

BLISS

A film by Abdullah Oguz

A film by Abdullah Oğuz
Based on the novel by Zülfü Livaneli
Original Title: MUTLULUK

105 minutes, color, 2007
Turkish w/English subtitles



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SYNOPSIS

Based on the acclaimed novel by Zülfü Livaneli and set amidst Turkey's natural wonders, *Bliss* is a riveting tale about love, honor, freedom and redemption.

When a 17-year-old girl, Meryem, is found unconscious and disheveled by the side of a lake, her family believes the worst – that her chastity has been lost. To uphold the family honor they turn to an ancient moral code that condemns Meryem to death. A distant cousin, Cemal, is ordered to carry out the task. Instead, Meryem and Cemal embark on a surprising journey across traditional and modern-day Turkey in this unforgettable film.

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Abdullah “Apo” Oğuz founded the production company ANS International Turkey in 1992, which has brought produced numerous original dramas, reality shows, game shows and commercials for Turkish television.

In addition to being a versatile producer, Abdullah Oğuz has established himself as a unique director by almost single-handedly creating the music video industry in Turkey, and has won a number of international awards. He has also become one of the most sought-after TV commercial directors. In 2003, ANS entered the national film market, producing four feature-length films, two of them becoming the highest grossing films out of a total of 134 released features. Abdullah Oğuz directed one of these films, *The Ivy Mansion-Life*, which became the highest grossing film of 2003 in Turkey. *Bliss* is Oğuz's third feature film.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I knew that I wanted to see this story on the screen when I read the book “Mutluluk”(Bliss). The film is moving forward in the axis of a journey that brings both the traditional and modern faces of Turkey together. It tells the story of Cemal, Meryem and İrfan's search for happiness, who are all coming from different backgrounds. You are going to witness the striking and touching story of three people in “Mutluluk”(Bliss) set against a very impressive backdrop that stretches from Turkey's natural wonders in the East to locations in the West and South.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Omer Zülfü Livaneli was born in Ilgin, Turkey in 1946. After being held under military detention for three months during the coup of March 12th, 1971, he had to leave Turkey and move to Sweden. After Stockholm, he lived in Paris and Athens, and he returned to Turkey in 1984.

His third novel, “Mutluluk”(Bliss), published in 2002, was a number one best-seller, made 44 editions, and became a cult work. “Mutluluk”(Bliss) has been published in Greece, Sweden, France, the United States, Norway, Netherlands and Italy.

Livaneli achieved prominent success not only as a writer but also as a musician and film director. Alongside this brilliant artistic career, he has been a highly influential political figure for the past thirty years. Being one of the foremost defenders of Turkish-Greek friendship, in 1986, he founded the Greek-Turkish Friendship Committee together with the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis. In 1995, he was appointed as a Goodwill Ambassador of UNESCO in recognition of his contributions to world peace. He still continues to work on UNESCO's Culture of Peace programs worldwide. In 2002, he was selected a Member of Parliament. He's still on duty as an independent member of parliament from Istanbul. He has

been writing editorials for different Turkish dailies since 1989.

For more information on Livaneli's books and achievements, visit his website at www.livaneli.net.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Literature shows us very different worlds and lives from ours. By means of literature, we are able to get out of our small worlds and we manage to understand and feel empathy for what is different from us. I think that is the most fascinating characteristic of the novel, "Mutluluk" (*Bliss*). First of all "Mutluluk" (*Bliss*) is a story about personal development, a story of Meryem's confrontation with customs and her maturing. "Mutluluk" (*Bliss*) is also a novel one of whose fundamental themes is cultural differences. It's a narrative that deals with different faces of Turkey and works with the ongoing argument between tradition and modernity. I saw my characters in the movie and therefore I am very happy. I saw Meryem in Özgü Namal's eyes, Cemal in Murat Han and İrfan in Talat Bulut. I think this is an extraordinary success. Abdullah Oğuz has told the story and transferred it beautifully onto the screen.

