



Sideshow / Janus Films

NURAY (Merve Dizdar, left) and **SAMET** (Deniz Celiloglu) are fellow teachers in a rural area who develop a personal relationship.

MOVIE REVIEW

A bitter Turkish drama lingers on

Set in a snowy town of secrets, 'About Dry Grasses' is a complex study of self-delusion.

By **TIM GRIERSON**

When we first encounter Samet, the solitary protagonist of Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan's superb drama "About Dry Grasses," he's miserable. Being dropped off in what appears to be the middle of nowhere, he trudges through deep snow, the wind howling, not a soul in sight. Samet is heading back to work after winter holiday — back to the job he dislikes in a small village he loathes. Over the course of the film's next three hours, he will rarely be less miserable. The only question is how many others he will drag down with him.

Ceylan, the celebrated auteur whose 2014 film "Winter Sleep" won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, specializes in disenfranchised individuals struggling against despair, their bleak circumstance set against Turkey's gorgeous landscapes, the surrounding beauty mocking their anguish. But even by Ceylan's stringent standards, "About Dry Grasses" is a dour and

enveloping affair, featuring one of his most complicated and, ultimately, despicable protagonists. That isn't initially apparent, but it's bracingly clear by the end.

Played by Deniz Celiloglu, Samet resides in Incesu, a sleepy, impoverished community in East Anatolia, where he's an art teacher at the local school, alongside his easygoing housemate Kenan (Musab Ekici). Samet has one semester left before completing his mandatory four-year stint, and he longs to be transferred to the far-more cosmopolitan Istanbul and be free of a place he uncharitably refers to as a dump.

There are small consolations. Samet is charmed by Sevim (Ece Bagci), a clever, vivacious student with whom he shares a conspiratorial bond. Quickly, though, we notice their flirtatious rapport, their bodies close as they walk down the hallway, Samet later giving her a gift of a compact. Ceylan doesn't comment on these moments — instead, he moves on, letting them linger in our memory, gnawing away like a secret we wish we didn't know. But secrets have consequences, and in "About Dry Grasses," the repercussions of Samet and Sevim's chumminess will soon have a chill-

ing ripple effect.

This is only one of the film's two major plot strands. The other gets underway once Samet meets Nuray (Merve Dizdar), a fellow teacher with whom he's set up on a blind date. Friendly but guarded, Nuray lost her right leg in a terrorist attack — just one example of the fears threading through Turkey's subconscious at a time of brutal authoritarian rule and Kurdish bids for independence. Samet and Nuray hit it off, but he later suggests to his roommate Kenan that he should court her — after all, they're both part of the minority religious sect the Alawites. As for Samet, he seems to believe in nothing except himself.

So begins a tense pseudo-romantic triangle in which the three of them start spending time together, Samet silently envious of the attention Nuray shows Kenan. Meanwhile, Samet encourages young Sevim's crush, while insisting that he's uninterested in the smart, independent (and age-appropriate) Nuray. Is his reticence an indication of his desire to be in situations he can control?

"I still haven't figured people out," Samet laments at one point, but it's likely his

'About Dry Grasses'

Not rated
In Turkish with English subtitles

Running time: 3 hours, 17 minutes

Playing: Laemmle's Royal Theatre, West Los Angeles

concern is less one of empathy than it is emotional domination. Known for his slow-burn dramas, Ceylan lights a long fuse that commences with a scandal at Samet's school but will eventually involve his friendship with Kenan and Nuray. Samet is a man who has so little in his life — the hope that he'll eventually return to Istanbul, Sevim's pure affection — that when those kernels are threatened, he reacts in unexpected, malicious ways.

Ceylan's films enrapture on the big screen, where the vastness of Anatolia's barren, majestic exteriors dwarf his downtrodden characters' personal dramas. Immersively shot in widescreen by cinematographers Cevahir Sahin and Kursat Uresin, with an emphasis on static camera setups that allow the

characters to engage in lengthy conversations that often end up as debates, "About Dry Grasses" traps Samet both at school and the world, a sullen man aggrieved that he must endure the indignities of his small-town existence. But actor Celiloglu keeps challenging our attitude toward Samet, his sad smile and vulnerable eyes occasionally hinting at a buried soulfulness.

