

MEMORIES OF A GOLDEN YOUTH: COSMOPOLITANISM IN PIRO AND ENO MILKANI'S *THE SORROW OF MRS. SCHNEIDER*

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Abstract

The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider attests to the human toll of social transformation. Despite the official stances assumed by the plant director and the local police commissioner, the Czechoslovakia that the hero, Albanian student Lekë comes to know is replete with human warmth, a sense of hope, and a vision that transcends official doctrine. Rules exist, but can be bent, and one is free to dance to the rhythms of the world. Yet Lekë displays both maturity and a sense of priority. Indeed, he basks in the sexual freedom so alien to his homeland, but, nevertheless, he finds true love. He is free to critique the Albanian regime, yet in the end he knows that he must return there, if just for his family's safety. Albania is textualized as a dictatorship in Lekë's candid conversation with Count Šternberk and much more forcefully through the ominous words of the Albanian ambassador. The film, however, does not dwell on this. Rather, it shows a young man discovering a world with new possibilities, all the while knowing that the openness he has experienced will remain, for many years to come, a secret part of his life. For Piro Milkani, the film nostalgically evokes an apprenticeship, one that rendered him the cultural cosmopolitan that he is today.

Keywords: communism, cosmopolitanism, co-productions, nostalgia, isolationism

Albanian cinema of the post-communist period has consisted of a dialogue with the past rather than a rupture with the constraints and orthodoxy of the former regime. Following the collapse of the communist regime in 1991, the state-run Kinostudio was dissolved, and the country opened its doors to international co-productions. During the 1990s and early 2000s, one of the salient tendencies of the new cinema was an assessment of the Enver Hoxha dictatorship. For instance, Kujtim Çashku's *Kolonel Bunker/Colonel Bunker* (1998) explores two distinct, yet related themes: Hoxha's extensive campaign of bunkerization (the construction of nearly 175,000 concrete bunkers that cluttered the landscape of the small country) and the plight of

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women from other Eastern Bloc countries who had married Albanians and immigrated to the country as it gradually isolated itself from the Eastern Bloc.¹ In a similar fashion, Gjergj Xhuvani's *Parrulat/Slogans* (2001) tells the story of a young schoolteacher in southern Albania who must construct propaganda slogans out of rocks on a mountainside.² Both of these films, not only deal with the communist past, but also reconceived the very process of filmmaking in Albania. While Çashku's film was a coproduction with Poland and France, Xhuvani's was made with the cooperation of multiple French partners. When Albanian cinema had become saturated with (sometimes hackneyed) reassessments of the Hoxha regime, it moved on to an exploration of wider themes, or at least revisited the communist past from fresh perspectives. A work of special significance is Piro and Eno Milkani's *Trishtimi i zonjës Shnajder/Smutek pani Snajdrové/The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider* (2008), an Albanian/Czech/Italian coproduction, which frames the theme of isolationism in the context of a poignant love story between a young man and an older woman. It is imbued with a sense of optimism for the early days of communism, when Albania shared the comradeship of the Warsaw Pact nations and their optimism. The film draws upon Piro Milkani's personal experiences as a young film student in Prague who was repatriated to Albania in 1961 due to the country's worsening ties with Moscow and the Eastern Bloc. This essay will demonstrate how the Milkani's film attests to the cultural cosmopolitanism of the early communist years and evokes a sense of nostalgia for this lost world. It will further reveal how *The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider* not only serves as a point of departure for a foray into contemporary Albanian cinema, but also invites a retrospective exploration of the Kinostudio era.

Cultural Cosmopolitanism and Geographic Considerations

George Crowder (2013) argues that cosmopolitanism places emphasis on "the importance of identification not with the nation or other particular groups but with humanity at large [...] involves not just a programme for humanity but identification with humanity itself" (pp. 91-92). In sociopolitical terms, cosmopolitanism "takes a universal view of human affairs, but one that claims to be sensitive to, and appreciative of, legitimate differences among nations and cultures" (Crowder 2014, p. 92). Jeremy Waldron (1995) asserts that cosmopolitan identities are constructed out of a multiplicity of different cultural sources, giving birth to lives that are replete with "kaleidoscopic tension and variety" (p. 94). For Waldron, in the modern world, traditional communities are deeply inauthentic. Their existence is predicated upon self-sufficiency and moral authority, both which, in given contexts, have become obsolete. Waldron stresses that cosmopolitanism is "the only appropriate response to the modern world in which we live" (p. 100). He feels that the cosmopolitan ideal is exemplified by Salman Rushdie, who has described his novel *The Satanic Versus* as celebrating "hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs" (Rushdie 1990, p. 52.).

