

RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Employing his signature blend of analytical detachment, wry humour and unsentimental compassion, Nuri Bilge Ceylan tells the story of a young man with uncertain prospects reluctantly returning to the town where he grew up, in the complex, elegant *The Wild Pear Tree*

By Geoff Andrew

Clocking in at just over three hours, *The Wild Pear Tree* – Nuri Bilge Ceylan's eagerly awaited follow-up to the 2014 Palme d'Or-winner, *Winter Sleep* – takes a similarly leisurely, discursive approach to narrative. As with all his work, from modest early features like *The Small Town* (*Kasaba*, 1997), *Clouds of May* (1999) and *Uzak* (2002) to the first of his longer, more novelistic movies, *Once upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011), the new film tends in tone and content towards the quietly intimate, with 'big' dramatic scenes being conspicuously absent. Consequently, for all its length and seriousness of purpose, it never feels portentous or overblown; rather, its nuanced observations, true to form, suggest the epithet 'Chekhovian'.

It centres on Sinan (Aydin Dogu Demirkol), a literature graduate who returns from his studies in the coastal city of Çanakkale to his parents' home in the small rural town of Çan, where he hopes to raise enough cash to publish a book of essays and short stories – or what he describes as a "quirky auto-fiction meta-novel" – inspired by his barely concealed dislike for the region and its inhabitants. Sinan is constantly distracted by the fact that his teacher father Idris (Murat Cemcir) is up to his neck in gambling debts, causing his mother (Bennu Yıldırım) and sister to become reluctantly accustomed to making do without food or electricity. So Sinan, unsure whether he'll find success as a writer or be reduced, after army service, to teaching somewhere way out east, wanders around town and the surrounding countryside, visiting his grandparents, encountering old friends, looking for funding for his book, and becoming increasingly disenchanting both about his father and about life in the sticks.

To use the kind of definition its protagonist might deploy, *The Wild Pear Tree* might be described as an extended picaresque conversation piece, though that risks making it sound episodic and incoherent, which it isn't. Talky in places though it may be, the conversations are rewarding not only in terms of the subjects discussed – which range from the mundane to the unashamedly philosophical – but in the way they illuminate the various characters. If Sinan and his parents are the subtlest creations on view, the many minor characters are so deftly drawn as to be immediately intelligible, rounded and credible.

Thematically, the movie is Ceylan to the core, developing ideas that have coursed through his work since his earliest films: the tensions and comforts of family life, the contrast between rural and urban customs, the

importance and difficulty of being honest with others and oneself, how to find one's path in life, how to take responsibility and do the right thing, how to face up to one's own insignificance in the larger scheme of things. All this and more is dealt with, but with a pleasingly light touch; even an extended discussion between Sinan and two imams is imbued with irony and wit, and speaks volumes about the protagonist, his ambitions and his attitude to the world around him.

If, in terms of pace and duration, *The Wild Pear Tree* resembles its two immediate predecessors, its narrative situates it closer to his first three features; in particular it might be seen, in certain regards, as an expansive, highly imaginative reworking of *Clouds of May*, which followed a filmmaker returning to his small provincial hometown to make a movie. Visually, too, it has a limpid, elegant simplicity reminiscent of Ceylan's earlier work, while the sparing but effective use of a Bach passacaglia is in keeping with the faintly melancholy mood. The performances are superb throughout, none more so than Demirkol – a stand-up comedian who had never acted before – as the less than wholly sympathetic Sinan, and Cemcir, known for comic roles on Turkish television, as the feckless Idris. The scenes involving these two constitute the emotional core of the film; few filmmakers are as adept as Ceylan at dissecting the flawed male psyche. Again writing in collaboration with his wife Ebru, he has created a film that is unusually personal yet widely relevant in its sharp insights into human behaviour. The distinctive blend of analytical detachment, wry humour and unsentimental compassion that is his creative signature has once more produced a remarkably complex and convincing portrait, both of an individual and of a society.

The following interview took place during the BFI London Film Festival in October.

Geoff Andrew: How did the film come about?