ACTOR BIOGRAPHIES

TALAT BULUT

Born in 1956 in Sarikamis, Talat Bulut began his acting career in a play called "Dimitrov" in 1975. He played within the Ankara Sanat Tiyatrsu (Art Theatre) structure for many years and entered into cinema first with movie called "Hazal." He played in distinguished Turkish films such as "Yilani Oldursele," "Gol," "Cayda Cira," "Karanfilli Naciye," "Firar," "Fidan," "Kuyucakli Yusuf," "Kurbagalar," "Her seye Ragmen," and "Manisa Tarzani."

ÖZGÜ NAMAL

Özgü Namal was born in 1978 in Istanbul. She began her acting career with children plays in Masal Gercek theatre. She made her television debut in 1998 with "Affet Bizi Hocam" (*Forgive Us Teacher*). Taking part in serial films such as "Yeditepe Istanbul," she graduated from Istanbul State Conservatory in 2002 and in the same year took on a role in the film "Sir Cocuklari." With this movie, she was awarded with the "promising female actress" prize at the 14th Ankara Film Festival. She received awards for her supporting female role as Kiralik Oyun in the play "Orta Oyuncular." She also was awarded with Beyza Inci, best leading actress, for her role in the "Kurtlar Vadisi" serial films. Her movie credits include "Buyu," "Anlat Istanbul," "Organize Isler," "Beynelmilel," "Polis," "Mutluluk" (*Bliss*), "O... Çocuklari," "Günesin Oglu," and "Incir Çekirdegi."

MURAT HAN

Born in Ankara, Murat Han graduated from Bilkent University department of theatre and moved to Los Angeles in 1998 in order to study at the Stella Adler acting academy that has trained actors and actresses such as Marlon Brando and Robert De Niro. He has been living in America for 8 years and took leading roles in plays such as "Elephant Man" and "Of Mice and Men" in the Stella Adler theatre.

PRODUCTION NOTES

- "Mutluluk" (*Bliss*) is an international production since Bosnian Mirsad Heroviç was the director of photography, sound crew was made up of Greeks Konstantinos Kittou and Nikos Drakos, and 1st camera assistant was Czech Karel Kaliban.
- Since the Imam of the village mosque had quite a horrible voice to sing the azan, the helpless movie crew was saved by the camera bus driver Muharrem Öğretici who went up the mosque and sang the azan with his beautiful voice and everybody was relieved.

- Talat Bulut became the most entertaining actor of the set, never ceasing to amuse the crew in between takes. As he tried to cross from one boat to another at 3 o'clock in the morning after long hours of shooting in the freezing cold, Bulut fell into the sea. One of the most unforgettable moments of the whole movie was when he tried to hold on to the assistant art director and took him down with him.
- The crew spent more than 20 shooting days on the boat.
- Özgü Namal's hyperactivity continuously motivated the crew.
- This was the only European co-production with a Turkish majority that received support from Eurimages.
- As a fanatic Fenerbahçe fan, director Abdullah Oğuz, gave the day off to the set on days of Fenerbahçe games, but he didn't give a break on days of the matches of other teams especially Galatasaray.
- When Özgü Namal's TV show set collided with her movie set, she had to work long sleepless hours. She even broke a record and worked sleepless for 40 hours.
- Author Zülfü Livaneli, who said that scenes in the novel were reflected suitably, visited the set in Bodrum during the shootings.
- 400 boxes of film were used.
- A set was built in the middle of the sea. A ferry that travels to Rodos was turned into a set.
- Abdullah Oğuz insisted on using Taşkale as scenery, which he had used for a commercial 10 years ago and never forgot about.
- The crew, which started shooting with 100 walkie talkies, dropped at least 20 of them into the sea during shooting.
- Abdullah Oğuz, who is known for his actor discoveries in his movies, worked with Murat Han, in whom he saw a rare quality. This is Murat Han's acting debut in a Turkish film. Han has studied acting in America.
- Murat Han, who came to ANS for a TV show, got the leading role in the movie and according to a lot of people Turkey has found its new leading actor.
- After shooting the first audition with Abdullah Oğuz, Murat Han got the script and his camera and went to Van in order to do some research. The dialect exercises he made by chatting with young people over there and making them read the script was very helpful during pre-production.
- Bilkent University Theater department graduate Murat Han, has acted in a total of 3 movies and 5 theater plays.

