

Burdens of history

Acclaimed director Atom Egoyan was ready to move on to lighter subject matter in his new film, writes **Yenni Kwok**



Despite the critical success of his last film about one of the world's worst atrocities, no one would blame Atom Egoyan for wanting to shift his focus.

After plumbing the horrors of the Armenian genocide in *Ararat*, the Canadian director's latest feature, *Where the Truth Lies*, is certainly less politically charged.

The film, screened at this week's Canadian Film Festival, is a film noir- styled whodunit. Starring Hollywood heartthrobs Kevin Bacon and Colin Firth as a showbiz duo whose career ends after a dead woman is found in their room, it is surprisingly light.

"*Where the Truth Lies* is a response to *Ararat*," the 46-year-old filmmaker admits during his visit in Hong Kong this week. "*Ararat* brought lots of social responsibility, so after that I wanted to do something that was fun. I wanted to enjoy myself."

Critics seem to have liked the experience less. In spite of its nomination for Palm d'Or at Cannes Film Festival last year, the film received mixed reviews. But, with 10 full-length features to his credit and more than 20 years experience in the industry, the self-taught director is neither worried or irritated by the reaction.

"There are critics who love the film and understand it, which is great," he says. "But I have a reputation for making a particular type of movie so some people are disappointed. But, I can't keep making similar films."

Adapted from a novel by Rupert Holmes, *Where the Truth Lies* jumps between 1957 and 1972, highlighting the highs and lows of entertainers Lanny Morris (Bacon) and Vince Collins (Firth).

Egoyan applies his trademark labyrinthine plots and twisted manipulations to the film. He doesn't deny the characters were inspired by people he'd met in the world of entertainment.

"People can be scheming and abusive as well as charming - the industry is full of narcissistic, self-absorbed, angry people who feel they don't get enough attention. "I won't name names, but everybody tries to use each other. The characters in the film are composite of the people I've met."

Whereas his earlier works often reveal dark surprises, *Where the Truth Lies* unravels more predictably. "I imagined this story from Lanny's point of view, and I directed the film like a Hollywood director, not as Atom Egoyan. I tried to tell the story using a popular language that reflected the inner psychology of the characters."

A descendant of refugees who survived the slaughter of one million Armenians by Turks between 1915-18, many of his films cross cultural boundaries. *Exotica* is centered on a striptease club in Toronto, *The Sweet Hereafter* in a small Canadian town while Felicia's Journey takes place in England and Ireland.

In most of his films, he has cast his wife, Arsine Khanjian, who shares his passion for film and Armenian history. The couple has a son, Arshile, named after a famous Armenian painter (who was featured in *Ararat*).

Born in Cairo to Armenian parents, he was named Atom as his family's tribute to the development of nuclear power in Egypt. But, sensing heightening Egyptian nationalism, they decided to move to Canada. He was only three when the family arrived in the city of Victoria, on the western coast of Canada. The Egoyans were the only Armenians in town. In his efforts to "assimilate," Atom resisted speaking his mother tongue and remained largely ignorant about Armenians' traumatic history and the Turkish denial of it.

Atom and his sister Eve inherited their parents' artistic talent and while Eve became a leading experimental pianist Atom would study guitar and do art installations, his work eventually exhibited at the Venice Biennale.

It was not until the 18-year-old Egoyan moved to Toronto to study international relations that he became interested in his cultural heritage. He joined the campus Armenian society, took up the language, chose the Armenian genocide as the topic of his thesis and started to make films.

There are around 40,000 Armenians in Canada, a relatively small number, yet their plight has entered the public consciousness. *Blind Assassin*, a novel by fellow Canadian, Margaret Atwood, makes recurring mention of "starving Armenian children."

When asked about this, Egoyan smiles and remarks: "I think, perhaps I am responsible for that." It also helps that Atwood has become close with the Armenian community, many of whom are fans of her works. "It shows that when an artist becomes close with a community, they'll choose that version of history," he says. "If she (Atwood) had known a Turkish community, the story would have been different. I am too aware of how politics work to be that naive."

Ararat, starring legendary French singer of Armenian descent Charles Aznavour, is Egoyan's personal statement about the genocide. He spent two decades thinking about it before knowing what kind of film it should be. A bloody historical drama it isn't. Instead, the film reveals and meditates on the trauma and horror through a complex, multi-layered narration that spans cultures and generations.

"*Ararat* is the most important film of my career," he says. "It questions how we regard history, especially in a multicultural society. How do you reveal something, and how do you deal with it, especially if you have no access to it? Ultimately, it is a film about denial of a genocide."

Egoyan is too much the intellectual to deliver simple condemnation of the Turks. "It is important to remember that there is now a generation of Turks who have been raised with this denial," he writes on his Web site. "They aren't denying anymore. It's what they've been led to believe."

He was relieved when earlier this year, Turkish courts dropped charges against writer Orhan Pamuk for remarks made about Turkey's denial of the genocide. "It shows how taboo the topic still is," Egoyan says calmly.

He will continue to travel with *Ararat*, he says, to raise consciousness of the tragedy.

While he is unsure what his next film project will be, he knows it will not be more mainstream than *Where the Truth Lies*. "This is as close as I get to Hollywood," he says.

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