In an examination of Albania's underground pop-rock culture under communism, Bruce Williams explores fissures of cosmopolitanism, pointing out that through music, "Albanians sought to incorporate the western models of individualism and resistance" (2016a, p. 113). The

¹ Kujtim Çashku is an example of a noted director of the communist period who successfully made the transition to the post-communist international coproduction context. For a profile of the director and a discussion of his work, see Bruce Williams, *Kujtim Çashku e a emergència do cinema independente na Albânia* (2013).

² For a discussion of Xhuvani's *Slogans*, see Dina Jordanova (2016).

country, moreover, was well positioned for cosmopolitanism by virtue of its liminal position between East and West. Nonetheless, centuries of isolation, both under the Ottomans and the communist regime, impeded such openness on a large scale. Although Albania's incorporation of pop-rock into its own cultural discourse was far more limited than that of other Eastern Bloc countries, music opened doors to the world and anticipate the drastic changes that would come in 1991.

The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider is set in another liminal context, but one quite distinct from Albania. Czechoslovakia, and most specifically, its capital, can be deemed to lie in violation of fundamental assumptions regarding European geography. As Kevin Moss (2006) asserts, Prague lies to the west of Vienna, yet has always held "a special place in the Orientalist construct of Eastern Europe" It may well be a Central European country, but there is something exotic and different about it. For westerners during the communist period, the country was characterized by "near and far" dynamics; It was so close to the West, yet a visa was required for individuals from outside of the Eastern Bloc. Nonetheless, from a Czech perspective, the situation was perceived quite differently. Czechoslovakia was culturally a part of Central Europe, and German was spoken by a good deal of the population of the Bohemia region. Although travel to and from the West was complicated during the communist period, the country was never nearly as isolated as Albania. For an Albanian student in Czechoslovakia in 1961, the country represented a perfect window to the West.

Piro and Eno Milkani as Citizens of the World

Upon his repatriation to Albania from Czechoslovakia, Piro Milkani served at Kinostudio as cinematographer on eight films, which comprised both documentaries and feature films, and had the opportunity to work with major directors such as Kristaq Dhamo and Hysen Hasani. From 1967 to 2008, Milkani directed 22 films, including 19 features and three documentaries. His first feature, *Ngadhujim mbi vdekjen (Victory over Death)*, (1967), codirected with Gëzim Erebara, became one of the most celebrated films in China during the Cultural Revolution, where it was seen by 100 million Chinese. Relating the story of two young Albanian women who struggle against, and are subsequently executed by the Nazi occupation, its female protagonist, played by Eglantina Kume, set fashion and hair trends in communist China.³ As will be discussed below, Milkani's 1979 film *Ballë për ballë/ Face to Face*, which he codirected with Kujtim Çashku was a tribute to an era of friendship among the Eastern Bloc countries that would be aborted when Albania sealed its doors and windows. Following the closure of Kinostudio, Milkani was able to return to Prague in 1998, this time to serve a four-year term as Albanian ambassador. Piro Milkani is a highly educated and well-traveled man, fluent in five languages. Following the release of *The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider*, he has enjoyed yet another career, this time as a teacher of cinema at Tirana's Marubi Academy of Film and Multimedia.⁴

Piro Milkani has received noteworthy recognition following the international release of *The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider*. In 2019, director Piro Milkani received the Gratis Agit award from the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, as the Czech Ambassador to Albania, Jaroslav Ludva, asserts, is reserved "only for those tireless people who have honored the Czech Republic around the world." Following his return from the Prague ceremony to Tirana, the

³ The popularity of *Victory over Death* and other Kinostudio films are discussed by Xianing Lu in an article forthcoming in *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* and available online in advance of publication.

⁴ For a biographical sketch of Piro Milkani, see Abbas Hoxha 2002, p. 264–266.

