

## FILM REVIEW

### Rosso Istanbul (*Istanbul Kirmizi; Red Istanbul*)

Directed by Ferzan Ozpetek

Featured March 24 & 31 at the 17th Boston Turkish Film Festival — The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

*Rosso Istanbul*, directed by Ferzan Ozpetek and based on his 2013 novel by the same name, is a cinematic meditation on his hometown and on life. Reality is not as pretty as our dreams, the movie tells us. This review may have a spoiler.

Similar to Ozpetek's Turkish baths movie of twenty years ago, *Steam*, this new film conveys the inner side of human lives, and both movies include endings with death. Both are also set in Istanbul but in different eras, *Rosso Istanbul* in today's excess of wealth and lifestyle. Current music blends with traditional, evocative Eastern sounds and their feel of the elusive past, the score by Giuliano Taviani and Carmelo Travia.

The movie is slow because it reflects on individual life experience, from childhood relationships that impact psychology to successful careers that implode, like Deniz's. Life inevitably deteriorates, but it's a person's accumulated memories that lead to later-life depression or despair.

Briefly, a London book editor, Orhan Sahin (Halit Ergenc), returns to his hometown, Istanbul, to help his old friend Deniz Soysal (Nejat Isler), a famous filmmaker, finish his autobiography. Orhan's tragic face and the film's other hints about his past eventually reveal the cause for his leaving Turkey twenty years before. Mostly silent, he speaks with his large blue eyes, and panning on all of the protagonists' faces—their long looks at each other—is overdone. In real life friends don't hold each other's gazes for so long.

Deniz's dissipated face and manic behavior juxtapose Orhan's passivity. The stunning Neval (Tuba Buyukustun) forms a female addition to the relationships, which also include Deniz's mentally tortured lover Jusef (Mehmet Gunsur). Neval appears less depressed than the three men, until she says: "But isn't everyone unhappy?"

That line could be a subtitle for the movie: People are unhappy.

Deniz disappears on the first night of Orhan's arrival and the rest of the movie takes on suspense about where he is, while the characters' back stories slowly fill in. Jusef's angry character is the best role, partly because his gaze never lingers too long on any of his adversaries.



Audiences may appreciate *Rosso Istanbul's* study of life—human life—or they may ask: What was the point of this movie? And the ending might disappoint them—it's ambiguous. Yet that ambiguity also offers a freedom to interpret meaning, which works well with this dark, meditative genre.

The Bosphorus's upscale Karakoy shoreline is the main setting of the film and plays a key role in the central characters' lives and the movie's ending. As the story winds up, Jusef tells Orhan that he and Deniz used to challenge each other to swim across the strait. Jusef succeeded many times, despite the dangerous currents, but Deniz never made it more than a few yards before turning back. The audience therefore assumes Deniz, drunk the last time anyone saw him, took on the Bosphorus feeling omnipotent, or he committed suicide. Soon after, Jusef drowns in the waters, probably suicide. In the last scene, Orhan sheds his clothes, dives into the water, and begins swimming with a strong stroke. The screen goes black.

Over the course of the movie, Orhan works through his past and frees himself from his dead condition of twenty years. But what is his future? Does he have a new beginning in Istanbul? Does he dive into the Bosphorus because life is dark and meaningless, or does he dive in feeling empowered to reach the other side, a symbol of his new strength? The viewer must decide an ending to this movie's sad, but realistic depiction of life.

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