

MUSTANG

Deniz Gamze Ergüven FR/GER/TUR/QA 2015 97m



Review by Louise Keller:

Unbridled like wild horses and revved up like the car built for exhilaration, the five young girls at the film's centre exude a contagious enthusiasm for life. It's catching, as is their wonderful camaraderie. Spontaneous laughter, long legs and even longer hair all seem to meld together as the orphan sisters rebel against everything in Deniz Gamze Ergüven's debut film. In the context of conservatism, overstrict moral codes and arranged marriages, the film explores female sexuality: innocence and corruption. We jump into the saddle and join the girls in their journey from euphoria to dismal disillusionment. Beautifully realised, it's a sobering journey and one that reveals much about the blinkered views in the remote Turkish village, where the girls' strict upbringing squashes their spirits cruelly and violently.

The opening sequence sets the scene beautifully. After a heartfelt farewell with a teacher, we get a sense of the natural adrenalin rush that youth offers, as the five sisters let go of their inhibitions. They are a natural when the girls splash playfully in the water on their shoulders is a picture of sheer happiness. The performances are all excellent and the fact that each of the five girls fit into the same mould, works to the film's advantage.

They may look the same and be put through similar hoops, but the experience for each is different - as is their response to their predicament.

The grandmother's (Nihal Koldas) exaggerated response to hearing about the girls' innocent frolic is our first clue as to the family attitudes. But it gets much worse as Uncle Erol (Ayberk Pekcan) makes the house into a virtual prison, which the girls are not allowed to leave. A housewife factory is how Lale (Gunes Sensoy), the youngest of the girls describes it as they are taught how to make dolmades and other home duties while dressed in dull, shapeless dresses. The accent is on chastity and purity - to the detriment of everything else. The process of arranged marriages with awkward introductions ('she is one of a kind'), traditional ceremonies and wedding night sheet inspections begin. The ugliness of the constraints is accentuated as the extreme nature of Uncle Erol's disciplines becomes evident.

Like Sofia Coppola's *Virgin Suicides*, Erguven's film takes a pointed look at adolescence, its dreams and realities. It's a powerful film and a sobering experience, especially made so by the absolute contrast between the girls' natural state and what is forcibly imposed on them - both physically and emotionally. With its themes of harsh conformity, control and restraint, it is easy to feel both outraged and dismayed at this vivid portrayal of youth quashed.

Review by Andrew L. Urban:

Mustang is not your predictable 'girls in rebellion' movie; it is much more than a simplistic feminist essay. In its depiction of a society whose traditional mores constrain women - and castrate men without them being aware of it - the film reveals the devastation that comes from a culture that refuses to enlighten itself. It is told with an unblinking eye but also with moments of sheer joy, all with wonderful, fresh, moving performances.

Set in a village on the Black Sea coast of contemporary Turkey, Mustang begins with the recognisable joy of schoolchildren frolicking in the water on their way home at end of term as summer begins. Boys and girls. Boys with girls on their shoulders splashing and pushing each other in the universal water game. But a neighbour sees it through the prism of her twisted morality: she saw five sisters being immoral, pleasuring themselves on the necks of boys, as she tells it to the sisters' grandmother and uncle who are bringing them up since the death of their parents.

The mis-framing of the innocent reality sets off a chain reaction in which the guardians (literally and morally) of the girls hastily isolate the young sisters and start urgent matchmaking. Inspecting their virginity and finding husbands is the priority - as it has been for centuries. Centuries, that is, before enlightened societies abandoned female suppression and arranged marriages. Schoolgirls no more, the sisters eventually rebel.

We see how the old rules bind not only women but the men, who are also prisoners of the old rules and worse, unaware that their apparent position of authority is a useful tool to help the women impose their self-serving traditions and strictures on their society.

Although the story is told in sequence, the editing technique removes or omits much of the interstitial material you might expect. The audience is assumed to be intelligent and alert enough to link scene a and b without scene aa in between. This results in a dense and economical work whose focus is on the girls and their emotional responses. They are clearly a tightly woven unit, bonded by the shadow of their common grief over their parents and their common predicament of being prisoners in their own home - complete with newly installed window bars and metal grilled doors.

To western eyes the film depicts a primitive society but to those who live within such communities, the film will seem to be an authentic depiction - a local story with lessons for the likes of the sisters.

The sweetly pretty Lale (Gunes Sensoy), the youngest, is the centre of the screenplay's attention - and beloved by the camera. She is the 'most angsty mustang', who takes action. She is the symbol of the modern young woman and we barrack for her all the way. Sadly, not all the sisters find a positive way out.

Entertainment Weekly Leah Greenblatt

It's not hard to see why Mustang has been dubbed the "Turkish Virgin Suicides." Like Sofia Coppola's dreamy, unsettling 1999 debut, it's another first film by a young female director that focuses in feverish close-up on the adolescent awakening of five restless, radiant sisters — and the ruin that follows when their family tries to contain it.

Cath Clarke

Time Out

The giddy abandon of youthful pleasures are writ large across blissed-out faces and fast mouths. The story moves at speed, with Erguven constantly resisting the temptation to pause and wring sentiment from a dramatic development.

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Sophie Monks Kaufman

Little White Lies

Mustang immediately stands out amidst the largely male-dominated efforts of contemporary cinema, its concerns distinctly feminine in constitution, its context specific in circumstance yet universal in scope