CREDITS

Directed & produced by ABDULLAH OĞUZ
Co-produced by GEORGE LYKIARDOPOULOS
Based on the novel by ZÜLFÜ LİVANELİ

Sound record KONSTANTINOS KITTOU
Art director TOLUNAY TÜRKÖZ
Edited by LEVENT ÇELEBİ – LewQ, ABDULLAH OĞUZ
Line producer SADIK DEVECİ
Music by ZÜLFÜ LİVANELİ
Director of Photography MİRSAD HEROVIÇ
Screenplay by KUBİLAY TUNÇER , ELİF AYAN , ABDULLAH OĞUZ
Co-Production HIGHWAY PRODUCTIONS
Production Company ANS PRODUCTIONS

Starring

TALAT BULUT- IRFAN
ÖZGÜ NAMAL- MERYEM
MURAT HAN- CEMAL
MUSTAFA AVKIRAN- ALI RIZA
EMİN GÜRSOY- TAHSİN
SEBNEM KÖSTEM- DÖNE
MERAL ÇETİNKAYA- MÜNEVVER
EROL BABAOĞLU- YAKUP
İDİL YENER- NAZİK
ALPAY ATALAN- SELO
LENA LEYLA BAŞAK- SERAP
ALİ ZEYTİN- ALİ RIZA'NIN ADAMI
UĞUR İZGİ- ALİ RIZA'NIN ADAMI

Guest Starring

LALE MANSUR- AYSEL
EMEL GÖKSU- GÜLİZAR EBE

Film Locations: : Marmaris, Bodrum, Karaman Taşkale village, İstanbul

FESTIVALS & AWARDS

{ Winner! Audience ce Award, Best Film – Montpellier Int Film Festival }

{ Winner! Audience Award, Best Film – Puerto Rico Int Film Festival }

{ Winner! Odyssee Award for Best Film – European Council }

{ Winner! Five Awards – Antalya Film Festival }

{ Winner! Best Film, Best Director & Best Actress – Funchal Int Film Festival }

{ Opening Night Film – Mediterranean Film Festival, Rome }

{ Opening Night Film – Mumbai Asia Film Festival }

{ Winner! Special Jury Prize – Kerala Int Film Festival, India }

Official Selection at dozens of festivals worldwide, including:
Seattle International Film Festival 2008

Cleveland International Film Festival 2008
Boston Turkish Film Festival 2008
International Filmfestival Mannheim-Heidelberg 2008
Istanbul International Film Festival 2007
Montréal World Film Festival 2007

SELECTED PRAISE & PRESS

Critic's Pick! "A panoramic allegory of Turkish national identity, beautifully acted ... this consistently gripping, visually intoxicating film stands as a landmark of contemporary Turkish cinema."
–Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*

Critics Pick! "Gripping ... supremely engaging." –*New York Magazine*

"Powerful adaptation of Omer Zülfü Livaneli's politically trenchant novel... extraordinary pain and beauty." –Betsy Sharkey, *The Los Angeles Times*

"A trio of fine performances ... surprising emotional power." –Kilian Melloy, *Edge Boston*

"Strikingly lensed, accessible, surprisingly moving...shades of *Knife in the Water*... a quality mainstream movie." –Derek Elley, *Variety*

"Oğuz's narrative is just as crystalline as the Aegean Sea he opulently photographs... Bliss is wonderful storytelling through and through." –Justin Strout, *Orlando Weekly*

"The highest degree of artistry... a feast for the eyes, ears and mind." –Deborah Young, *KC Online*

"Marvelous ... a positively blissful experience, a must-see ...it's comic and sad, melodramatic and tragic, the ensemble putting their all into the story to give it the gravitas and the lightness it so well deserves... This is both a mainstream film and arthouse fare... a moving film that could benefit the Turkish Tourist Board as well as cineastes." –Harvey Karten, *Compuserve*

"Oguz has skillfully created an intense view of the conflict between tradition and emotion in contemporary Turkey... compelling, satisfying." –Ed Scheid, *Boxoffice Magazine*

