

CADET

Director Adilkhan Yerzhanov

Kazakhstan | 2024

126 min. | Kasakh, Russian with English subtitles

Screenplay Adilkhan Yerzhanov. Cinematography Yerkinbek Pturaliyev. Editing Arif Tleuzhanov. Music Sandro di Stefano. Sound Design Zurab Kurmanbayev. Sound Zurab Kurmangaliyev. Production Design Yermek Utegenov. Costumes Ainur Ainur. Casting Leila Sadykova. Producer Damir Yedilov. Executive Producers Akbota Kaisenova, Bibizhama Bekenova, Yerlan Bukharbayev. Production company Tiger Films (Almaty, Kazakhstan). With Anna Starchenko, Serik Sharipov, Ratmir Yusupzhanov, Alexey Shemes.

Synopsis

Resolutely, Alina and her son Serik are shown round the premises of the “best military school” in Kazakhstan by its headmaster. Alina will teach history here, of all places, and Serik will attend the school as a cadet. However, the discipline prescribed doesn’t work for the shy boy, with his girly hairstyle making him the target of malice and bullying, despite having the right connections – as Serik’s biological father is a key figure behind all the goings-on as a protector. It happens as it happens in (post-)horror: first one pupil dies, then the next. Murder? Suicide? And what role do the mothers play? Obfuscation, threats, harassment – an investigator from a municipal authority is tasked with finding out. The spiritus sovieticus also oozes out of every nook and cranny of this great film, the latest from Kazakh genre-auteur wunderkind Adilkhan Yerzhanov. In *CADET*, this spirit seeps out as an education-of-monsters via architecture, ritual and rhetoric, physical violence and psycho-horror, as the cadaver’s stench from the dungeons of repressed history into the present of evil. Yerzhanov’s subtle and deliberately naïve question isn’t how evil is possible – but why good is possible. (Christiane Büchner, Barbara Wurm)

Adilkhan Yerzhanov was born in Kazakhstan in 1982. He studied filmmaking at the Kazakhstan National Academy of Arts and his films have twice been selected by the Cannes Film Festival as well as the Venice International Film Festival. His film *THE OWNERS* received awards at many international film festivals and was included in the 100 Best Asian Films catalogue published by the Busan International Film Festival in 2015.

Films: 2011: *Rieltor / Realtors*. 2013: *Stroiteli / Constructors*. 2014: *Ukili kamshat / The Owners*. 2015: *Istoriya kazakhskogo kinematografa / The Story of Kazakh Cinema: Underground of Kazakhfilm*. 2016: *Chuma v aule Karatas / The Plague at the Karatas Village*. 2018: *Nochnoy bog / Night God*, *Laskovoe bezrazlichie mira / The Gentle Indifference of the World*. 2019: *Boj Atbaja / Atbai’s Fight*, *Chyorniy, chyorniy chelovek / A Dark, Dark Man*. 2020: *Zheltaja kosha / Yellow Cat*. 2021: *Onbagandar /*

Herd Immunity. 2022: *Ulbolsyn, Shturm / Assault*, *Goliath / Goliath*, *Obuchenie Ademoki / Ademoka’s Education*. 2024: *Nosorog / Steppenwolf*, *Cadet*.

Director’s Statement

Ghosts and Demons Are Not the Real Evil

Looking at the difference between monsters in fact and fiction

It was important for me to express through the horror genre the feeling of fear and helplessness in the face of the violence that has suddenly arisen in our era: An era where violence invades our lives in an absurd way. The characters of the mother and child, who are accepted by the military school, go through physical and psychological pressure. Ghosts and demons are not the real evil, as it seems to me. In horror films there is always a mystical explanation for monsters. But in our reality, there is no such explanation for this monstrosity – and that is much more terrible.

Adilkhan Yerzhanov

Interview

Educated to be Monsters

Adilkhan Yerzhanov speaks with Christiane Büchner and Barbara Wurm about his new film *CADET*

Barbara Wurm: Adilkhan, your films have been presented at many festivals around the world. CADET is the first to be shown at the Berlinale, which makes us enormously happy. Like ADEMOKA’S EDUCATION, one of your most recent films – you’ve made a lot – your newest one also deals with school and education. What about these topics interests you?

Adilkhan Yerzhanov: It’s something personal, since I could only go to school until third grade. Afterwards, I found myself in the turbulence brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The system was a real mess, not only the educational system, but across the board. My family went through a very tough time, without work, without a stable living situation. We moved constantly from one place to the next and going to school wasn’t possible. I filled these gaps by studying on my own. I read every book I could find. I had the complex that everyone my age was getting somewhere and I was stuck. And this complex led me to read more than the others and to learn more. For me, school is a sacred place. A place where knowledge is passed on. For other people my age, that isn’t the case. For them, school was an everyday thing. For me, it was a place in which I wasn’t allowed to but absolutely wanted to go to. A mystical place where I never was as a kid.

BW: I suppose the same applies to the cadet corps?

