

Mongrel Media

Presents

THE FORGIVENESS OF BLOOD



A Film by Joshua Marston

(108 min., USA/Albania/Denmark/Italy, 2010)

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The Forgiveness of Blood

CREW

Directed by JOSHUA MARSTON
Written by JOSHUA MARSTON &
ANDAMION MURATAJ
Produced by PAUL MEZEY
Executive Producer JANINE GOLD
Executive Producers ERIC ABRAHAM
DOMENICO PROCACCI
Executive Producers HUNTER GRAY
TYLER BRODIE
Co-Producers ANDAMION MURATAJ
GWEN BIALIC
Associate Producer ANDREW GOLDMAN
Director of Photography ROB HARDY B.S.C.
Production Designer TOMMASO ORTINO
Editor MALCOLM JAMIESON
Music By JACOBO LIEBERMAN
LEONARDO HEIBLUM
Costume Designer EMIR TURKESHI

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CAST

(in order of appearance)

Nik	TRISTAN HALILAJ
Mark	REFET ABAZI
Bardha	ZANA HASAJ
Tom	ERJON MANI
Zef	LUAN JAHA
Ded	ÇUN LAJÇI
Sokol	VETON OSMANI
Kreshnik	SELMAN LOKAJ
Shpend	KOL ZEFI
Rudina	SINDI LAÇEJ
Drita	ILIRE VINCA ÇELAJ
Bora	ESMERALDA GJONLULAJ
Dren	ELSAJED TALLALLI
School Director	IBRAHIM YMERI
Mara	SERVETE HAXHIJA
Loran	ARLIND LLESHI
Fatmir	ALFRED LISI
Police Captain	EDMOND PEPKOLAJ
Afrim	GEG ZEFI
Besim	PJETER NOSHI
Cen	GJON LULA
Gjergj	ISUF DURAJ
Lekë	SABRI HAXHIJA
Genc	RUZHDI PIRNAQ
Mr. Skendaj	XHEVDET SHIMA
Hasan Pema	GJIN BASHA
Burim	ARBEN BUHAJ
Cigarette Vendor #1	INJAC MARKU
Cigarette Vendor #2	HAXHI BRATI
Cigarette Vendor #3	EDUARD BEQIRI
Horse Buyer	FATMIR SHABAJ

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Nik is an energetic 17-year-old in his last year of high school in Northern Albania. He is embarking on his first romance with a girl in his class and plans to open his own internet café after graduation. His sister, Rudina, is a bright, mature fifteen-year-old who aspires to go to college. When a local land dispute results in their father Mark being accused of murder, the family is drawn into a deadly blood feud. The rules of the Kanun, a centuries-old Balkan code of law, force Nik, his 7 year old brother and the other male members of his family into virtual house arrest. With Mark hiding in the mountains and Nik unable to leave the house, the family must rely on Rudina, who has to leave school and take over Mark's business in order to provide for them. While Rudina flourishes in her newfound responsibility, Nik's frustration and anger at his isolation drive him to try to end the feud, even though it may cost him his life.

MEDIUM SYNOPSIS

Set in northern Albania, *The Forgiveness of Blood* follows Nik, an energetic 17-year-old in his last year of high school, who dreams of opening an internet café. He spends his time fixing motorbikes with his best friend Tom and is courting the prettiest girl in his class, Bardha. He has a teasing relationship with his sister Rudina, a bright, mature fifteen-year-old who aspires to go to college.

Life is turned upside down when an ongoing dispute over land between their family and a neighbor takes a violent turn. Their father Mark is accused of murder and the rule of law takes a back seat to the Kanun, a fifteenth-century code that gives the deceased's family the right to kill Nik (or any adult, male member of his family) in retribution. Nik is immediately forbidden to leave the house, initiating an isolation that could last years.

With Mark in hiding, Rudina must leave school and take over his bread-delivery business to help support the family. As a young girl doing a man's job in a patriarchal society, Rudina is presented with a daunting challenge. Yet this challenge presents unexpected opportunities, and she blossoms in her new-found responsibility.