Adding to that sense is a series of striking photos Ceylan infrequently inserts into the film — images that Samet, an amateur photographer, takes of locals, which convey a poetry that belies his stoic exterior. Is he a misanthrope? Or merely misunderstood?

Like a rich novel, "About Dry Grasses" takes its time fleshing out its central players, who are each grappling with their own metaphorical purgatories. Ceylan, who co-wrote the script, has a Chekhovian fascination with protagonists weighed down by fate. The effortlessly orchestrated dialogue scenes are riveting, but what's remarkable is that, no matter how talkative Samet and his cohorts are, they often don't say what they mean. The characters argue politics, worldviews or how to handle the disturbing accusations

leveled against Samet and Kenan at school, but their rhetorical jousting masks unspoken resentments and disappointments.

"I'm not overly fond of anything," Samet admits, a rare moment of candor in a movie about people who have learned to muddle through, the relentless snow outside their window seemingly smothering the spark within them. When "About Dry Grasses" premiered at Cannes, Dizdar took home Best Actress, a testament to a muted performance that nonetheless burrows into your psyche, just as Nuray quietly gets her hooks into Samet. Because of Nuray's disability, audiences might assume she will be the film's sympathetic saint and moral compass, but nothing in Ceylan's construction is so simplistic. (If you need proof, look no further than a shocking narrative flourish near the end of "About Dry Grasses," which finds Ceylan actively interrogating his own meticulously rendered character study.)

Once Samet develops feelings for Nuray — or, at least, appears to develop them — their relationship becomes one of seductive verbal combat. But Nuray is not so easily wooed, and Dizdar brings a grounded intelligence, the character perhaps recognizing Samet's darker agenda while not entirely caring.

As Samet navigates his final semester, winter giving way to summer, he holds his true intentions close to the vest, his outward signs of cordiality undercut by ugly outbursts when he feels betrayed. Celiloglu lets those contradictions be a mystery, but only those foolish enough to seek out the best in people will be unable to solve the riddle. With an off-hand deftness, Ceylan lays bare the sort of master operator who hides in plain sight, skilled at ensnaring unwitting victims.

The film ends with a plaintive voice-over from Samet that's so double-edged it's practically a critique of the cinematic device's emotional manipulation. This pathetic wretch longs to escape to Istanbul, where he can be around the worldly types he prefers. Anyone unlucky enough to cross his path in "About Dry Grasses" will no doubt be happy to see him go.

Iconic theater in new hands

[Village Theater, from E1] the country continue to face financial headwinds, brought together a diverse array of Oscar-winning filmmakers.

The new owners of the theater include such directors as Christopher Nolan, J.J. Abrams, Guillermo del Toro, Christopher McQuarrie, Judd Apatow, Damien Chazelle, Steven Spielberg, Chris Columbus, Bradley Cooper, Alfonso Cuarón, Hannah Fidell, Alejandro González Iñárritu, James Gunn, Sian Heder, Rian Johnson, Gil Kenan, Karyn Kusama, Justin Lin, Phil Lord, David Lowery, Chris Miller, Todd Phillips, Gina Prince-Bythewood, Reitman, Jay Roach, Seth Rogen, Emma Seligman, Emma Thomas, Denis Villeneuve, Lulu Wang and Chloé Zhao.

The theater — which boasts a large auditorium seating more than 1,300 people, with a 70mm-capable screen and upgraded sound system — will showcase a mixture of first-run films and repertory programming selected by the theater's owners.

Several of the filmmakers, including Lin, Prince-Bythewood, Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Farris, Brad Silberling and Alexander Payne, are alumni of UCLA, which sits just a block away from the theater.

Inside the house, the directors plan to showcase artifacts from their personal collections, including props, wardrobe items and film prints. In time, there are plans to add a restaurant, bar and gallery, but the theater will remain open throughout.

Reitman spoke to The Times by phone Wednesday about the inspiration behind the deal, the state of moviegoing and what the future holds for the Village Westwood.

Long before you were a director, you grew up going to the Village Theater.



EVAN AGOSTINI DIVISION VIA AP
JASON REITMAN, director of 2007's "Juno."

What are your early memories of being there?