GRADE: A! "Fresh as the Turkish breeze ... Bliss is one of the best films to sail into theaters in the last two years." –John DeSando, WCBE's "It's Movie Time," "Cinema Classics," and "On the Marquee"

"Powerful and absorbing... (a) beautiful film -- and one that deserves to be seen."
–Mike Scott, *New Orleans Times Picayune*

"The most significant work to emerge from Turkey in the past decade ... provocative, thoughtful, heartrending and soul-stirring." –NP Thompson, *Movies into Film* (Australia)

"Bliss is timely and provocative. It is a stellar and triumphant film." –Asli Omur, *European Weekly* (US)

"Artful road film." –Bill Stamets, *Chicago Sun-Times*

"A film of beauty, challenge, emotion, tradition, and truth; and every image in the film is gorgeous. The film is among the most impressive I have ever seen: it is moving, its memory lingers."
–Daniel Garrett, *Offscreen*

“An engrossing, tender and compelling drama boasting exquisite cinematography and a radiant performance by the beautiful Özgü Namal.” –Avi Offer, *NYC Movie Guru*

“Should not be missed!” –H. Nazan, *Turkish NY*

“Gripping entertainment. It's a vivid glimpse into the corner of the soul of a country and its people.”
–Tony Macklin, WebTV.net

Los Angeles Times

By BETSY SHARKEY
October 9, 2009

The lake is still. A stark wind-swept dune rises above it, the image mirrored, unbroken on its surface. A herd of sheep drinks beside it. The body of a young woman lies on its bank.

Her name is Meryem and though it turns out that she is alive, that life is of little use to her anymore, for the shepherd's daughter is the victim of an "honor crime"; her chastity lost brutally, her sentence in the small Turkish village of her birth -- dictated by tradition, demanded by the village's most powerful man -- is death.

And so begins the modern-day horror story of "Bliss," director Abdullah Oğuz's powerful adaptation of Omer Zülfü Livaneli's politically trenchant novel. The sheep, which looked so serene against their harsh landscape, now become a chilling metaphor running through the extraordinary pain and beauty of this film, which puts the stain of "tore" and those who like sheep follow it blindly, or worse, who fear to question it, under the microscope.

The Turkish film is daring for its unsparing look at a subject that still tears at its people. It is one of the divides remaining between an advancing culture and a generations-old tradition, between urban and rural ways. But being daring alone is not enough and in Oğuz's good hands "Bliss" offers us a great deal more.

The story takes us on many journeys both literal and figurative.

The first is Meryem's, played with a riveting quietness by Özgü Namal, whose inability to carry out her suicide leaves the village with a problem it must solve. Cemal (Murat Han), a young soldier just back from the front lines and a distant cousin, is handed the task of taking her to Istanbul and disposing of her.

When Cemal finds he doesn't have the stomach for this killing -- at least not yet -- a slow rebirth for Meryem begins, while a disquieting awakening descends upon Cemal. If he can't kill Meryem, he will have defied his father, yet another unforgivable sin.

As the two make their way into hiding, all of the rural traditions that shape relationships and roles between men and women are tested. Each time their ties to the past loosen, Meryem flowers ever so slightly while Cemal struggles as the battle rages on inside of him.

There is solace for a while at a remote fish farm, then Irfan (Talat Bulut), a freethinking professor-author who is running from his own demons, turns up in their lives offering escape on his luxury yacht, and it takes a while for them to figure out whether he is a mentor or a menace.

There are reasons that trust doesn't come easily.

While the story is a dark and difficult one, the players in this morality tale are bathed in light and lost within breathtaking landscapes thanks to director of photography Mirsad Herovic. And despite the Turkish desert forever in the distance, survival, and if not survival, growth, always comes by way of water. If not for the lake in the beginning, Meryem might not have been discovered; if not for the fishery, there might not have been a safe haven; and if not for Irfan's yacht, well, much would not have happened.

Though Oguz has given the film almost a fairy tale quality, there are hard truths embedded throughout. He has ultimately told a story of a man and a woman, alone and at odds, giving a voice to both their dilemmas. And though only one answer is humane, by treating the issue in such an exacting manner, Oguz allows the sense of outrage to grow ever stronger.

