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Little-Known Kazakh Actress Wins Over Cannes Film Festival

By Andrei Muchnik

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Samal Yeslyamova **Courtesy Cannes Film Festival**

Last week Samal Yeslyamova, a little-known actress with just two films under her belt, won the prestigious Award for Best Actress at the Cannes Film Festival. The award was for the title role in the movie "Ayka" by Sergei Dvortsevoi, who has been better known until now for his poignant documentaries.

"Ayka" is only Dvortsevoi's second feature film. The first one, "Tulpan" (Tulip) brought the director several prizes, including Un Certain Regard Award at Cannes in 2008. For Samal Yeslyamova, "Tulpan" was her debut film.

Discovered in Kazakhstan

Dvortsevoi's casting agents were travelling around Kazakhstan looking for talented actors for "Tulpan" and chose Yeslyamova at an open casting in her hometown of Petropavlovsk in the

very north of Kazakhstan. At the time she had just graduated from high school.

“Tulpan” took four years to film, since Dvortsevoi wanted to depict the real life of herdsmen in the steppes of Kazakhstan and he could only film during one season a year. Yeslyamova played the sister of the main character, one of the key supporting roles.

When “Tulpan” was done, the actress was 22 year old. She decided to apply to one of the best acting schools in the post-Soviet space — the Russian Institute of Theater Arts, usually just called by its acronym GITIS. For several years Yeslyamova was busy studying and training. But then came a proposal from Dvortsevoi to star in his new movie.

Cannes Winner

“Ayka” is a about an immigrant girl from Kyrgyzstan who is trying hard to make ends meet in Moscow. After an unplanned pregnancy, Ayka gives up her child by fleeing the maternity clinic right after birth. She has no stable job and can’t afford to raise a child. But despite all that, maternal instincts soon take over and she starts searching for her child.

Lauded as a brutal, but honest depiction of tough illegal immigrant life in Moscow, Dvortsevoi’s work has been compared by critics to the masterpieces of the Dardenne brothers, especially “Rosetta.”

“The theme is simple, but very important: the connection between mother and child,” Yeslyamova told The Moscow Times. “For me, the immigrant community in Moscow was a very different world. I am from Kazakhstan, and fortunately we don’t have to emigrate like that.”

Making “Ayka” also took several years and was finished right before the festival. “Dvortsevoi wanted all of us to do our very best — it had to be 100% immersion,” Yeslyamova said. “I learned the Kyrgyz language and started talking to some of the women immigrants in Moscow. Many of them have to live apart from their children. Some of my new friends among them haven’t seen their kids for a year.”

Yeslyamova says the only way her life has changed after the Cannes award is the number of phone calls she’s been getting. Asked about her plans for the future, she said: “I have a couple of offers, but I haven’t settled on any of them yet. Right now I want to rest.”

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