

## OFFICIAL SELECTION

**Cold Souls – a comic look at existential pain**

Veronika Bednářová

*Cold Souls*, which was a big hit at Sundance this year, screens today in the Official Selection. French writer-director **Sophie Barthes**'s debut feature is a surreal comedy about an actor (Paul Giamatti) whose intense rendition of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* is so mentally draining that he decides to take the radical step of freezing his soul to avoid a nervous breakdown.

**How challenging was it getting your first feature off the ground?**

As a first-time director, the biggest challenge is to protect your vision and remain true to yourself. Both writing and directing come with their challenges and complications. I enjoy very much the initial phase of writing, the solitary part, when you have an idea and slowly develop it into a screenplay, observing the idea growing and changing. It's emotionally and intellectually stimulating. Then you have to share your script with the cinema industry and you get notes and comments. This is when things start to become complicated, especially for a first time feature director. I like the analogy with painting. No one would tell a painter to add some blue or red on his canvas but for some reason everyone seems entitled to tell a screenwriter what the characters should be doing or saying.

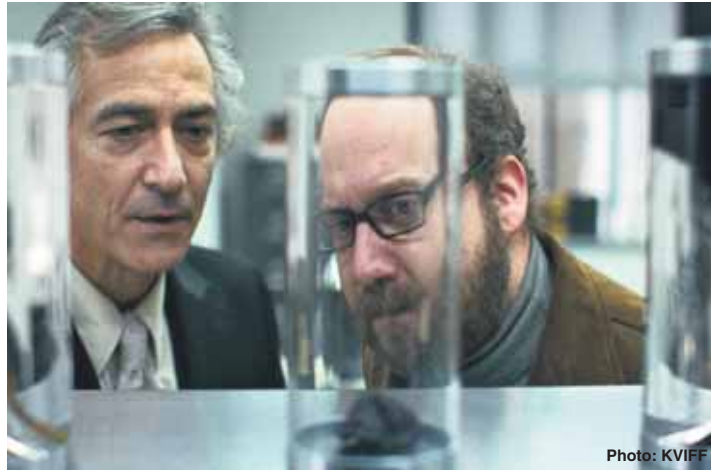


Photo: KVIFF

**Why did you choose Paul Giamatti for the lead?**

There is something painful and soulful about him, a sort of vulnerability and melancholy that make him very funny. I think Jerry Lewis said, "The premise of all comedy is a man in trouble." Paul conveys the sense that his soul is in constant turmoil. So I thought, "What if this essential quality, this soulfulness, is removed and taken away from him? What would he be left with?" That seemed very comic. I also really wanted to see Paul Giamatti play Uncle Vanya after seeing the Louis Malle film *Vanya on 42nd Street* with Wallace Shawn and Julianne Moore.

**From the film, it's obvious you know your Russian literature...**

I have a passion for Russian literature and theater. Chekhov is by far my favorite playwright. There is something so delicate in the Chekhovian tone, a sadness infused with absurd moments of comedy, the quiet sense of despair, the nostalgia, the hopelessness... In France

we are very fond of Russian literature. I think we share a common sensibility when it comes to poetry, literature and theater.

**What filmmakers have inspired you?**

I think that Woody Allen has a one-bedroom apartment in my subconscious! I'm very influenced by his work. I remember seeing *The Purple Rose of Cairo* when I was a child and I couldn't believe that cinema could be so magical. I don't get tired of watching his films. It's the wit and the pure intelligence which emanate from his dialogues. He is also one of the few filmmakers able to write such interesting female characters. Ingmar Bergman also writes incredible female characters. Bergman films have a dreamlike and hypnotic quality; they connect directly with the unconscious rather than reason.

*Cold Souls* screens today at 8pm in the Thermal's Grand Hall and tomorrow at 10am in the Espace Dorleans Cinema. ■

## OFFICIAL SELECTION

**Journeying to the roof of the world in Himalaya, Where the Wind Dwells**

Will Tizard

Korean films have proven strong festival contenders in recent years, and they generally offer surprises as well as bold characters and stories. Even fans of these might find the setting for Korean Official Selection entry *Himalaya, Where the Wind Dwells* unexpected, however.

In the stark, dusty, rarefied world of Asia's backbone mountain range, we find the lead character wandering, as if possessed by demons, in street shoes and a suit. Altitude sickness brings him down but he's fortunate enough to be discovered by local peasants, who nurse him back to health. For actor Choi Min-sik, who also appeared as the protagonist in director **Jeon Soo-il**'s 2003 film *Oldboy*, it's a role that clearly demands much.

He and fifty-year-old Soo-il journeyed for weeks to a remote village in the world's highest mountain range, reaching into new filmmaking territory as well. In *Himalaya*, the original *auteur* moves away from his previous work to create an almost documentary film about a journey with an uncertain goal.

He says that the inspiration for his latest film came during a bout of all-night drinking, after which he decided to embark on a journey to get as far as he could from his daily grind. "I wanted to run away



Photo: KVIFF

and be on my own because I was sickened by my life at that time. I got all the way to Bangkok and saw a signpost saying Kathmandu. I wondered what it would be like to go there."

This resulted in his discovery of the shepherd village where *Himalaya* is set: "It felt like the end of the world," he says. Inspired by this journey, he wrote the screenplay and set out to get Choi Min-sik for the part of a poker-faced tough guy.

"He seemed ideal. Before the shooting we agreed that his performance should be as sober as possible, without unnecessary overacting," says Soo-il. Min-sik's character (also called Choi) is a Korean businessman who quits his job and sets off on a journey into the wilderness. He carries with him the ashes of a Nepalese laborer who had worked in his brother's factory.

"It is just an excuse to run away for him," says the director. Choi meets the deceased man's family and is reluctant to tell the man's wife

that her husband is dead. The first dialog comes well into the film, and until that point all you can hear are howling winds and a gloomy double-bass.

The film is distinguished by Soo-il's deliberately gritty and realistic approach. "I wanted to evoke the feeling that I was on a journey with the character and that's why I used a hand-held camera. I got closer to a documentary style," he says.

The film was shot chronologically and most of the crew had never been in such a rough environment. Apart from Choi, all the other characters are played by the inhabitants of the native village. But it's the wilderness that's the real star, says the director. "To me, the landscape is another character forcing the protagonist to reinvent his purpose in life."

*Himalaya, Where the Wind Dwells* screens today at 5pm at the Thermal's Grand Hall and on July 10 at 1pm at the Espace Dorleans Cinema. ■

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