Meanwhile, Nik finds himself trapped between childhood and adulthood – old enough to be targeted, but too young to have any authority within his own family — a modern young man imprisoned by a centuries-old tradition. His growing anger and frustration lead him to take ever-increasing risks to hold onto his girlfriend and stop his prospects for the future from slipping away completely. In the end, Nik's desperation will drive him to force an end to his confinement, even if it costs him his life.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Shot in northern Albania, where the story unfolds, *The Forgiveness of Blood* sees filmmaker Joshua Marston continue a story-telling practice he initiated in his debut feature film *Maria Full of Grace*. Marston turns a paradigmatic story on its head, and chooses as his point of entry the perspective of characters who are commonly overlooked. In turning his attention to the Albanian tradition of blood feuds, Marston is not interested in telling a prototypical story about these cyclical revenge killings. Rather than cross back and forth between two rival clans, he focuses specifically on the lived experience of being in a blood feud from the point of view of the teenage children whose lives are turned upside down when their family is targeted. The film tells a universal story about growing up framed within the specific context of a society caught in the midst of change, a society simultaneously connected to the 21st century through cell phones and the internet, yet also imprisoned by the past, due to a centuries-old oral tradition that carries the weight of law. *The Forgiveness of Blood* is a fascinating, original tale about a country not widely represented in world cinema; at the same time it is a universal, emotionally engaging story of two adolescents placed in an adult situation, and forced to grow up very quickly.

As in *Maria Full of Grace*, Marston spent a period of time immersed in a foreign culture, listening to hundreds of personal stories which, in collaboration with Albanian screenwriter Andamion Murataj, he has woven into a compelling, fictional narrative. While Marston generally arrives in a place with the basic idea for a story, it is vital to his process to listen with an open mind, searching for specific details which will ground his narrative, while staying attuned to what will make the story universal. Says Marston, “The research is often the most fascinating element of the whole film for me. That’s when everything is new, everything is interesting. It’s like an enormous puzzle and I’m just accumulating hundreds and hundreds of pieces.” Marston’s initial idea becomes a starting point from which to engage in a conversation with people about their personal experiences of a situation. In the case of Albanian blood feuds there was a lot to learn.

When Marston read about the tradition of blood feuds in Albania it was not the feuds themselves that fascinated him. Rather, it was the fact that they continue in present day

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northern Albania and that entire families, despite being equipped with cell phones and satellite TV, still find themselves trapped under virtual house arrest, living 21st century lives under a 15th-century legal code. Marston developed the general outline for a story about a fictional teenage boy leading a modern life, sending text messages and trying to get his first girlfriend, whose world is radically reduced when the actions of his father and uncle force him to stay inside the house for an indefinite period of time. Marston was also interested in the story of the sister for whom the family's situation presents an unusual and daunting opportunity. One of the most important things for Marston was to capture the feelings of surprise and curiosity that he himself felt when he first encountered the subject matter. Telling the stories of both a brother and sister made it easier to convey these unexpected emotions, and avoid creating a straightforwardly tragic or redemptive narrative. For Marston, films are most interesting when they can portray complexity and contradiction; so, the idea of a young girl unexpectedly benefiting from these circumstances provided an interesting counterpoint to the plight of her brother.

The first person Marston discussed his idea with was his producer and collaborator from *Maria Full of Grace*, Paul Mezey, with whom Marston had been developing a number of projects. They began by talking about story ideas for the Albanian project, and Mezey became a sounding board during the script development process. As Marston puts it, "Paul gets involved from the very early stages of developing a story. He's constantly listening and questioning as I make discoveries about the world I am exploring; and then we have conversations about how to translate those discoveries into a film script."