AY: I don’t have any relationship to that. I’ve never had a weapon in my hand in my life and was never in a cadet corps. Everything

I know about it, I've heard from others who have studied there. So I'm judging from outside and my judgement overlaps with the character of Alina – it's a place where people are taught how to kill. No more and no less.

Christiane Büchner: But the school in the film appears to be there mainly to teach people how they can fit into the power system. Tell us how you wrote the script for CADET.

AY: In my film's, I'm always influenced by events I see around me. In this case, I talked to an actor who had done cadet training as a kid in Russia. He told me about his experiences and how one is educated to be a monster in that kind of school. I was really depressed by what he told me. He is a gentle, fragile guy, not at all meant to serve in the security forces. But he spent his entire adolescence in that kind of institution. I asked myself how he survived there. And there was my story. I was interested in showing a man who is totally against war, but who goes to a school in which everything is all about how to fight a war. The plot came out of this contradiction. However, without the mother character, the script would be worthless, since everything circles around the mother and the child. For me, the film's central question is to what degree a mother's love can justify violence. That's a provocative question, but I wanted to examine it.

CB: I also wondered why the mother forces her son to go there of all places. I suppose the mother loves Erik, but she doesn't see his true nature. The mother/son relationship is certainly central. But for me, the most important question was how power relations survive, how they are always reborn.

AY: I think that's really true because power actually reproduces itself. This isn't the first generation in which this is happening. It was already this way under the Soviet regime and possibly before it too. And after the fall of the Soviet Union. It's the reproduction of a system in which people must be ready to use violence, they must be able to produce this violence. Motherly love or any kind of feeling cannot function in that. That's why I chose the horror or post-horror genre for the film. I chose it because I cannot rationally explain why this apparatus exists, constantly forcing people to kill or be killed. Why is that necessary? Irrationality is the only meaning I find in the horror genre. The reality of horror is clearer and simpler than what politicians tell us. It's a film about the irrationality of power.

BW: And the masculinity of this power.

AY: Of course, I've always been convinced that there would be no wars if women ruled the world. I'm absolutely certain of that. I think that men bear the main guilt for every war and every act of violence. In this film, the mother and child are consciously pitted against everything masculine. In this school, there is not a single woman aside from Alina, Erik's mother.

CB: ...and this heroine teaches history at the school. That's interesting. She knows what happened before.

AY: She's a voice of reason who tries to explain what they are being prepared for. She tries to convey an objective picture. But of course, nobody listens to her, unfortunately. And this all leads to the only ending possible in such a patriarchal world, in my opinion.

CB: And the Descartes quote?

AY: Those are more or less opposing positions. Originally, I conceived of the film as a search for something rational in what happens. It's as if as the author, I were to try not to believe in all of the film's demonic elements. I have the impression that the demonic elements are just a background, a kind of machine necessary for the action. But in fact, I'm on the side of rationality, which exists less and less in the world. And in that sense, Descartes is a kind of life-saving action. This representative of

philosophy who said that you should doubt everything and not take it at face value. Not to believe in propaganda or everything you see around you. Only believe the voice of reason. And in this respect, Descartes seems to me a kind of redemption, a philosopher who can save the present.

BW: For me, this philosophical doubt seemed to be connected to the action and the choice of genre. What we, but also what the protagonists perceive never stops being questioned.

AY: We are in the post-truth or even the no-truth era. I've noticed that even publications I've always trusted can no longer be objective because there are always thousands of other sources of information. You constantly have to perform psychological hygiene on yourself and try to find out for what is true and what is not. And in the end, you need to stick to the simplest inescapable truths: You have to work against violence. No matter what happens, nothing justifies violence. That's an important cornerstone because things are happening in the world that can convince you that two times two equals five, as Orwell says. Sometimes, you feel like the characters in CADET, where you see an object – but is it even the object as it appears to me? You can't trust any of your senses. Descartes' experiment led him to a point where he realised, the only thing I believe is I think therefore I am. His maxim is still valid today. I think so. In my film, I wanted to convey this feeling of uncertainty, the feeling that reality doesn't exist. And that something can always be constructed or produced. It's a zombification. That's what I wanted to convey through the plot and the genre.

BW: The perception of reality as not reality? Is that a philosophical final conclusion or is that an interim conclusion of a life with experiences of violence outside our peaceful western existence?

AY: For a post-Soviet person, it is easier to react to manipulated information. I know for certain that as a kid, I had opportunities to observe the varieties of Soviet propaganda. I know for certain that every book in my childhood was full of slogans like 'Conquer your enemy', where there were class struggles and good and evil were clear. A third perspective did not exist. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became clear to me what objectivity means. I started studying different sources and up until the early 2000s, there was a certain freedom in the selection of information. Afterwards, everything gradually became increasingly filtered. That's why I'm immune, I'm used to there always being attempts to force me to a particular perspective. Unwanted websites, unwanted publications are blocked. That's entirely normal. After everything I've gone through, I still believe there is only one truth. But I see that for some people it is very comfortable to accept what is forced upon them as true. And as for Europeans, it's probably easier for you because you don't have such powerful propaganda as in the post-Soviet region. But I think that has its drawbacks too.