Nuri Bilge Ceylan: By chance, really. I was working on another project with my wife. It was summer, there was a religious festival, and we escaped the crowds by going to my hometown, where I had many enjoyable conversations with a guy who's married to a cousin of mine. Though he's a teacher and very interesting company, I realised that he's not really respected in the village. It was the same for my father, who was also a teacher: in the countryside, if you're a stranger and in any way different, people often make fun of you. I told



BURDEN OF DREAMS
In *The Wild Pear Tree*, Sinan (Aydin Dogu Demirkol, below) finishes his studies in the coastal city of Çanakkale and returns to his rural hometown of Çan, revisiting old friends and wandering through the surrounding countryside (right), which is filmed with an elegant simplicity reminiscent of Ceylan's earlier work



Ebru I was interested in making a film about such a person; then I remembered this guy had a son, Akin, who'd recently finished his studies in Çanakkale. So I visited Akin and told him of my idea for the film, and because he was a journalist – he's also written two books – I asked him to write down and send me some memories of his father. Ebru and I returned to work on the other project, but after a few months Akin sent me an email, with 80 pages of reminiscences. And I liked what he wrote so much that I decided to make this film first, and invited him to work with us on the script.

GA: So this is not one of your Chekhov films...

NBC: [Laughing] Not this time. Though there are quotations, of course.

GA: What was your prime concern: the portrait of Sinan, his relationship with his father, or the picture of that rural small-town world?

NBC: Akin's text had begun by describing his childhood. It was when he came up from the country and stayed in my office for a month that we decided to focus not on the father but the son; I'd wanted for some time to make a film about young people in Turkey, and this could be a way to do it. So we thought of the kinds of situations which a young man who wants to become a writer might encounter in the country; Sinan is actually quite like Akin, which meant I could ask him about certain details. We don't really know whether Sinan is passionate about writing, or simply using it as a way to get this place where he's grown up out of his system. Probably both.

GA: Akin also plays an imam, Veysel.

NBC: Yes. At the last minute, the actor cast as that character didn't turn up, so I told Akin he was playing that role. I felt he could do it because we'd written the script together, so he was familiar with the dialogue.

GA: Did you also draw on yourself and your own experiences?

NBC: Definitely. I've used many things from my life, my father's life and sometimes from Ebru's life. But mostly it draws on Akin's. Like Sinan, he studied to be a teacher but didn't get his qualifications for some years, and he

was worried about being sent to teach in eastern Turkey. In fact, Akin had to go off and take the exam during our shoot, just when I needed him.

GA: Sinan is quite naive, condescending, judgemental. Did you worry audiences would find him too unsympathetic?

NBC: For me, it's important that viewers should be unsure whether they like or dislike him; the same goes for his father – indeed, all the characters. We can't tell if they're good or bad. That's like life. We may not like someone, then they do or say something that makes us begin to like them a little. Or vice versa. In Hollywood films we're expected to like or dislike a character immediately, but I'm trying to make films where the contradictions in characters prevent the audience from making easy judgements. I'm trying to find out what it is to be alive, to be human, and I do that by thinking about what I observe in real life.

GA: That's particularly true of Sinan's father.

NBC: There are several layers to Idris's personality, so at one point he'll seem sympathetic, at other times irritating. Sinan feels very humiliated by his father's gambling, and his carefree attitude to life. He has debts he apparently doesn't care about, he always seems happy: the unbearable lightness of being! Idris's character came from Akin's father. What I knew of him I liked, but I saw just one side of him; he had, for example, lost a house because of his gambling addiction. That's one reason the villagers didn't take to him – that and his interest in things they simply weren't interested in.

GA: It's also a film about Turkey today. Most obviously, you have Sinan laughing as a policeman friend boasts about beating up students; but there are other subtle details that might be seen as political.

NBC: I wanted to show what young people have to deal with in their lives. All the situations in which Sinan finds himself were taken from the experiences of young people living in Turkey today. The phone conversation with the policeman came from something I myself witnessed. The film is about the sort of things faced by someone who

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PHOTOGRAPH BY NURI BILGE CEYLAN

wants to become a teacher of literature, and many such people end up having to take jobs in the police.