Marston made his first trip to Albania in March 2009 along with Andamion Murataj. The two had met months before in New York, where Murataj (born in Albania) had been living for nearly ten years. (Says Marston, "I started telling everyone I met I was working on an Albanian story. Sure enough, all of a sudden it seemed like everyone I know knew someone Albanian.") Murataj had left Albania after the fall of communism and made his way to the United States where he earned a Masters degree in filmmaking at American University and then moved to Manhattan. Murataj first agreed to travel with Marston as a sort of guide and interpreter; however, halfway through their first trip it was clear that the two were on a similar wavelength. According to Marston, "Every conversation we had – whether it was parsing an interview or deciding who to talk to next – was wrapped up in

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an ongoing discussion about the film narrative that was developing in my head. So at a certain point, it was logical to ask if Andamion would be interested in co-writing.” Aside from gaining a collaborator, it was important for Marston that an Albanian voice and perspective should be an integral part of the creative process.

Marston and Murataj spent one month traveling extensively throughout northern Albania interviewing families who were locked in feuds and living in isolation. They spoke with blood feud mediators, teachers who home school children stuck in the house, non-governmental agencies working to end blood feuds, police, prosecutors, defense lawyers and, of course, Albanians who had nothing to do with feuds but provided insight into everyday life there. “When I made my first trip to Albania I had read as much as I could get my hands on, I had studied my Albanian verbs, but other than a few specific images I had in mind, I knew very little,” says Marston. “Basically, I got off the plane with lots of questions and a list of all the sorts of people I wanted to interview.” Marston and Murataj had been in the capital city, Tirana, for less than twenty-four hours when Murataj began digging. Of Murataj, Marston says, “He was the perfect fixer. He’s social and he’s inquisitive.” The two were sitting in a café waiting for their first interview when Murataj recognized a news anchor at another table. Fifteen minutes later Murataj returned with a remarkably fortuitous discovery: the day after next there was scheduled a national conference on blood feuds bringing together some 300 feud mediators to debate a new government policy. “On the one hand, the timing was just dumb luck. On the other hand, finding out about that conference was the result of constantly being active and inquiring.” It was at that conference that Marston would meet several mediators whom he returned to time and again for information. Some of these mediators inspired characters in the script and appear in the finished film.

Marston describes being impressed time and again by the families living in the feuds. He interviewed a family who had been stuck in isolation for fifteen years despite having four boys, the oldest of whom was fourteen. None of boys had been to school; the furthest they dared venture was to play in the front yard, though even that was made stressful after the mother and father were shot and wounded whilst working in their own garden. Another family, who had relocated to the city of Shkodra, had been in a feud since the oldest boy, soon to turn 18, had been five. Marston had to promise not to photograph the family as they feared that any publicized images would make it that much easier for the

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family they were feuding with to target their eldest son in revenge. At the home of another family, Marston and Murataj were moved by the thirteen-year-old son who had not been allowed to leave his house in two years. When asked what he missed most, the boy simply said, “My friends,” and began to cry. As Marston puts it, “Sitting with these families was devastating. It strains credibility to think they are living locked up inside their own homes.” While Marston and Murataj routinely brought boxes of groceries and toys for the families they quickly realized that what the families needed most was some form of connection to the outside world. Upon returning to the US they collected donated laptop computers which, on their next trip to Albania, they provided to several families, and worked with a local non-profit to provide computer training.

The most challenging aspect of the research, as Marston describes it, was understanding the incredible level of nuance that underlies the codes and traditions of the feuds. There was constant mention of the Kanun of Lek Dukagjini, the code that dates back to the fifteenth century, but it wasn't as simple as just reading the rules. “Everyone was asking if I'd read the Kanun, which of course I had, but it's completely antiquated, referencing sacks of gold in payment for murder, for example. People complain that the Kanun is always being perverted but even the mediators who negotiate these feuds don't pull out the book. It's an oral tradition. So it's interpreted and reinterpreted to suit a party's interests.” The leading causes for the fights that spurred the feuds were disputes over land, road rage, and arguments about women. But this was only at the surface. What became apparent to Marston – something that would be integral to his approach to the film's story – was that everything revolved around pride, honor and ego: a bruised ego led to murder; the murder was, in turn, a black mark upon the honor of the family of the victim that could only be cleansed through retribution; and negotiating peace relied on repeatedly beseeching the family of the deceased to the point where “forgiving blood” would gain them more honor than seeking revenge. Says Marston, “Our research was a form of sociology, archeology almost. It's not that social scientists haven't studied this before, but when you're preparing a film, you're trying to understand everything through the lens of how the experience is lived, day in and day out, so that you can then bring that experience to the screen.”

