

FILM REVIEW

Sour Apples (*Ekşi Elmalar*)

Written and directed by Yılmaz Erdoğan

Featured March 30 & April 8 at the 17th Boston Turkish Film Festival — The Museum of Fine Arts

Sour Apples is a modern-day Shakespearean comedy written and directed by Yılmaz Erdoğan, who also stars in it as Hakkârî's vain and overbearing mayor. It's 1977, and the mayor has just lost his election to a third term, but until his dying day he will remain "the mayor," severe and unsmiling, dressed in tailored clothes, and driven about by his manservant, Yusef.

We know this is a lighthearted comedy from the opening's fun, farcical music, which also plays between scenes. It's snowing outside at the mayor's house, which sits in front of a jagged mountain peak in southeastern Turkey. Inside the dusky parlor, men listen to the election results with their candidate seated before them as if on a throne. They kiss his hand as they leave, expressing regret for his loss.

Turkey's turbulent politics of the 1970s and 80s thread through the background of this heartwarming love story, narrated by the mayor's youngest daughter Muazzez. She recalls the family's past to her aged father, who can no longer silence or punish her for what she tells him because he has Alzheimer's. We hear how her city was known for two things: the mayor's apple orchards and the mayor's daughters.

And oh, what daughters!—Türkan, Safiye, and Muazzez. Their adolescent beauty, flowing dresses and tresses, laughter and gaiety, and conniving plots to get the men they want rather than their father's choices, launch the movie in its Shakespearean vein. The character Sino carries letters and messages between the illicit lovers; the grotesque, traveling merchant, Etar, brings gossip to the women; and lovable, blundering Hatip, in love with Safiye, can be counted on for laughter.

The women's lives are so restricted that Muazzez hasn't learned to read or write, and yet this distressing state of women is treated in a parodic way, keeping the story playful. When Muazzez spies Özgür—a true Romeo—it's love at first sight, with humor woven into the lovers' action and dialogue. Özgür comes from cosmopolitan Ankara and asks Muazzez: How can boys see girls in this town? She answers: You marry them.



The story progresses and we watch Muazzez's two older sisters go through exactly that process of marrying before meeting their patriarch's choices for them. The girls' mother Ayda is like one of the sisters, having been betrothed at age fourteen. She often joins in her daughters' merrymaking and whispered schemes, showing how the women share a secret world of romance novels, movie star pin-ups, and natural urges they have to hide from male authority.

As the years pass, the unemployed mayor can't afford his lifestyle any longer, and if he marries off his last daughter, his wife won't be able to handle the housework on her own. He suggests he take a second wife so Muazzez can marry, but leaves the decision to Ayda and Muazzez. This is a wonderful moment in the movie, tense and meaningful for both the women and the audience. It's also the film's turning point into less comedy and more poignancy over life's losses. However, in keeping with its Shakespearean tradition, the story has placed key props along the way—the green apples and the characters' traits—that feed into a perfect, climatic ending. All's well that ends well, with much life experienced along the way.



Gail Spilsbury is the author of four books and editor-in-chief at Bergamot Books (bergamotbooks.com). Her film reviews are archived at gailspilsbury.blogspot.com. Listen to her fiction podcast set in Boston The Red Line (redlinepodcast.com or itunes).