BW: I didn't mean that so much in relation to propaganda, but rather in regards to the existence of physical violence. In my personal life, I only know those kinds of extremes from films and the news. But I know a lot of people in and outside the post-Soviet region – as you just called it – for whom that is completely different.

AY: I grew up in the 90s and that was wild time. Violence among teenagers was completely normal. I often saw violence back then. Things like looting, too, when law enforcement officers took someone's factory from them, went in armed with machine guns and swiped all the property. That was a normal procedure for dealing with post-Soviet companies. A small war through which one business violently oppressed another one and took over power. What's happening in Ukraine now, for instance, has always existed in the post-Soviet region, only now it's about the relationship of one country to another. This shows the culture of relationships in which violence is the final and most

powerful authority. Not jurisdiction, violence is what counts. I've been accused of not directly addressing these topics in my films. But if I were to resolve the question through a deus ex machina device, having a happy ending by the mother stopping the entire mechanism in the school through her own decision, it wouldn't be realistic. Still, I think that I found a solution in the character's own struggle. Because Alina fights to the end, she does not accept the school's totalitarianism. She fights like the other characters too. They are looking for possibilities to defy the system. I think that is the most important thing, for everyone to try to find some kind of confrontation. I think that is also the solution, when you fight this battle through art.

CB: To switch topics: the film has fantastic special effects. They carry the story invisibly. How did you develop them?

AY: Since I didn't want to have genre elements, make-up, or other techniques in **CADET**, with Bek Aliev and a new set decorator, I created a world where everything is in suspense. In the set design, there is a realistic, physical world, but a small step is enough for everything to fall into a dark, supernatural world. And we wanted to find this border, this margin in the image itself. That's why we worked with a lens filter I developed myself, which makes the margins of the image unsharp. Plus, we chose a style that in some parts is reminiscent of films from the 1940s. We wanted to achieve the effect of not being able to say exactly when the film is set, even though it is clearly stated: This is our time, this is the present. My references included above all classical Japanese horror films and Kobayashi Masaki. But I'm also a big fan of German Expressionism, films like *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* or *M – EINE STADT SUCHT EINEN MÖRDER*. But Stanley Kubrick's *THE SHINING* was also a source of inspiration.

BW: A few words about your fantastic actress Anna Starchenko, who plays Alina.

AY: I'd already collaborated with her on *STEPPENWOLF*. I don't know any other actress who could figure out a script like **CADET**'s all her own. In my opinion, in the script, the character was not yet developed. She was a cold character, just the protagonist's mother. But thanks to Anna, she got all the layers, all the depth, and the image the film now shows of her. She is the voice of reason. But at the same time, she is complex and wonders if she really loves her son or not. In many respects, she sees him as the fruit of the violence that Bulat Asanovich did to her. That's why this moral question is always hanging over her. I don't know how she managed to come to terms with it. I tried not to intervene emotionally in the process, because it was very hard for me too. I'm very grateful that Anna took this work on herself. When you work with her, she shapes the character she plays in relation to the drama. That is, she considers questions like the story arc and motivation: Why did she do that? Why does the character feel or think this way? That's all in Anna's head. She follows her character's development very closely. That's very practical for a director.

*BW: We've mentioned a few of your films as well as the fact that you shoot a lot and quickly. I know some of your films, but not all. They're are so many! However, **CADET** seems different, it has less of the tone of what is perhaps your now typical laconic surrealism, your specific irony towards violence. How do you see this?*

AY: I simply could not do anything else than to make a statement in the form of a film about what is happening around me. It's my personal attitude towards it, aside from everything else. I think what is special about the film is that it is told from a female perspective. All of my earlier films are connected to perspectives from the world of men, with a male perspective and the way things develop is based on men's rules, the struggle and everything else, like through a prism, through a man's perspective. This film is unusual for me. At some point, it became

clear to me that **CADET** is a film about a mother and a child, a world I'm not familiar with, so I'm trying to understand it by putting myself in it. Everything was new for me. And it became clear to me that certain approaches would not work. It's an even more violent and categorical film than my earlier ones.

CB: I can see the pinboard behind you. How many films are you working on right now?

AY: I don't really shoot quickly, but I do shoot regularly. Every production phase is very stressful. Script development and pre-production. It takes time, as for other directors too.

BW: But it's fascinating that you always seem to be writing new scripts and that you have a special kind of story development. They're very clever and have a very subtle humour. How do you come up with stories?

AY: Thank you! I don't know how I can explain it exactly, but for me, aside from the actual story, there always needs to be something extra or a kind of displacement. A detail that sets the whole story in motion. And in some films, I never found this motor. I really regret that. But when I have found it, then everything starts to move and creates meaning for me. I really enjoy telling stories in my films about Kazakhstan, about our society, about small people, about private life. But I always relate it to what is happening in the world. Because if the story is not part of what is happening in the world, then it isn't interesting. Every plot needs to exist in relationship to every society in the world. I'm inspired when I find something that is important both globally and locally. Then it becomes interesting for me.

BW: Thank you for this informative conversation. We're looking forward to your world cinema from Kazakhstan!