

RESTITUCIJA, ILI, SAN I JAVA STARE GARDE

Eighty Plus

Director Želimir Žilnik

Serbia, Slovenia | 2025

118 min. | Serbian, German with English subtitles

Screenplay Želimir Žilnik, Tanja Šljivar. **Cinematography** Jovan Milinov. **Editing** Vuk Vukmirović. **Music** Dragoljub Vagner. **Sound Design** Aleksandar Stojšin. **Sound** Aleksandar Stojšin. **Production Design** Ivana Jančić. **Costumes** Romana Knezevic. **Make-Up** Aleksandra Ivatovic. **Casting** Ognjen Petkovic. **Animation** Ziva Stanojevic. **Producer** Sarita Matijević Žilnik. **Co-Producers** Želimir Žilnik, Miha Černec. **Production company** Playground produkcija (Novi Sad, Serbien). **With** Milan Kovačević, Milivoj Kiždobranski, Vera Hrčan Ostojić, Mirjana Gardinovački, Lidija Stevanović, Katharina Gualtieri, Radoje Čupić, Nina Stamenković.

World sales EXPOBLVD

Synopsis

Milan Kovačević, 80+, in the role of Stevan Arsin, is about to buy records by his own 1960s jazz band, the "Montenegro Five", in a second-hand record shop in Vienna when his mobile rings. A property valuer in Novi Sad tells him the Serbian state intends to return the house that was expropriated from his family during World War II. Restitution, goodwill: the kindly gentleman, his back heavily stooped, sets off at his very own pace with researcher Nina to his old homeland, consisting of lots of Habsburgian and even more of New Serbian markers – and only a little of former Yugoslavia. In this docu-fiction featuring an amateur cast oozing aged charm, Stevan follows the ingenious tracks laid out by Želimir Žilnik ("80+", just like his hero, but as youthful, cheeky, funny and witty as ever) and travels through a post-socialist landscape encountering family, friends, old loves and new obstacles. In 1969, Žilnik won the Golden Bear for *EARLY WORKS*, the time has now come for his *Late Works*: while the bonding may be less radical (soft touch matters), his eye for the political and social at the margins remains sharp. (Barbara Wurm)

Želimir Žilnik, is an artist and filmmaker born in 1942 in Novi Sad, Serbia. In his highly prolific career, Žilnik has made over 50 feature and short films, which have been exhibited internationally at film festivals including Berlin, Toronto, Rotterdam, Moscow, and Oberhausen. Since the late 1960s, his socially engaged films have earned him accolades, but he also faced censorship in the 1970s and 1990s for his unflinching criticism of the government apparatus. His power to observe and unleash compelling narratives out of the lives of ordinary people is the common thread throughout his work.

Films: 1969: *Rani radovi / Early Works* (IFB Competition). 1976: *Paradies. Eine imperialistische Tragikomödie / Paradise. An Imperialist Tragicomedy* (short film). 1980: *Bolest i ozdravljenje*

Bude Brakusa / The Illness and Recovery of Buda Brakus. 1984: *Druga generacija / The Second Generation*. 1986: *Lijepo žene prolaze kroz grad / Pretty Women Walking through the City*. 1988: *Brooklyn-Gusinje / Brooklyn-Gusinje, Tako se kalio čelik / The Way Steel Was Tempered*. 1994: *Tito po drugi put među Srbima / Tito among the Serbs for the Second Time*. 1995: *Marble Ass* (IFB Panorama). 2000: *Trdnjava Evropa / Fortress Europe*. 2007: *Kenedi se ženi / Kenedi is Getting Married*. 2009: *Stara škola kapitalizma / The Old School of Capitalism*. 2015: *Destinacija_Serbistan / Logbook_Serbistan*. 2018: *Das schönste Land der Welt / The Most Beautiful Country in the World*. 2025: *Restitucija, ili, San i java stare garde / Eighty Plus*.

