



74th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Forum

SHELLAC presents a MANDRAGORA production

HOLY WEEK

a film by
Andrei Cohn

based upon *The Easter Torch* by Ion Luca Caragiale

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HOLY WEEK

a film by
Andrei Cohn

A Mandragora production
in coproduction with
Bord Cadre Films

Romania, Switzerland

2h13
1.85:1
Color

5.1
Original version in Romanian

INTERNATIONAL SALES

shellac

41 rue Jobin
13003 Marseille
+33 4 95 04 95 92
contact@shellacfilms.com

SALES & FESTIVAL MANAGER

Egle Cepaite
egle.cepaite@shellacfilms.com

PRODUCTION

Mandragora - Anca Puiv
Str. Gheorghe Bratianu 4, apt. 2
011413 Bucuresti, RO
anca@mandragora.ro

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

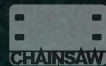
MAKNA
Chloé Lorenzi (+33 6 08 16 60 26)
Marie-Lou Duvauchelle (+33 6 78 73 44 57)
festival@maknapr.com

Cast

Leiba Zibal **Doru Bem**
Gheorghe **Ciprian Chiricheș**
Eli **Mario Dinu**
Sura **Nicoleta Lefter**
Nina **Cristina Flutur**
Gheoghe's mother **Ana Ciontea**
Carol **Iulian Postelnicu**
Head of Police **Puiu Mircea Lăscuș**
Civilian **Tibor Pallfy**
Civilian **Erdei Gábor**
Constantina **Mihaela Sîrbu**
Luțu **Bogdan Farcaș**

Crew

Adaptation
& direction **Andrei Cohn**
Photography **Andrei Butica**
Editing **Andrei Iancu**
Dana Bunescu
Production design **Cristian Niculescu**
Costume design **Viorica Petrovici**
Sound **Daniel Soare**
Petre Osman
Production **Anca Puiu**





The Holy Week, around 1900, somewhere in Romania.

The tense relationship between the Jewish innkeeper Leiba and Gheorghe, his Christian employee, reaches the point where the innkeeper decides to expel the latter. Revengeful, Gheorghe promises Leiba that he will return on Easter Night to “settle” his accounts. This threat comes as a last straw against Leiba’s attempts to cohabit with his hostile, anti-Semitic environment.

From then on, Leiba will struggle distinguishing between the real danger and the one fabricated by his anxieties, engaging onto a path of transformation leading to extreme consequences.

Director's note

The story is set in the early days of the 20th century, just before the two biggest nightmares of modern history: fascism and bolshevism. It's a loose adaptation of a short novel written by Ion Luca Caragiale, the one Romanian writer who understands us the most.

Personally, being deeply in love with people, my main question when making movies is: "how come?". In this case, it's about the act of killing.

Holy Week explores various themes, some intentionally and some not, but mostly speaks about this vicious circle of hate that we don't know how to break. It reflects on this pandemic of evil.

I do not intend that the answers I am looking for should compete with history. I do not wish to right any historical wrongs, to find guilty parties, or to create a parable; I do not even think it is cinema's task to do such a thing. I'm rather, looking with emotion on how people face life from an existentialist point of view. I do think that the empathetic gaze proper to cinema, in the case of this film, can bring to life the eve of a pogrom, the moment when somebody — before the internet, television, or colour photography — makes the decision to set off for a place about which he knows only that "milk and honey" are supposed to flow there, or to depict the transition from the fear of death to murderous intent.

I only hope to awaken doubts and let the people formulate their own questions freely.



Interview with Andrei Cohn

by Barbara Wurm & Irina Bondas
for Berlinale Forum

Holy Week is your third feature, following Acasă la Tata from 2015 and Arest from 2019 which focused on the '80s in Romania and the topic of the Securitate.

The last two scripts are about evil things and are part of a larger project. *Arest* was about Communism, even though I'm not into political movies. But Communism is the backdrop and the story is about how we dealt with it. *Holy Week* is about another terrible chapter from our past. The main character is trying to handle the strained relationship between Jews and the rest of the community. It's set at the beginning of the 20th century, albeit not at any precise date, but definitely before the nightmares that were to come – the Holocaust, Bolshevism and the rest.

Was there a certain moment when you came across the novella An Easter Torch by Ion Luca Caragiale which the film is based on and was there any specific event that led you to make this film?

He is one of the most famous Romanian writers, and I think he is the one who knows and loves us the best..We learned about him at school. As a Jew, was interested in The Easter Torch, the story of a guy trying to dance this ballet in dealing with his environment. So it stayed with me for a very long time.

I had this idea about making three films that are based on three stories about the act of killing, where fear is at the centre and it's about trying to understand how one can deal with it. But my film is a very free adaptation of one of his stories, the original conveying a pretty different message. The decision to make this film had no external reason. Of course, it might look like it these days, which is unfortunate.