Marston wrote extensive journals throughout his time in Albania and from these journals a script started to emerge. Marston comments that “I would often be on the road all day,

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then having dinner with people who we were interviewing until late. I would then go back to my room and at midnight would start a journal entry that would have me up until 4 or 5 in the morning.” Marston would then share his journal entries with Mezey via email so that by the time Marston returned to the United States after a month in Albania, Mezey was already up to speed on his experiences. This enabled Mezey to weigh in on the story development immediately and in an informed way.

As happened with *Maria Full of Grace*, Marston quickly found that his problem was not having enough information, but having too much: “There just isn’t room in a film script for all the fascinating stories, intricacies and nuances that you discover. So the challenge becomes how to simplify, how to make it relatable, understandable and compelling while staying true to the complexity of the story and the people who inspired it.” One such challenge was how to represent the mediator who comes to the Nik’s house mid-way through the film. Marston discovered that while there are a lot of mediators who are genuinely concerned about the people they represent, and have a commitment to resolving their problems, he found it more narratively compelling to depict another type of mediator he had come across: one who is looking for remuneration and actually has a financial incentive to draw things out. Marston notes that there was much discussion about the mediator character as there was not enough room in the film for two mediators. Ultimately, it was decided that the less flattering version was more central to the film’s investigation of blood feuds, touching on the economic side effects that families are forced into by self-serving mediators.

As was the case with *Maria Full of Grace*, the casting process was not simply designed to find the film’s performers; it was, in effect, a second phase of the research process. Marston and Murataj continued working together with Murataj now taking on the role of casting director. Together they visited schools, interviewing and auditioning Albanian teenagers. Marston describes his process by saying, “For me even as you’re seeing all these kids pass through, you can tell pretty quickly if someone is interesting for the role or not. But even if they aren’t interesting for the role I am still asking basic questions to understand more about my characters.” Questions covered kids’ aspirations, how they spent their time, how they flirted, how they earned and spent money, how they used Facebook and how they related to their parents, to name just a few subjects. To create natural, realistic characters Marston feels, “It’s important to understand my characters

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outside of the story as it happens to them.” Which is to say, before the blood feud starts these are kids whose lives are not defined by being in a feud: they are just kids who have their own hopes and dreams. From this approach to casting, Nik and Rudina’s characters came increasingly to life as Marston assimilated the anecdotes of more than 3,000 Albanian school children.

The casting process itself was a grueling one, with Marston and Murataj visiting nearly 50 schools throughout northern Albania. They benefited from the fact that there haven’t been many movies shot in northern Albania so the community was very receptive and interested in what they were doing. This tremendous support from local people allowed them to show up at a school first thing in the morning, set up a camera, and – with the blessing of the local administration and school principal – meet scores of kids everyday, interviewing them on camera. More challenging than the interviews, however, were the callbacks. The kids had no experience of acting so the greatest challenge was in setting up improvisation scenarios that they could relate to and, even more difficult, creating an environment where they felt comfortable. Marston and Murataj found that even if they knew what improves they might use, the best approach was to lead the kids to discover those scenarios for themselves. Marston describes sitting in a circle with ten to twenty kids and opening with a question like, “What’s the most difficult thing about being a teenager in Albania?” He says the answer was always the same but every single time it was fascinating to watch: “Instantly, someone would mention the subject of “mentality” – meaning, basically the generation gap.” But the generation gap was always felt differently for boys (who have more freedom in Albania) than for girls (whose freedom is not only reined in by their fathers but also by their brothers). Discussions would turn into debates, debates then turned into concrete examples from their own lives, and these concrete examples in turn became the basis for improvisations. “When every audition becomes a window into the lives of these young kids, then an otherwise grueling process becomes absolutely fascinating.”