Director's Statement**A Multi-Generational Dialogue**

Aging after socialism and re-connecting with old friends

If *EIGHTY PLUS* turns out to be a humorously incisive social portrait of family politics, identity, and belonging, I am fine with that too. As our main hero Stevan navigates the practical and emotional demands of his present situation while fondly recalling his past life in pre-war Yugoslavia, he reconnects with his multi-generational family, rekindles old friendships, and even sparks a new romantic interest with a nightclub singer he once shared a stage with. Blending documentary realism and narrative fiction with non-professional actors, the film's hybrid aesthetic aims to create a vision of elderly life in the post-socialist, transnational, and hyper-transactional world we live in.

Želimir Žilnik

Interview**Listening to the Wisdom of the Old**

Valentina Djordjević, Ted Fendt and Barbara Wurm talk to Želimir Žilnik and Sarita Matijević Žilnik about issues of restitution and growing old in present-day Serbia

Valentina Djordjević: It's the end of January 2025. We start the conversation with legendary filmmaker Želimir Žilnik with an update on the situation in Serbia where students have been protesting in the street since late November 2024. What is going on in Serbia?

Želimir Žilnik: Everything started on the first of November 2024, when a concrete roof fell down in the Novi Sad train station, which had just been reconstructed. Fifteen people died because the construction was shoddy, and there was reasonable doubt about corruption. Then the students started blocking the streets in protest. The number of students and professors and other professionals and citizens who are on their side against the government is growing. The government and president Aleksandar Vučić, who is very authoritarian – he was the assistant of nationalist hardliner Vojislav Šešelj in the 2000s and before that Minister for Information during Milošević's

regime – are getting nervous. This means it is also a dangerous moment when violence could happen. There have been a number of car incidents, where people just drove into the crowd of the protesting students. In the beginning, the president publicly supported those people, which would be totally unacceptable in a normal state. But now he seems to be retreating. We are still in the middle of all these big tensions. We live in Novi Sad, Serbia's second biggest city after Belgrade, where there is a big university. The students and their professors are in a blockade. They are sleeping in the university buildings and have their own teach-ins and workshops. I was invited by students here in Novi Sad and in Belgrade, because they wanted to use some of my footage, which I shot in the past when we had these kinds of tensions in the socialist era and the Milošević era. I went and spoke to them and I was surprised about how knowledgeable they are. They are not burdened by the complexes from the civil war in the 1990s when Yugoslavia was being dismantled from the inside. They are completely confident and rational.

VD: In EIGHTY PLUS, some of the scenes refer to the political situation in Serbia. For example, when the characters talk about the rubble on the banks of the Danube that Chinese companies left behind. How does your film relate to today's political situation?

ŽŽ: In all the Balkan countries, China is spreading their influence. They make loans to the state, but then hire their own workers on the projects these loans finance. Sometimes we can observe live how capitalism starts spreading, only this time it's from the East, not the West. At the moment, Russia is not very present because they are of course busy with the war in Ukraine, but they have also collaborated with some of our giant firms. When Trump came into office a few days ago, he pressured the Serbian leaders to cut ties with Russia, which is difficult because we get 90% of our oil and gas from them. It will be hard to resolve all these problems successfully now. This crisis is dangerous and deep, and will last longer than the ruling class in Serbia, even if they resign. But they won't resign easily because they are involved in all kinds of risky investments. A lot of facts about corruption are coming out. It's a very tense and uncertain moment.

Ted Fendt: In your films, the socio-political issues come out organically with the characters in these situations.

ŽŽ: I like it when films, besides their storyline and dramatic structure, function as some sort of evidence of the moment which society is in when the film was shot. I hope that many of my films are my own diary about how these various periods are changing. Here we have an old man, over 80 years old, who comes to Serbia with some expectations and a good feeling, trying to see his family and some friends, and step by step, his hands are tied completely and he cannot realise his dream. His dream was to sort out his inheritance, which was in the hands of his parents, and give it to his family, but that is completely impossible the more he gets into it. The main actor Milan Kovačević is not a professional, he is a musician. We saw him in a short, 10-minute film while doing researching for the story. I just wanted to interview him to see how he sees his situation. And then I noticed how tremendously talented he is and I asked him if he would like to be part of the film. He immediately said, 'Yes, yes. I've always dreamed how I would like to try acting.' That's how we decided to cast him. But the film's plotline, that he is hoping to get back his parents' house, that is fiction. His father was actually a book publisher and his mother was a pianist.