Albanian Minister of Culture Elva Margariti bestowed upon him the title “Albanian Film Ambassador,” As Margariti stated, this award, which celebrates his dual career as filmmaker and political ambassador, reminds Albanians, that “[...] there is no way not to feel proud that a small country like ours brings out such intellectuals” [...] Milkani didn’t just survive, but he also managed to do art in a time when censorship restricted such a thing” (“Piro Milkani Receives ‘Albanian Film Ambassador Award’”). (Piro Milkani Receives ‘Albanian Film Ambassador Award.’”). In 2020, Milkani was honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award of the 15th edition of Strumica, North Macedonia’s AsterFest (held virtually).⁵

The son of Piro Milkani, Eno Milkani, like his father, was fortunate enough to have an international education, studying film direction both at the Academy of Performing Arts in Tirana and at the European Film College in Ebeltoft, Denmark. In 1994, he launched, together with his father, the production company Bunker Films. Milkani’s first film, *Edeni i braktisur/Abandoned Eden* (2004), documents a seaside area of southern Albania, which has been abandoned by young people due to their social conditions. It has been termed a “poetic film [that represents] an effective cinematic rendering of pain felt deeply over the disappearance of cultural values” (Karlovy Vary IFF 54 ½ 2020). In 2011, Milkani founded the Balkan Film and Food Festival in the town of Pogradec, which lies across Lake Ohrid from North Macedonia. The festival celebrates the combined cinematic and culinary history of the Balkan region (Grgić 2014).

Nostalgia for a Lost Era

Not only does *The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider* cast a nostalgic look at the optimism of the early days of communist, but, of equal importance, its discourse of nostalgia echoes back at another film by Piro Milkani, which, when read against the grain, is replete with a similar sense of longing for the same time period. *Ballë për ballë//Face to Face* (1979), which was based on Ismail Kadare’s novel *Dimri i madh* (1977), documents the 1961 withdrawal of the Soviet presence from the naval base in Vlora. On a surface level, the film can be read as a work of propaganda, foregrounding the triumph of Albania over Soviet revisionism. Bruce Williams (2016) goes beyond this interpretation and rereads the film in terms of nostalgia, a term which plays out in the film on both personal and sociopolitical levels. Roger Scruton clarifies that the term nostalgia” [...] was] originally designed as a yearning for home, but now [it is used] to mean any longing for an absent (and by implication past) state of affairs, accompanied by an idealization of that state, involving intemperate attention to its supposed virtues, together with a merely schematic representation of its faults” (Roger Scruton 2007, p. 485). Williams (2016b) stresses:

At the time of its production, *Face to Face* served to kindle the memory of a bygone era. There was no failed past for which one could long, yet absent was a sense of continuity with the pre-breach days. Moreover, the existential questions posed by its protagonists transcend the historical moment and suggest something inherently universal in a discrete moment in history. Such universality is suggested by the similar sensitivities of Soviet and Albanian characters.

⁵ A Czech-language interview with Milkani regarding his career and accomplishments has been released by the Festival.

The film's protagonist is Besniku (Mevlan Shanaj)⁶, who has returned to Albania from Moscow, where he had witnessed a meeting between Hoxha and Khrushchev that constituted one of the key moments in the breach between the two countries. Besniku is photographing the architectural site at Butrint at the very moment when the Soviets withdraw their troops from Vlora. Replete with references to popular Soviet music as well to Tchaikovsky's opera *Queen of Spades*, the film depicts the end of the times of friendship, when Albanians and Russians partied the night away, singing and dancing together. The film ends with an image of a seagull, which, in the official reading of the film, can be read as a return to peace brought about by the retreat of the now enemy. Nonetheless, as Williams points out:

[...] we are left with the profound sense of shattered friendships and severed human ties, and once again, we are struck by the ambiguity of the rift [...] Some thirty-five years after the film's premiere, we contemplate the complexity of this ambiguity (Williams 2016 b)..

Williams further (2016 b) clarifies that, during the course of the production, Çashku sensed an atmosphere of nostalgia among those involved in the film for the days in which USSR and Albania were close friends. Yet in 1979, such thoughts dared not be pronounced. Today's open climate in Albania allows the film to be read in a number of ways, and it can be viewed as a testament to the years of friendship and community among the Warsaw Pact nations, a friendship that could not be avowed during the decades of increasing isolation. This sense of community is a defining theme as well of *The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider*, which looks back to the exact same year. What is distinct here is that the democratic production context of recent years allowed the theme of nostalgia for the early years of communism to come to the forefront, and not be couched by official historical discourse.

Love in a Time of Isolationism

The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider is set in 1961, a year which marked one of the most significant moments in Albania's breach with the Soviet Union. Lekë Seriani is an Albanian film student at Prague's prestigious film academy, FAMU.⁷ In his final year of study, he and two other young filmmakers travel to Český Šternberk, a small town located some 50 kilometers from Prague, to produce their diploma film, a documentary on the ESO motorcycle factory. Over the course of their stay there, Lekë has a love affair with Jana Schneider, an older woman and wife of the local police commissioner. Although Mrs. Schneider expresses the desire to

⁶ Actor Mevlan Shanaj was extremely popular in China during the Cultural Revolution, particularly for such films as *I teti në bronz/The Eighth in Bronze* (Viktor Gjika, 1970). He frequently quips that to this day, he is more popular in China than Robert De Niro.