Tristan Halilaj made an immediate impression on both Marston and Murataj. On the second (very long) day of auditions held at his school, Halilaj was the last student to step in front of the camera. Much of the challenge of casting had been getting the kids to open up, but Halilaj was immediately captivating, speaking for over 20 minutes and telling story after story from his life in great detail. It was clear that in addition to having a

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very appealing look on camera, he was creative and a bit mischievous. He was free enough and comfortable enough to tell stories about his misbehavior, his crazy dreams and...about having a blood feud in his own family. Though plenty of other kids had their own personal and compelling stories of feuds, what astounded Marston, Murataj and Mezey was the way Tristan crafted the story. This was a boy who had a clear understanding of storytelling and yet that didn't for a second get in the way of his open naturalism. Marston remembers, "It was very immediately clear that this kid not only had a rich and interesting life but also a tremendous ability to talk about his life. It is rare to find a 17 year-old kid who has that clear of a memory, is that articulate and that captivating in his storytelling."

It would be another two months before Sindi Laçeј was discovered for the role of Rudina, but again the feeling of discovery was instant. Marston recalls, "I've never told Sindi this but I remember the first day I met her I sent a text message to Paul – back in the US, which was not cheap and not something I ever did – saying, I think we found Rudina!" Like Tristan, Marston says "Sindi had a rare spark in her eyes, a combination of intelligence and vulnerability, an openness that reads beautifully on camera."

With Tristan and Sindi cast, the most important part of the rehearsal process could begin. Marston first wanted to define their relationship as brother and sister. This process involved a lot of improvisations around how they interacted, helped each other, fought with each other and got on each other's nerves. It was integral to the project to create a natural brother/sister dynamic and to establish an organic relationship of give and take. Marston notes, "They were immediately very creative and playful but it took some time to develop their roles and to define their characters as separate from themselves." For Sindi, the challenge lay in the fact that she had grown up in the city (Shkodra), was from a different social class from Rudina, and had a very different (much stronger) personality than that of her character. Throughout his research Marston had observed the way teenage girls from small villages acted around guests, down to details such as where they stood or how they served coffee. Marston challenged Sindi to meet someone similar to her character and conduct research. "I think it terrified her and her parents," recounts Marston. However, they found someone for her to meet and Sindi came back telling stories a mile a minute. "It was a groundbreaking moment for her in defining her understanding of who this girl was that she was playing." He goes on to

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say, “I think one of the things that was most exciting about it for Sindi was that this was a side of her own culture, of Albanian society, that she didn’t know.” By the time filming started, Sindi had taken it upon herself to use her research to model a character that behaved very differently from herself, down to the smallest detail of body language and posture, enabling her to take ownership of the story and her scenes.

Tristan also benefited from having a direct reference point, not so much for his character but for the situation his character faces. Marston introduced Tristan to the young man in isolation who had initially refused to have his photo taken when interviewed. “One of the things that was most fascinating for Tristan was to meet a boy who lived within walking distance of his own house, who had just turned 18 and had been living in isolation since the age of 5,” recalls Marston. When Marston first introduced the two boys Tristan said very little. He listened and soaked it up but at the end of that first meeting he asked the young man if it would be okay to come back and hang out. The two started a friendship, giving Tristan a means to research his character and giving the boy in isolation a new friend. Marston speculates, “They talked as much about the blood feud and what it had done to this kid’s life as they did about life in general.”