TF: Did you already have that storyline? Or did you find him and build from there as you found more of the cast?

ŽŽ: First of all, most of these other people, his family and the other characters, are professional actors, but they are already retired. They are from Novi Sad. I've already worked with all of them on TV films and other fiction films of mine. They're very good friends. Only the guy who plays Stevan's schoolmate,

who he's known since they were young, that guy is not a professional actor. He's someone whom I met really by chance. He was just walking each weekend with his group in our area. We have one small mountain near to us and I met him there and I saw that he's special. This was a hybrid working process where you have one initial text and then you have to reduce it. When we put the actors all together and saw their abilities and difficulties, we changed it around a bit. For instance, the main actor's brain works tremendously. His memory is excellent, but physically he is very weak. He smokes a minimum of three packs of cigarettes a day. When we said, 'We are offering you the main role', he said, 'Okay, but what is the work load?' We said, 'We have to film at least eight hours a day.' And he answered, 'People, I must tell you, I am a musician. When we were playing in these big dancing halls, we went to sleep at 4 or 5 in the morning. I normally get up at half past three in the afternoon.' And really, the first ten days he couldn't get up. He felt so guilty that he actually completely stopped sleeping. He wouldn't sleep for two or three days. And then after a week or two, he started to faint, because he wasn't sleeping! He had a lot of lines to say. Each of his lines was about one and half pages long. And then [Žilnik puts his head on the table and shows how the actor fainted or fell asleep].

TF: The scenes are very generous for the actors, you let the scenes run quite long a lot of the time. Did you remove or change things a lot in editing?

ŽŽ: We didn't shoot much footage; not like we do when we're making documentaries. All the dialogue, except the scene when Stevan speaks to the psychologist, is scripted. In the editing, we only had three or four sequences we did not use and that was because they were not successfully shot. My instructions to the actors were mainly to be more easy-going and as realistic as possible. We didn't want to have this characteristic actorly way of speaking or exposition through dialogue. Maybe we made just one mistake: The film is two hours long.

TF: The lead actor is so authentic that everyone else gains authenticity – it doesn't feel like they're actors. Is the young woman doing the research also an actress or is she an actual researcher?

ŽŽ: She is actually a German teacher who is married to a guy here in Serbia. We got in contact with her as she was translating some of our footage into German. In the beginning, I didn't know how everything would work out, so I thought about hiring her to exchange memories with Stevan, who could then continue to speak German. But as he was so comfortable in Serbian, we had to cut her role. While researching, we found this old lady in a village nearby who was a servant for the owners of the villa before WWII. We did a long interview with her. She had saying tremendous things to say about the family who owned the house. To avoid confusion: this isn't our actor's real family.

Sarita Matijević Žilnik: Among the many statements we had from people of that generation from the region that we filmed during the research for the script, that particular character, Svetlana, was so striking for Željimir that he decided to keep her in the film. So that is the only documentary part in the film, but here it serves a fictional story. That is why the whole character of this researcher was invented, in order to incorporate at least some of the documentary footage.

TF: How big of an issue is restitution in Serbia today?

ŽŽ: What we know about this restitution process in Serbia is that 90% of the cases are not solved, so that the people finally can start using their possessions. In many cases, the factories, workshops, or houses are ruined completely. And, of course, the state doesn't care – they say, take it as it is or leave it. On the whole, this restitution process is one of the big lies of the Serbian government: We will give back everything that was stolen by

the communists and there won't be any memory of communism left. But what actually happens is that they push money into the pockets of these bureaucrats, criminals, and former socialist secret police. The house where we filmed has now been given back to the family, but they cannot do anything with it. They told us, that the state asked them to restore the house, but with the original materials. But the original materials were from Hungary and from Italy, because it was a villa, a hunter's villa of an Austrian noble family. So, like in the film, the main character inherits it, but he can't do anything with it.