Self-discovery always comes with a cost, and in "Bliss" the price is a great one. It is mesmerizing to watch it unfold in the lives of these two young people, and you can't help but think that the way the story ends is a window into the future and the fate of the Meryem and Cemal caught in a backwater of tradition.

See for yourself whether there is reason for hope.

The New York Times

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

August 7, 2009

In an early scene of "Bliss," the glowering stepmother of Meryem, a teenage rape victim in eastern Anatolia, gives the girl a rope with which to hang herself for bringing dishonor to her family, and you prepare to endure a Turkish variation of "The Stoning of Soraya M." That recent harrowing film, based on a true incident, depicted the public execution of a young Iranian woman falsely accused of adultery, with the graphic ferocity of B-movie torture porn.

"Bliss," fortunately, is not a one-note exposé created to shock, although its vision of a misogynistic patriarchy is almost as repellent. Adapted from Zülfü Livaneli's 2002 novel, it observes the collision of two cultures, one ancient, the other modern, in contemporary Turkey. Directed and produced by Abdullah Oguz, "Bliss" has ravishing cinematography by Mirsad Herovic and a mystical score by Mr. Livaneli that match the novel's feverish, poetic language. The natural beauty of the waters around Istanbul is breathtaking. And once the story moves from the Anatolian village where Meryem's unconscious, brutalized body is discovered by a shepherd, the movie's initially monochromatic palette bursts into brilliant color.

More than the novel, the film focuses on Meryem's steady awakening to her own autonomy. After fitting a noose around her neck, Meryem (Özgü Namal) removes it and refuses to kill herself as tradition dictates. Her stern uncle Ali Riza (Mustafa Avkiran), the dignitary in the rural village who decreed her suicide, decides to wait for his son Cemal (Murat Han) to kill her when he returns from the army. Cemal's instructions are to take Meryem, his cousin, to Istanbul on the pretext of an arranged marriage and dispose of her en route.

The young soldier's sympathy for the disgraced girl, whom he routinely reviles as a whore and smacks in the face at any suggestion of what he deems improper female behavior, conflicts with his fundamentalist beliefs. In one scene he calls her a demon after having an erotic dream about her. But he can also be tenderly protective.

He delays the killing until they reach the city, where they visit his brother Yakup (Erol Babaoglu), who disparages the village's benighted customs. Still feeling obliged to follow orders, Cemal takes Meryem to a bridge and instructs her to jump. But when the do-or-die moment arrives, he plucks her from the edge, and the cousins become fellow fugitives from their repressive background.

They find lodging and work on a remote fish farm and later on the yacht of Irfan (Talat Bulut), a suave, white-haired Turkish professor, educated in the United States, who has just left his unhappy marriage to a wealthy woman.

In one of the most pointed scenes of culture clash, Irfan instructs Cemal to set the table and serve dinner. When Cemal refuses to do "women's work," Irfan exerts his authority as the ship's captain and declares, "There are no women's jobs and men's jobs on my boat."

Cemal also assumes that the fatherly interest Irfan takes in Meryem is really lust waiting to pounce. And when she disappears with Irfan on his motorboat to observe marine life, a potentially lethal tussle between the soldier and professor breaks out upon their return. Irfan has his own demons: his dream is to find a way of living in which he doesn't have to think about tomorrow.

As Cemal and Meryem discover the cosmopolitan world, with its bikinied young women who drop by from other boats, Meryem chafes at Cemal's dominance. But traditional ways don't die easily. Cemal's indoctrination in hyper-masculine authoritarianism runs to his very core, and he often reacts violently without thinking. The movie goes out of its way to ridicule his attachment to his macho military title, "commando."

There are moments aboard the boat in which the competitive male rituals between him and Irfan recall Roman Polanski's "Knife in the Water." But the game-playing psychodrama in "Bliss" is only a minor element in a panoramic allegory of Turkish national identity, beautifully acted by Mr. Han, Mr. Bulut and especially by Ms. Namal.