As casting of the remaining roles continued, film prep also focused on finding the main house where more than half of the story takes place. The location had to meet a number of requirements; for example, Marston needed two houses (one for Nik’s family, one for his uncle’s family) side by side, on one plot surrounded by a wall. After months of searching, the team finally found the perfect locale. But as Marston recollects, nothing in Albania is simple; the production team was constantly reminded of the pride that underlies the disputes that fuel blood feuds. After a careful and considerate negotiation with the property owner, the team, led by production designer Tommaso Ortino, set about a series of modifications to the house (building a staircase inside, for example). Two weeks later, life would imitate art. As Marston arrived one day to check on the progress of work, he found his way across the property blocked (very much the way he had written it into his script) by a man putting up a fence across the land. “The man turned out to be the “owner’s” cousin – he owned the second house on the property. We had been told he was out of the country and he would be fine with the filming.” The man, clearly, was not out of the country and was not fine with filming: he felt insulted and disrespected – not by the crew but by his own family. Says Marston, “In New York you

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run into this sort of thing on a film set and it's a question of money. Here it was a much more delicate because it was a question of ego and pride." The dispute took over a week to iron out and, adding to Marston's direct research on mediation, involved respected members of the local government. Says Marston, "It was a complicated and stressful week of pre-production. The whole shoot nearly fell apart. I have a lot of respect for the folks who pulled off that negotiation."

Marston enlisted Director of Photography Rob Hardy whose cinematography in *Red Riding: 1974* caught his eye at the 2008 Telluride Film Festival. Hardy and Marston wanted a sense of realism and immediacy to drive the film's visual style; however, they were also determined that the film be finely composed and use its photography to evoke the psychological mood of the characters. They shot on super-16mm, with a streamlined package of equipment. One visual theme that runs through the film is the repeated contrast between inside and outside. Delineations of light and space heighten the viewer's awareness of characters' isolation and add tension through the constant potential threat which is always lurking unseen just outside the house. Marston remarks, "Even in scenes that aren't taking place in the house, we tried to give a sense of definition between an inside space versus an outside space, with careful attention given to where the characters are in relation to those definitions." For instance, when Rudina is out in the world, she remains encapsulated by her dark cart. The openings in the cart act as a window frame to the external world. For Nik, it's a constant question about how far he is able to step outside. In the beginning, he is stuck inside the house, but slowly he dares to step out onto the porch. In one scene (when Nik's friend Tom arrives for a visit on his motorbike) Hardy and Marston demarcated a boundary with light, so that Nik is staring out at the bright and sunny garden while standing under an overhang, cloaked in shadow.

The story Marston set out to tell would not have been possible without the creative and financial support of executive producing partners Fandango Portobello and Artists Public Domain to add to the generous grants from Cinereach, Goteborg Film Festival Film Fund and New York State Council on the Arts.

Fandango Portobello came on board in May of 2009 at the Cannes Film Festival after Marston met with Janine Gold, Domenico Procacci, and Eric Abraham, already great

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admirers of Marston's work. Marston described his interest in developing an Albanian-set story in the Albanian language about a blood feud in the North of the country, and he provided a short treatment containing a draft narrative. Despite the inherent challenges of such a film, the team was immediately attracted to the thematic power of a very culturally specific but also deeply human story. Marston's talent, abundantly evident in the beautiful and taut *Maria Full of Grace*, coupled with his immersive approach to filmmaking, and the solid emotional core of the story, made it clear that this would be a compelling film that could resonate with audiences worldwide. After just a few conversations, Fandango Portobello confirmed their commitment and decided to finance the project.

Artists Public Domain (APD), a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting the artistic vision of filmmakers working outside of the commercial mainstream, was intrigued by the proposition of making a film exploring the phenomenon of blood feuds in northern Albania. After providing early support in the fall of 2008 to launch the project, APD later came on board to formally co-finance the project in conjunction with Fandango Portobello.

Also integral to the project was Cinereach, a New York based not-for-profit film production company and foundation which awarded Marston's project a grant in January 2009 and continued to support the project through Cinereach's production area. *The Forgiveness of Blood* piqued Cinereach's interest due to Marston's desire to explore this unique story from an under-represented perspective, and in a way that would transcend international boundaries. Other integral support came from the Goteborg Film Festival Film Fund and New York State Council on the Arts, which provided grants toward development, research, writing and casting.