BW: How provocative is the film for Serbian audiences?

ŽŽ: We've shown the film to some friends and the crew. They liked it and think that it's some sort of ironic commentary, but I don't know, I cannot judge. [To Sarita Matijević Žilnik:] What do you think?

SMŽ: From my point of view, the topic of restitution is one of the central topics in our society that remains completely out of sight. On a symbolic level, it is one of the crucial issues. Until it is resolved in a just and fair way, it will not be possible to have real reconciliation. That is why we wanted to deal with it. Also, restitution is pushed aside in the general discourse in Serbia because these huge estates were the source of an amazing amount of corruption and illegal activities. Through them, wealth was transferred from state-owned funds to private hands. So, to answer your question: This could be provocative. That was not our main aim with the film, but it definitely is a provocative story. We will see. As Želimir said earlier, Serbian society at this moment, early 2025, is in huge turmoil. It is in such a state of turmoil that we ourselves find it more complex and more radical than back in the 1990s. During that time, the way out, of how to resolve the internal conflicts in the society was somehow more obvious. You had bad guys and good guys. Now, in this moment of time in the development of our society, it's a completely new topography with this new generation who is brushing off what was happening in the past three decades. They want to deal with the injustices and the basic human rights issues of today and they are ready to fight until the end. I'm not sure how much the issue of restitution is going to be on the top of the agenda in the next few months, because we are in the middle of this 'to be or not to be' situation.

VD: What is your aim with the film then, whenever its time comes?

SMŽ: What we hope, and this is really our honest hope, is that when this film comes out in Serbia, it will contribute to the general topics of justice and the social resolution of different kinds of injustices. The other thing that we hope for this film – for me as a producer, this was really the most important reason why I produced this film – is to raise awareness on the topic of ageism and the treatment of the oldest generation in Balkan society. The amount of misuse, exploitation, and direct political manipulation of the oldest generation is of enormous importance to our society. The oldest generation is the biggest victim in this post-transitional society of ours because they are 100% manipulated by all sorts of authorities. I am speaking not only about the official authorities, but it goes to the level of family, to the level of the local community. We hope this film will bring this topic very directly to the surface: How the oldest generation, who is completely written off, is considered by the majority of the population as a voting machine for the worst of the worst, how these people are being misused and not given any possibility to be who they want to be, to show their emotions, to show their hopes, their dreams, their motivations, what they want to do in this sort of society, how their knowledge, how their experiences can contribute.

ŽŽ: My ambitions are maybe a bit more modest and smaller. I am 80 plus, I'm now 83. And I wanted to make some sort of lament for my generation.

VD: A remark about the ending: on the one hand it is a bit sad, but on the other hand also very poetic when Stevan and his girlfriend just fly away with the balloon. But it brings no real resolution regarding the real problems that we learned about before.

ŽŽ: It's like question mark at the end.

SMŽ: Like life is every day.

BW: On the other hand, you have a love story accompanied by music. The main character is a musician. Can you talk about the music a bit?

ŽŽ: When the filming was finished and we did the rough cut, we talked to Milan Kovačević, our main actor, and asked him, what for his suggestions for the film's score? He said, 'I have this friend here in Novi Sad, who is a great improviser, his name is Dragoljub Vagner. He was in the same orchestra, Montenegro 5, I was in.' So, we asked him. He watched the movie and he improvised on the piano.

SMŽ: It was a very unique situation. For the first time ever, Želimir gave the authority to someone else to actually decide on the character of the sound scaping. It was a fantastic experience, I must say.

BW: How much of your own biography and experience is in this film?

ŽŽ: I can't say much about that. Maybe only that I also listened to my grandfather, who was an old man when I was young. I listened to his memories of his grandfather and grandmother. In that time after the Second World War a lot of things were treated completely different. But as I said, I am sort of excited when I hear this old man whose brain works so perfectly. One can learn a lot from them. And that is the same with this main character. I would bet that he was at least two times more intelligent and his memory worked better than anybody in the crew.