But Sinan's response to the policeman is also partly about showing off, and partly an expression of sympathy for a friend. It's not so much that he agrees with his friend's sentiments; he just doesn't want to offend him. Much of what Sinan says, in his condescending way, is him trying to protect himself, he's asserting his adulthood, his importance, by implying he's superior to other people. Many of us do that when we're young. When I was in London many years ago, I worked at a Wimpy bar, and I would speak to the manager, who hadn't had a great education, in such a way that he couldn't understand me; it was my way of trying to make him respect me. Often, at that age, conversation has little to do with expressing reality; it's about getting an advantage over someone.

So you might say it's a political film, since it reflects aspects of today's Turkey, but that's really just the background. For me, any political elements are there because they illuminate the characters. So, while the long conversation with the imams may say something about current attitudes to religion, it's more to do with Sinan trying to get something back from the imams. It also shows that despite his own frequent criticisms, he won't allow others to say anything against his father. He's like his mother, who has her own complaints about her husband but won't let Sinan go too far in that direction.

GA: The film has an audacious approach to time: some extended scenes play out in real time; elsewhere, cuts and ellipses suddenly take us forward in unexpected, even disorienting ways; and a strange, brief interlude stands in for Sinan's military service.

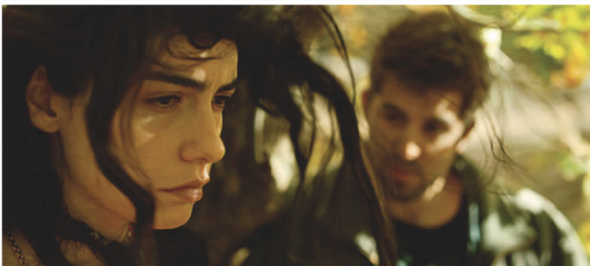
NBC: This is hard to talk about, as the decisions involved were instinctive. But for the military service, I needed a time lapse because Sinan's change of attitude, arising from a guilty conscience toward his father, required the passing of time. He went into the army harbouring feelings of guilt which he'd never felt before – that can change a person. I know, because of my own relationship with my father; there comes a time when you realise there are things you haven't really understood. I myself needed both a guilty conscience and time – which for me was my military service – for there to be changes in my attitude towards him.

GA: The film is unusually discursive in dealing with such a wide range of characters and situations.

NBC: True, but all those different things are connected. We worked hard on that aspect of the script. The first rough draft would have resulted in a film of almost five hours, but some elements in it weren't really connected, so I removed them. So now, for instance, the jeweller we see briefly in an early scene is mentioned later with regard to another significant character. But I don't like to make those links too explicit. If audiences discover things slowly, it's better, it makes them more active as viewers. In Turkey, quite a few people who liked the film saw it a second time; its structure, with all those connections, almost encourages people to watch it again. It's probably why my longer movies probably work better after their initial release, because people can watch DVDs more than once.

GA: As always, it's visually very beautiful...

NBC: But this time around, I was less bothered about that. For some scenes where the characters are walking



around, I used a small Osmo camera; the quality isn't quite as good, but I wanted to be constantly with them. And I didn't want them just to be talking in a room all the time. As scripted, the long scene of Sinan with the imams took place at the coffee shop, but when we came to shoot it, I realised it wouldn't work, so I changed the script so that it started at an apple tree, then they continued speaking as they walked to the coffee shop. Actually, we couldn't find a good apple tree, so we had to use a walnut tree and hope nobody noticed!

GA: Did you worry about that scene's length?

NBC: Yes, it's 20 minutes. But it's the unique selling point of the film. That scene probably feels longer if you don't know Turkish and have to read all the subtitles. But for me it's quite important because it deals with different attitudes to religion: one character is a reformist, for example, and another quite agnostic. One more aspect of Sinan's life in the countryside.

GA: You strike me as something of a perfectionist. Would you agree?

NBC: [Laughing] Well, when you know it's possible to make something better, it's hard not to try and do that. ☺

i **The Wild Pear Tree** is released in UK cinemas on 30 November and is reviewed on page 77

WHERE THE HEART IS
In *The Wild Pear Tree*, directed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan (opposite), Sinan (top) visits his old flame Hatice (Hazar Ergüçlü, middle and above)