⁷ The training of Albanian film directors in other Eastern Bloc countries was the norm until the country had developed a cadre of professionals who could conduct film education at Kinostudio, which was an essential strategy in Albania's growing isolationism. In 1950, the first group of aspiring filmmakers, including Endri Keko, who would become a noted documentarian, and Xhanfise Keko, who would, as Kinostudio's sole woman director, become renowned for her children's films, were sent for training in 1950 to Moscow's Central Studio for Documentary Film. For a discussion of their experiences abroad, see Xhanfise Keko's *Ditët e jetës sime* (2008), pp. 31–49). Other professionals who received training abroad include the director of Albania's first feature film, *Tana* (1958), who studied in Budapest, and Dhimitër Anagnosti, arguably the most famous director of the Kinostudio period, who was educated in Moscow. During Albania's period of heightened isolation, foreign study was normally not permitted. One exception is Romania where four Albanian filmmakers studied during the early 1970s, including director Kujtim Çashku, due to the relatively good ties between Hoxha and Ceaușescu. In all cases, the foreign students returned home to work at Kinostudio. See Țuțui, 2011, p. 108.

leave her husband and go to Albania with Lekë, the passion is doomed. Immediately upon receipt of his diploma, the young man is repatriated to Albania. He leaves Česky Šternberk without bidding farewell to Mrs. Schneider. It is significant to note that, had the older woman followed the youth to Albania, her stay there could have resulted in internal exile or imprisonment. As Albania grew in its isolation and Hoxha in his paranoia, foreign wives, mainly Russian, Polish, Czech, and Hungarian, who had mostly married Albanian soldiers who had been trained in the Eastern Bloc, were suspected of espionage. (Such a dynamic is a key diagenetic thread of Kujtim Çashku's *Kolonel Bunker/Colonel Bunker* (1998).⁸



Fig. 1 – Albanian student Lekë Seriani (Nik Xhelilaj) and the wife of a Czech policeman (Anna Geislerová) engage in a doomed love story.

Lekë's experiences in Česky Šternberk are guided by four voices of authority, all of whom are male and who reflect the ethnic composition of the film's characters—three are Czech and one is Albanian. Upon arriving in town, he is informed by the hotel manager that, as a foreigner, he must register with the police, and that he must see the local police chief, Mr. Schneider. Having sought out the commissioner in his villa—where he first interacts with the older man's wife, Lekë ultimately encounters the officer in a local pub, where he is drinking with friends. Mr. Schneider condescendingly informs the young man that since he is from a socialist country, there is no need for registration. The older man, perhaps out of deference to his governmental position, lauds the friendship among socialist nations. In a later encounter, Lekë contacts Mr. Schneider when he finds a man injured from a motorcycle accident on the side of the road. By the time he and Mrs. Schneider arrive and meet up with the commissioner, the injured man and his cycle have disappeared. Angrily, the officer chides the youth for having

⁸ The Polish protagonist of *Colonel Bunker*, a pianist, is based on a Hungarian musician in Albania who was ostracized from the music world of Tirana and sent into internal exile. Another film, Adela Peeva's *Divorce, Albanian Style* (2007), is a Bulgarian documentary on the plight of foreign wives in Albania that provides intimate portraits of a number of women who suffered under the Hoxha regime.

