO

Nikola Ležaić was born in 1981 in Bor, Yugoslavia. He graduated film directing at the Faculty of dramatic arts in Belgrade.

Nikola's directorial debut *TILVA ROŠ* premiered in Sarajevo where it won the Heart of Sarajevo award and had its international premiere at Locarno. It was screened in more than 40 other festivals, and it won over twenty awards around the world. It was nominated for the best debut at 2011 European Film Awards.

Nikola produced *THE DISOBEDIENT* (2014), a feature that premiered at Sundance. Directed over two hundred music and commercial videos.

HOW COME IT'S ALL GREEN OUT HERE? is his second feature.

PRODUCTION COMPANY

Qče (Serbia)

QČE is a newly-established production company working on quirky feature and documentary films that don't fit any profile. It rather chooses a lifeful mountain path than a safe freeway.

CO-PRODUCTION COMPANIES

Nukleus Film (Croatia)

In the past 20 years, Nukleus has become a regional production company whose films crossed the regional borders, and were shown at important festivals such as Cannes, Berlin and Sundance and TV stations such as ARTE, WDR and HBO.

PremierStudio (Bulgaria)

Bulgarian production company established in 2009 which produces high quality films (feature, documentaries and 3D animation) for the global market. For the last 5 years, the company has turned its focus on international co-production projects.

Forgrade (Serbia)

FORGRADE is a studio founded with a clear focus on high-end image post-production for cinema, it provides expert consultation and guides projects from the earliest concept to the final master.

Since expanding into production in 2020, the company has co-produced a series of films that have found both quiet and notable success at festivals around the world—including Cannes, Karlovy Vary, and Busan.







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