The screenplay, written by Mr. Oguz with Kubilay Tuncer and Elif Ayan, turns the novel, in which the rapist's identity is disclosed early on, into a thriller in which the truth is revealed in an explosive Hollywood ending that rather too neatly ties up loose ends left dangling in the book. However streamlined, this consistently gripping, visually intoxicating film stands as a landmark of contemporary Turkish cinema.

indieWIRE

August 5, 2009

Abdullah Oğuz's "Bliss" tackles the taboo subject of honor killings. When 17-year-old Meryem is found disheveled and unconscious by the side of a lake in the countryside, her family believes the worst – that her chastity has been lost. They turn to the ancient principle of "tore," a strict moral code that condemns Meryem to death. The duty of upholding the family's honor falls upon a distant cousin, Cemal, who has just completed a brutal tour in the military. Together they embark on a surprising journey across traditional and modern-day Turkey.

"Bliss" opens in the US this Friday, August 7, courtesy of First Run Features. indieWIRE contacted Oguz via email to discuss his film.

What initially attracted you to filmmaking, and how has that interest evolved during your career?

In the early 1990's I entered the Turkish market as both a producer and director. I produced a variety of shows for Turkish television that include game-show formats and television serials. At this time, I was also directing commercials and music videos. It was these latter experiences that attracted me to feature filmmaking. Whenever I created a video or commercial I would always try to tell some sort of story. They became short films of a certain sort. That's when I realized what I loved most about these projects was taking the camera and telling that story.

Are there other aspects of filmmaking that you would still like to explore?

Since I started in Turkey in the early 1990's, I have had the pleasure of experiencing both sides of the industry, but there is always more to explore. With "Bliss"'s critical acclaim and global interest, I am now focusing my energy on doing projects on a more international scale. So, although I have explored what the industry has to offer in terms of my home country, I would like to take what I have learned along the way and apply it on a global scale, maybe even have my next project be in English. I don't, however, want to abandon Turkey. Turkey is a beautiful location and very accommodating for film production. Furthermore, its history and lore have so many stories that can touch hearts around the world. My hope is to bridge that gap by co-producing projects with companies from outside the country on a global scope.

Please discuss how the idea for the came about and evolved.

The film is based on Zülfü Livaneli's best-selling novel of the same name. I read the novel and was immediately intrigued by its story. The book was published in 28 different countries, including the US, so I knew there was a mass appeal. Zülfü, who wrote the novel, actually received an award from Barnes and Noble for the work. Zülfü is a friend of mine and actually came to me to make the picture. He was in talks with a separate production company and they approached me to direct the film. After their funding fell through, I decided to take on the project and obtain separate funding and get it made through our company.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in developing the project?

Our main challenge involved the development of the screenplay. Our writing team had to make the creative decision as to how we wanted to approach the novel's adaptation. Obviously, a lot had to be cut out of the novel in order to create the tight narrative I hope we achieved. We also felt that we needed to have a heightened sense of mystery and suspense not found in the novel, but translating well to film. We achieved this by having the village locals chase after Meryem, which was not in the novel. Another main issue was that of a love story. Nowhere in the novel is there a hint at a romance between Meryem and Cemal, but I'm confident it works within the scope of the film.

How did the financing and/or casting for the film come together?

Financing for the film came from two main sources. My company financed a majority of the film through a combination of our own funds and pre-selling the DVD and television rights. A portion also actually came from a grant from Eurimages.

In casting the film, I turned to my other firm, a talent agency. Murat Han was one of our clients at the time and I felt he would make a perfect fit for the role of Cemal even though he had not acted in a feature, previously.

What is your next project?

My project after “Bliss” has already been completed, actually. The story revolves around a different kind of woman, also named Meryem. This Meryem is another portrait of a type of Turkish woman. While the Meryem in “Bliss” is a villager, unfamiliar with the urban life, this second Meryem is a cosmopolitan wife to a harsh and abrasive husband. The plan is to do a “Meryem trilogy” each one reflecting a different aspect of what it means to be a Turkish woman today. We are currently seeking funding for the third film around Europe, as this film will take place in Berlin.

Please share an achievement from your career so far that you are most proud of.

The achievement that I am without a doubt the most proud of is having the guts to direct. I didn't have any formal education in cinema, nor did I work my way up in a company until they gave me an opportunity to direct. I said to myself, this is what I want to do, and so I went out and did it.