made a false claim. Mrs. Schneider privately informs Lekë that her husband's behavior constitutes a form of cover up, and that such behavior is commonplace. The second figure of authority is that of the director of the ESO factory. He is the spokesperson for official doctrine, and stresses that the documentary the young filmmakers are producing must convey the gains of the communist state. His goal is to put communism on display, showing the quality of the motorcycles produced and the diligence of the dedicated workers. However, the hot and frenzied workplace that the young filmmakers had visited on their first visit no longer exists; the director has ordered it cleaned and spruced up. And in its present state, it no longer conveys a visual sense of the intense labor of the welders and riveters. It is the plant director, moreover, who refuses to allow the students to include a sequence depicting a young woman with a wheelbarrow—whom the viewer later learns to be the daughter of a count—, thereby denying the depiction of any figures from the former upper classes. Finally, the plant director is a voice of morality, threatening to denounce Lekë to the Albanian embassy and inform FAMU of the indiscrete footage the young men have filmed a young woman swimming nude. In Prague, Lekë meets the third voice of authority, who is arguably the most menacing. He is summoned to meet with the Albanian ambassador, who informs him that the Eastern Bloc has betrayed the ideals of Marxism-Leninism, and that all students are being repatriated to Albania. Lekë will be allowed to complete his studies, but upon receipt of his diploma, he must report immediately to Albania's new film studio⁹. The ambassador makes it clear that dire consequences would befall the young man should he not return. The final figure of authority, and the most benign, is that of Count Šternberk (portrayed by Italian actor Michele Placido), a member of the family who has guarded the imposing castle overlooking the town for centuries, and who guides visitors through the historical site. Although far more of a compassionate figure than the other males, the count, nevertheless, has a powerful influence in the young man's return to his homeland. Count Šternberk is a stalwart advocate of loyalty to one's homeland and mew his family has held onto the castle despite numerous political transformations over the years. Although the count urges Lekë to follow his heart, his advice is still clear.¹⁰

The very title, *The Sadness of Mrs. Schneider*, draws attention away from the character of Lekë, who is definitively the film's central focus and from whose point of view the diegetic realm is conceived, and displaces it onto the young man's love interest. There is, however, a

⁹ The Kinostudio complex referred to by the ambassador was actually opened in 1952, and its first professionals had also been trained abroad, this time in Moscow. While the studio's initial efforts consisted of documentaries and newsreels, a trend that had continued from 1947 onward, it had moved into the production of feature films in 1958. Following his repatriation to Albania in 1961, director Piro Milkani worked first as a cameraman on several feature films.

¹⁰ Of particular consequence in *The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider* is not only the portrayal of a historical moment, but also the film's very language dynamics. For the most part, it is a Czech-language film, which contains a number of sequences, including a key conversation at the Albanian Embassy in Prague, spoken in Albanian. Its lead actor, Nik Xhelilaj, was forced to learn his extensive lines in Czech, a language he did not speak. Xhelilaj would repeat this process two years later with German, in Johannes Naber's *Der Albaner/Shqiptari/The Albanian* (2010), the story of a young Albanian migrant living on the margins of German society. This recalls a somewhat reverse process from a decade earlier in which Polish actress Anna Nehrebecka learned Albanian phonetically from a Polish woman, who had married an Albanian and had lived in the country for decades. Director Piro Milkani, on the other hand, was fluent in Czech, the result of both his studies in Prague four decades earlier and his tenure as Albanian Ambassador to the Czech Republic from 1998–2002. The extent to which the experience in Czechoslovakia impacted Piro Milkani on a long-term basis is evidenced by the impressive fluency he has maintained for some 60 years in the Czech language. Finally, it must be noted that the film's language dynamics are, thus, the opposite of most other co-productions, in which the primary language is Albanian, regardless of the production partners.

level of ambivalence in this apparent shift of perspective. Although the film clearly depicts the Schneiders' marriage as alienating, the woman's sadness is most clearly articulated by Lekë in his final talk with Count Šternberk. Thus, it is the male protagonist who most clearly and in greatest detail explains that his lover is ready to venture off to Albania with him. Although a number of sequences in which both characters appear make Mrs. Schneider's feeling for Lekë evident, it is the male protagonist alone who is the primary spokesperson for feminine desire.

The decline of the Schneiders' marriage is analogous to the state of affairs in the Eastern Bloc, particularly in what concerns Albania, which itself is initiating a process of divorce and a remarriage of sorts. Mr. Schneider as a police commissioner stands in for the orthodox Eastern Bloc-*lire*, Soviet perspective. His wife desires to separate from him out of a feeling of idealistic love for the younger man. Albania's ongoing rupture with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact nations is, as well, motivated by an ideal, that of the Marxism-Leninism that Hoxha feels Stalin's successors have betrayed. Lekë has indicated to his lover that life in Albania is different; it lacks much of what Czechoslovakia has to offer. She would be sacrificing her world for a much more restricted life, with considerably less freedom. As Lekë stresses in his conversation with Count Šternberk, were he to remain in Czechoslovakia with his love, he would put his family in Albania in grave political danger. The young man's description of Albania is not overstated. The Albania to which he returns is strikingly different from the one he left behind. The country's isolation is constantly increasing, and the tumultuous events of 1961 are but a portent of what will transpire over the course of the next three decades.