The Forgiveness of Blood addresses "prestige culture" and the negative ramifications caused by the psychology of pride. The film captures Nik's evolving thoughts, both in terms of how he views blood feuds and his feelings about his own father's culpability. The film takes viewers into a world that they do not otherwise know, depicting what it's like to live under an ancient code of law. Marston adroitly looks outward, to the remote mountains of northern Albania in order to look in on an ordinary family grappling with

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oppressive, antiquated practices and their desire to assimilate into a modern world they are fast becoming cut off from.

ABOUT BLOOD FEUDS

The institution of blood feuds in the mountain region of northern Albania dates back to the fifteenth century legal code (*Kanun*) instituted by the Albanian prince Leke Dukagjini. It traditionally governed all aspects of life including marriage, property, work, church, and family. Among its many rules, the *Kanun* provides that the killing of an individual in one family may be avenged with the killing of a male member from the murderer's family. One notable caveat to the rule, however, is that men may consider themselves safe within the confines of their home. Beyond simply avoiding an ever-present mortal threat, staying within the house is considered a way of paying respect and amends to the family of the deceased. Originally established to bring law and order to northern Albania, the *Kanun* was used for centuries until it was banned by Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha.

Only one blood feud killing was recorded during the 40-year reign of the communist regime. In the vacuum created by the collapse of communism in 1992 the *Kanun* re-emerged as an unsanctioned alternative to the convoluted and overstretched government legal system. With rampant bribery, overloaded courts, and the nationwide ban of the death penalty in 2000, many Albanians came to believe that the state was not doing its job of settling disputes or properly punishing the guilty.

Since 1992 more than 9,500 males have been killed in blood feuds, with more than 2,800 families locked in these deadly disputes. Some 20,000 men and boys have experienced virtual house arrest, afraid to step outside because of an ever-present death sentence. The situation has become a serious problem for the second poorest European country as it tries desperately to modernize and gain entry into the European Union.

For families in isolation, life is turned upside down. Teenage boys stop going to school. Men stop going to work. Girls and women go out and take jobs to make the money that their stay-at-home fathers and husbands cannot. A teenage boy who might have hoped to go away for college cannot leave town for fear that, living on his own in another city, he might be vulnerable at any moment. The situation can drag on for years without resolution. It's not unusual for the family of the original murder victim to take its time to commit the revenge killing, preferring instead to torment the other family by forcing all its men to stay at home and suffer slow economic strangulation.

ABOUT THE CAST

Tristan Halilaj (Nik)

Born in Shkodra, Albania in 1992, Tristan Halilaj was attending Jordan Misja high school when he was cast in *The Forgiveness of Blood*. He has subsequently graduated. While he had never acted before, Tristan's natural proclivity for storytelling, his vibrant personality and his ability to access his emotions made the casting decision easy. He is now a first year acting student at university in Tetovo, Macedonia, and looks forward to a career as a professional actor in theatre and film.

Sindi Laçej (Rudina)

Born in Shkodra, Albania in 1996, Sindi Laçej was attending Ismail Qemali when she was cast in *The Forgiveness of Blood* and still attends this school. While she has never acted in film or theatre, her charisma and confidence set her apart from thousands of girls seen. With two years left of high school, she plans to study acting full time at university.

Refet Abazi (Mark)

Refet Abazi was born in Tetovo, Macedonia and received his BFA in acting from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts at the University of St. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje, Macedonia. Abazi has been active in both international theatre and film productions for more than twenty years. His film credits include *Trist Via Skopje*, *North Mistake*, *Hi-Fi*, *Osveta*, and *J.A.C.E.* Abazi is also a professor of acting in charge of Albanian language acting classes at the University of St. Cyril and Methodius.

Ilire Vinca Çelaj (Drita)

Ilire Çelaj graduated from the Faculty of Arts from the University of Prishtina in 1993 and has been a professor of acting at her alma mater since 1996. Çelaj has acted in over twenty theatre productions most notably *Caligula*, *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *The Glass Menagerie* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. She acted in *Doruntina*, a co-production between New York's Blessed Unrest and Prishtina's ODA Theatre. Çelaj also performed in *Baby with the Bathwater* by Christopher Durang and *Rock n' Roll* by Tom Stoppard. She has been in 5 feature films, 21 sitcom episodes, and done voiceover work in 78 episodes of *Sesame Street*. She directed *The Possibilities*, written by Howard Barker.

