

# Mirlan Abdykalykov about RUNNING TO THE SKY

**"The birds were not chosen randomly"**

12 year old Jekshen is the fastest runner in the Kyrgyzstani mountain village, where he lives together with his alcoholic father. Jekshen grows up pretty much by himself, finding the last bit of freedom and relief by participating in a traditional running competition. Until one day he is pledged to take part in a big race, one that might change his life for the better.

**The environment in which the story takes place seems to have a big influence on the character, the nature of the people living there.**

Mirlan Abdykalykov: The landscape and especially the atmosphere in the village had a very positive influence on the entire filmmaking process, and on the crew and actors. Off set, we all felt at ease in that place. The wonderful atmosphere fitted so well to the story. Through observing the scenery, the landscape and nature I'm building up a tension that lasts throughout the entire film.

**People in those villages don't speak much.**

Abdykalykov: We shot the film in a big village where during the Soviet days a uranium mine was located, making it a rather dangerous and unhealthy place to live. After the Soviet period, the mine was closed and most of the people moved out. The ones staying behind must have had a strong connection with the place. Maybe this explains why those people in general are rather introverted.

**Is what you show us really "life as it is nowadays" in that village?**

Abdykalykov: It's a truthful example of typical village life in Kyrgyzstan. We didn't have to rebuild or decorate anything – the scenery was all there, ready to use. A traditional village scenery in its purest form. There is a strong connection between story and location. The film refers to how life was during and after the Soviet days, which clearly shows in the environmental details.



**What sort of details?**

Abdykalykov: All the big buildings, like the school, were built during Soviet times. It is like time has stood still ever since, and every form of development has stopped. And even what we got from the Soviet days, we don't seem able to save and keep it. It is my very personal opinion that our society is not moving forward. We're having a status quo. About this, I want to raise some questions in the minds of the audience.

**Your protagonist Jekshen is extremely loyal. How loyal can you be to a father who refuses to take up his parental role?**

Abdykalykov: Respect and loyalty towards the elderly, and especially towards the father, are deeply rooted in Kyrgyzstani traditions. The film doesn't tell you how far this loyalty can go. Just like you will not find out why exactly the mother has left her husband. Such things you can only presume. Boys like Jekshen sooner or later will make a decision and meet their fate. The closing scene, in which



Jekshen runs away with his rooster, leaves room for interpretation. In the original script, Jekshen wasn't able to deal with life's hardships, and died. But I couldn't agree. When you can overcome so many difficulties, and still you die in the end, then you're weak. I didn't want my character to be weak. After many discussions with producers and scriptwriters, I proposed a different ending and measured the pro's and con's. That's how I convinced my team, and we rewrote the script with this open ending.

**In the film I spotted lots of images of birds flying through the sky. Not just because you're such a passionate birdwatcher?**

Abdykalykov: In this world there is less and less space for animals to obtain, so I wanted to guarantee them a place in my film. Their presence is no coincidence. In many cultures – surely where I come from – animals often represent special symbolic notions. The birds you spotted in RUNNING TO THE SKY were not chosen randomly. A pigeon symbolises love, like between the teacher and her colleague. For Jekshen that gym teacher impersonates motherhood, beauty, first love. The rooster is connected to the running game that is in the centre of the story. And the cuckoo comes with



*Director Mirlan Abdykalykov meeting the audience at the Schlingel festival*

the scene in which Jekshen visits his mother – remember how cuckoos don't raise their own chicks. One main intention with this story was not to put a blame on one specific person. The guilt is on all of us to carry. The presence of birds and other animals is there to explain this idea of a blame that needs to be shared.

**A lot of drinking is going on in the village.**

Abdykalykov: I believe there is always a reason behind all that drunkenness. Look at Jekshen's father and you will understand. In the nineties the alcohol problem in Kyrgyzstan was even bigger, but it still exists nowadays.

**How difficult was it to make the film?**

Abdykalykov: Both on the level of financing and technique, making a film is never easy. I constantly felt the threat of not having enough money to finish the film, which complicated everything. Luckily since 2005 a system of state funding was installed, the film landscape in Kyrgyzstan has developed. But for this type of cinema, telling personal stories based upon my individual ideas, there's still many challenges. Working with the best technical equipment, using the best facilities, is something we can't afford. To make a good film, having a 'good idea' is the crucial element. I am always hoping to meet someone who has plenty of money and no ideas. I have plenty of good ideas but no money to make them happen.

**Is it true what they say about you?**

Abdykalykov: What?

**You were the child actor who played the title role in BESHKEMPIR?**

Abdykalykov: I was. I have the best possible memories of that project. My father Aktan Abdykalykov was the director, and I'm now following in his footsteps.

**BESHKEMPIR was made 20 years**

ago.

Abdykalykov: HEAVENLY NOMADIC, my debut as a director, was a children's film too. It got a small scale release in 30 German arthouse cinema's. Now RUNNING TO THE SKY is having its European premiere in the renown Schlingel Festival. In the city of Chemnitz, I can feel the presence of a long children's film history, but on this 24th festival edition, RUNNING TO THE SKY is the first Kyrgyzstani film on the programme. I'm proud about that.

–

**Gert Hermans**

Contact & Sales: Pluto Film, [info@plutofilm.de](mailto:info@plutofilm.de), <http://www.plutofilm.de/films/running-to-the-sky/0043>

Sales: Margot Haiböck,

Festivals: Daniela Chlapikova.