The film's closing titles provide information of events subsequent to the diegetic time of the film. We learn that the film made by the three students can to this day be viewed in the Czech National Film Archives. The titles further mention that, sometime following Lekë's departure, Mrs. Schneider left town, never to be heard of again. Finally we are apprised that only after the fall of the Berlin Wall was Lekë Seriani—and by implication, Piro Milkani, was able to return to Český Šternberk.¹¹

A Portrait of a Golden Age

As explained by Richard Komárek, director of a five-part documentary/reality show entitled *Golden Youth* (2015a), the title of his own series refers to young urbanites in Prague, oblivious to their own privilege, whose primary goal in life is to have fun and enjoy what the city has to offer. Derived from the expression *Jeunesse dorée*, which was a term employed during the French Revolution and recouped in post-war France, "golden youth" refers to the condition of young people pampered by the big city, who live a socially irresponsible lifestyle. In Prague, the golden youth are extravagant and impractical, never working at a job they do not enjoy, unlike their counterparts throughout the country (Komárek 2015b). The Milkani's film transports the term back some five decades, to a Czechoslovakia that had not yet seen Prague Spring. For Lekë, who comes from Europe's most remote and poorest country, the freedom of student life implies pleasurable moments replete with sexual possibilities. Prague is open and sophisticated. But unlike today's youth, Lekë finds the sense of adventure that characterizes his own golden days in the small town as well as in the big city. Even Český Šternberk presents opportunities absent in the restricted realm of Albania. He finds, for instance, himself immersed in pop music that would be unimaginable in Albania. Throughout the film, Pavlina Filipovsá's 1960 hit, "Včera neděle byla" ("Yesterday was Sunday") is heard, be it over the opening an

¹¹ The pianist performing is actually Margarita Kristidhi, wife of Piro Milkani and mother of Eno Milkani.

closing credits, or in sequences in which the young protagonists party and dance. Even at an elegant soirée that Lekë attends during a visit to Prague, the tune is played by a classical pianist.¹¹ During his final meeting with Count Šternberk, Lekë realizes that he must abandon the good life that has been his in Czechoslovakia and return to Albania. He receives as a gift from the Count a book written by the Czech poet and journalist Stanislav Kostka Neumann, which details the author's visit during WWI to Elbasan, Albania. As the Count explains, Neumann later became a fervent communist. Lekë thus departs from Czechoslovakia with a token not of his golden days, but rather, of the orthodox Marxism to which he will return.

If one conflates the protagonist Lekë Seriani with his real-life prototype, it becomes clear that the cosmopolitan realm of Czechoslovakia would never be totally lost on Piro Milkani. Notwithstanding the orthodoxy of Kinostudio and the ideological dogma that characterized its films, Milkani was one of Albania's directors who found freedom in restriction. His works made during the communist period were imbued with a genuine creativity that transcended the local context of propaganda and paranoia. Despite losing the energy of Prague, Milkani brought home and held private the openness he had experienced abroad. When totalitarianism collapsed, Milkani drew upon his cosmopolitan education to embark on a career in diplomacy, and to become a humanistic as well as a political ambassador, one who could celebrate the cultural heritage of his homeland and of his country of education.



Fig. 2 – Students Karel (Ondrej Moravec) and Lekë (Nik Xhelilaj) preparing to make a film in Cesky Sternberk.

The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider attests to the human toll of social transformation. Despite the official stances assumed by the plant director and the local police commissioner, the Czechoslovakia that Lekë comes to know is replete with human warmth, a sense of hope, and a vision that transcends official doctrine. Rules exist, but can be bent, and one is free to dance to the rhythms of the world. Yet Lekë displays both maturity and a sense of priority. Indeed, he basks in the sexual freedom so alien to his homeland, but, nevertheless, he finds true love. He is free to critique the Albanian regime, yet in the end he

knows that he must return there, if just for his family's safety. Albania is textualized as a dictatorship in Lekë's candid conversation with Count Šternberk and much more forcefully through the ominous words of the Albanian ambassador. The film, however, does not dwell on this. Rather, it shows a young man discovering a world with new possibilities, all the while knowing that the openness he has experienced will remain, for many years to come, a secret part of his life. For Piro Milkani, the film nostalgically evokes an apprenticeship, one that rendered him the cultural cosmopolitan that he is today. *The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider*, moreover, echoes back seamlessly to the processes at play in *Face to Face*. Hence, the nostalgia present is not only a longing for a lost era, but of equal importance, it celebrates the true creativity of Kinostudio. *The Sorrow of Mrs. Schneider* is a tribute to the human need to live, explore, and create.

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