

Tashi Gyeltshen about THE RED PHALLUS

“In the heart of my film is the loss of humanity”

One of the most interesting films at the Berlinale 2019 was the feature debut of Tashi Gyeltshen, a writer, journalist and self-taught filmmaker from Bhutan. His THE RED PHALLUS tells about the 16 year old Sangay, struggling her way through a male dominated, patriarchal world. Ever since her mother died, she's lived in a secluded village on the foot of the Himalayas alone with her father, Ap Atsara, who controls nearly her every move. As a sculptor, he is carving phalli in wood. These symbols of fertility – resembling fertility goddesses from other cultures - are used for ceremonies, decorating the houses in the wonderful Phobjikha Valley to ward off evil spirits.

Ap Atsara also plays the role of the clown in traditional festivities. Clowns in Buddhism can help people to attain enlightenment. But behind the mask there's always a human being with all its capability to commit even horrendous crimes like abuse and rape. Sangay's only friend is Passa, a lower class married man and father, who tries to force her into running off together to

the city. Then it comes to a brutal and bloody confrontation between the two important men in her life.

Your film is challenging the audience, by its subject but also by the patience it demands to watch the slow burning narrative and – marvellous! - calm wide shots.

Tashi Gyeltshen: The movie takes its time to establish a dramatic climax. I wrote the story four years ago, before the #MeToo debate even started. But ever since the film has been released, everybody connects it with the #MeToo movement, which is not the intention I had in mind.

Then what did you actually want to show?

Gyeltshen: In the heart of my film is the loss of humanity and, of course, shame. The phallus symbolises humanity's decadence, that we largely owe to a patriarchal society and a way of thinking that is destroying the world.

Right from the beginning there is a tense and gritty atmosphere, with

violence lurking under the images of the wonderful nature in your country.

Gyeltshen: When I visited those festivities called Tschechus and was blessed by the clowns with phalluses, I often asked myself why in our culture the power to bless one by virtue is given to a man behind a mask. Everyone in this world is wearing a mask as a way to hide the truth, we hide our flaws, fragilities and crimes. I wonder why we turned so bad, destroying ourselves? Although I don't want to judge my characters from my own moral perspective, I wonder where this need to kill and rape comes from. My film deals with questions I ask myself, and I most probably won't get an answer. Because once I get an answer, the question will no longer be out there, and I insist to keep on asking questions.



I found this impressive debut film very sad and depressing. Is there no hope?

Gyeltshen: Of course I am hopeful because in the moment when Sangay fulfils her destiny, the hope is already embedded. In Buddhism we believe in rebirth and I hope Sangay will have her next life in a more civilised world with more humanity and higher moral grounds.

Where did you find Tshering Euden, the outstanding young actress playing Sangay?

Gyeltshen: She is an amateur, like my other protagonists. They all live in Phobjikha Valley. But I am sure we will see her again on screen.

–
Uta Beth