I genuinely remember lining up around that corner for as long as my father was taking me to movies. That was my introduction to the moviegoing experience: getting there early, lining up around the corner and feeling like I was part of a community of people who loved movies, who could not wait to see a film on opening night and who knew that the conversation before and after the movie was almost as important as watching the movie itself.

A lot of filmmakers clearly have a special place in their heart for this theater given how many stepped up to be part of this. When did the conversation start about taking the Village over?

What's incredible to me is how quickly this all came together.

I heard that the theater was up for sale last summer, and I remembered what happened to the National Theatre just a few blocks away [which closed in 2007 and was demolished]. I also heard that one of the bidders was interested in turning it into a live musical theater venue and another bidder was interested in turning the interior into retail.

I immediately put in a bid, and I started reaching out to directors I knew. And the response was swift — and it was positive. I think

the first couple directors I spoke to were Rian Johnson and Guillermo del Toro, who both immediately said they were in. And the more directors I asked, the more positive feedback I got and the more I kept hearing the same thing, which was that we unknowingly had a common vision to collectively own a movie theater that could serve as a community hub for everybody who loves movies, a place where you could grab coffee or a bite before or a drink after and love movies in every way.

This has obviously been a tough time for many movie theaters particularly in L.A. and some, like the ArcLight and the Landmark, have not survived. At the same time, we're also seeing new signs of life in the local moviegoing scene with theaters like the Egyptian, Vidlots and Quentin Tarantino's Vista Theater and the announcement of a new film festival. How do you see your purchase of the Village in the context of all that?

You know, we spent the last few years inside and we're all relearning why we want to go out, why we want to watch sports, why we want to go out and dance. Live-streaming has made it effortless to watch things at home. But in doing so, we've lost something really important, which is the habitual experience of going to the movies and watching them together.

There's a reason why Christmas is the biggest moviegoing day of the year. It's that day that you're with your family and you need to find an activity that you can do together no matter what. Movies truly bring us together, and I think this is a great moment to shine the light on how fun it is to go to the movies and how important films are for community building.

That community building is particularly hard in a city like L.A. but the Village has been an integral part of downtown Westwood for a long time.

You know, there's something in the name: Westwood is a village and this theater is called the Village. I think that's what we all yearn for. No matter how

technologically advanced we get, no matter how much we crave the city center, there's a part of us that always yearns for a village. This is a village for movies.

With so many filmmakers involved and such a diverse group, how do you envision the theater's repertory programming evolving?

I think the programming is going to be a reflection of the directors, and I'm really proud of the fact that there's a very cross-generational group that represents every genre of filmmaking. This is a movie theater that is co-owned by Christopher Nolan and Emma Seligman, Steven Spielberg and Lulu Wang.

We want this to be a showcase for first-run movies on one of the biggest screens in the country with the best picture and best sound. And simultaneously, a place where you can see indie film, international film, rep-house film, programmed by one of your favorite directors.

So what happens in the months to come? Obviously the theater will remain open but it sounds like there are pretty ambitious plans to remake it with a restaurant and bar.

[Dryly] Well, as you know, renovations in Los Angeles are easy. Construction is a snap.

The theater is going to remain open for the foreseeable future, as we finish putting together plans, but things are already in the works.

We have an exciting vision that includes dining, drinking, moviegoing, gallery viewing, and programming of new and old films, and we cannot wait to share that with everybody.

Do those plans involve acquiring other property adjacent to the theater or nearby?

[Laughs] Do you know how hard it was to pull together a group of 30 people to buy this one building? Right now I honestly just I feel like I'm living in a dream. It was literally a matter of months ago that I was standing in front of this theater, wondering if I can help save it. And just a week ago, I was in the lobby with

heroes of mine, directors who were among the reasons I became a director myself, and we stood together like a group of giddy kids in disbelief that we now own this theater. And that thrill is carrying me every day right now.

Will the repertory programming start soon? Any hint of what we can expect? It's a great question, and we can't wait to share more.

I think we're going to have to find a balance.

Here is what I'd say: I love what's happening in Los Angeles right now and I'd love to see it eventually happen across the country. And with the Village, we think there's an opportunity to not only have a great community home for cinema in Los Angeles but for us to create the kind of theater that we hope will one day exist across the country.

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