Caragiale is considered a predecessor of Ionesco. What kind of role did his humour play in your film?

I strongly believe that drama doesn't imply rain and clouds and black and white. I think it happens in daylight, with some people saying stupid things. Drama doesn't know how cinema decided to portray it. I believe that in terms of realism, humour is a requirement for drama. So I always work with humour. I changed some details of the story because I didn't want the original ending in which the character goes mad. I didn't want him to enjoy doing evil. It was just the starting point for my reflections.

Has the film changed its significance for you because of recent events?

Of course, the story has some very relevant connotations today

will have some unfortunate things read into it these days which were not my initial intention. I'm into humans, I make my films out of a love for people. I was thinking about individuals, about an innkeeper sliding into this spiral of evil out of fear. It's about this vicious circle of hate, and nobody knows how to break it. It's not about anti-Semitism or Zionism in Romania. That's up to historians or politicians. It's only about how individuals deal with history. It is just the setting for them to make decisions and to carve out their own path.

What's remarkable about this film is how it balances on this thin line of human ambivalence, especially regarding the protagonist. Yet there is also this hostile environment and the historical context, both of which obviously have a big impact on characters. What comes first for you? Is it the individual or is it the living conditions that shape this individual?

Generally speaking, I believe that this is the way we are, neither good nor evil, neither brave nor cowardly, dealing with life the best we can. I read a lot about the historical context, and it was much worse than the film is presenting it. But I was more interested in this fear which is half made by the environment and half made by the protagonist himself. Because I believe that fear comes not only from objective facts and I think that's the gateway into the spiral of hate. Once you start living under this sort of pressure, every day it will build and you won't be able to tell what's real. I can't say whether the pressure my character is under has real reasons or not. Yes, he's ambivalent. The things he is dealing with are ambivalent. Everything but the title is ambivalent: it is about a week and it spans a week and ends after that week. He's not sure whether



he's dealing with ghosts or with real people that might come to kill his family. But pressure often has a greater effect than reality, for all of us. And after terrible things happen, we find reasons for them, and it doesn't always add up.

How did you do your research? Is this film also an outcome of your own engagement with History?

It's a consequence of my intuition about everything I ever read. I also tried to place myself in that situation. It has more in common with me than with history. History speaks mostly about peaks and not about everyday life. It's hard to find this kind of information. When you look into this kind of subject, you are immediately confronted with these extreme outbursts of violence. I didn't want to focus on the most extreme and violent moments everybody knows already. I was interested in the everyday slow-cooked pressure which can turn someone into a different person. People might have problems finding their take on the story. I hope to awaken doubts. I'm not able to offer answers.

You have a lot of long, static shots that capture this landscape and this prototypical village characters inhabit. How did you choose the location? Was it also supposed to be a place that could be anywhere?

I was looking for two things: it had to be primitive and rough and it had to be beautiful, because I wanted to convey that the Earth is actually a nice place and we are doing dirty things on it. I wanted the horrible things to happen against this beautiful backdrop, because our planet isn't guilty of anything. I was thinking a lot about Romanian academic paintings, which are

always showing how beautiful our country is. But I always thought that if these paintings had sound, you would hear horrific things. The characters' ethnicities are made by the environment as well. They are more similar than different, even this family of foreigners. We are very used to this stereotypical image of the Jew wearing black and living in certain neighbourhoods in the city. But here we have a Jew from the village, a peasant. I wanted to walk this thin line regarding how they look as well. Of course, his wife is shaved in private according to the ritual, but outside, she's just like the others, speaks the same language and does the same work. He is shy with his Jewishness and the environment has an assimilating effect on his family and him.

A big strength of this film is its dramatic structure. How did you develop it in terms of pacing? What were your thoughts with regards to choosing these scenes and how did you compose them?

It was a lot about editing. The initial cut was much longer, but the main difference was that it had the logic and the dramatic structure of a novel which didn't fit my objective: I didn't want to make another thriller. The fear that was building was initially much clearer. Then I decided the protagonist would be under pressure from the very start, otherwise it would be a trivial story where a poor guy gets mental problems because of certain incidents. These people were living under this kind of pressure all the time. Maybe this is only a culmination, maybe not even the most relevant point. Maybe he should have reacted before. I was happy I decided that Gheorghe should be younger. It adds some innocence to his character, he's not evil by default. To maintain the ambiguity throughout the journey was one of my objectives.

Andrei Cohn

Born in Bucharest in 1972, Andrei Cohn is trained in Fine Arts before turning to directing and screenwriting. After a series of short films in the early 2010's, Cohn directs his first feature, *Back Home* in 2015, then *Arest* in 2019. The latter was presented in competition at Karlovy Vary, at the Transylvania and Cairo Film Festivals. *Holy Week* is his third feature film.