Çun Lajçi (Ded)

Çun Lajçi was born in Rugova, Peja in 1946 and went on to study in Prishtina, Kosovo. Lajçi has been active in both international film and theatre productions most notably in *Kolonel Bunker*, *Guards of the Fog*, *White Steps*, *Anatema*, *Dangerous Steps*, *Dossier K*, *Albanier*, and *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Joshua Marston (Writer/Director)

Joshua Marston is the writer and director of *Maria Full of Grace* (HBO Films/Fine Line Features). The film garnered numerous awards, including the Audience Award at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, Best First Film at the 2004 Berlin Film Festival, the 2004 Independent Spirit Award for Best First Screenplay, and an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress. He recently directed the Coney Island section of the feature *New York, I Love You* starring Cloris Leachman and Eli Wallach. In addition, he has directed episodes of *Six Feet Under* (HBO), *How to Make it in America* (HBO), *In Treatment* (HBO), and *Law & Order* (NBC). Mr. Marston received an MA in Political Science from the University of Chicago and an MFA in filmmaking from New York University. He has been a recipient of the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship and of residencies at the MacDowell and Millay artist colonies. Mr. Marston's films were recently added to MoMA's permanent collection.

Paul Mezey (Producer)

Paul Mezey is a New York based independent producer and the founder of Journeyman Pictures. Mr. Mezey has produced a number of critically acclaimed and award winning films including *Maria Full of Grace* which received a 2005 Academy Award Nomination for Best Actress in a Leading Role and *Half Nelson*, starring Ryan Gosling, which received a 2007 Academy Award Nomination for Best Actor in a Leading Role. His upcoming projects include the Louisiana bayou film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and David Riker's *The Girl*, starring Abbie Cornish. Other films produced by Mr. Mezey include *Sugar*, *Cold Souls*, *Momma's Man*, *Angel Rodriguez*, *Everyday People*, *Spring Forward*, *Our Song*, *The City (La Ciudad)*, Mississippi Blues documentary *You See Me Laughin'*, and *The Ballad of Ramblin' Jack* winner of the Artistic Achievement Award for documentary film at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival.

Andamion Murataj (Writer/Co-Producer)

Andamion Murataj is an Albanian filmmaker. As a cinematographer he has shot many feature and documentary films, among them the PBS documentary *Children Will Listen*. His films have won top prizes at the Tirana International Film Festival, Syracuse International Film Festival, Park City Music Film Festival, and American Vision Media Festival.

Janine Gold (Executive Producer)

Janine Gold is Head of Fandango Portobello, a joint venture between Italian producer/distributor Fandango and UK production company Portobello Pictures. Established in 2008, the company rapidly made its mark that year with Berlin competition title *Quiet Chaos* starring Nanni Moretti, Golden Globe nominee *Gomorra*, winner of the Grand Prix in Cannes and, *Mid-August Lunch*, awarded Best First Film in Venice,.

Janine began her film career at Creative Artists Agency before working for James Brooks' Gracie Films and The Thom Mount Company. She subsequently moved to Paris

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and worked in production on such films as Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden*, Larry Kasdan's *French Kiss*, and Daisy Mayer's *Madeline*. In 1996, she was Associate Producer of Susan Streitfeld's *Female Perversions*. Janine began foreign sales at Celluloid Dreams. She was recruited by FilmFour and a year later appointed Head of FilmFour International, where she worked closely with such directors as Walter Salles (*The Motorcycle Diaries*), Gus Van Sant (*Gerry*), Asif Kapadia (*The Warrior*), and Jonathan Glazer (*Sexy Beast*). Following the closure of FilmFour's international division, Janine set up Element X, selling such titles as Kevin Spacey's *Beyond the Sea* and Shane Meadows' *Dead Man's Shoes*.

In addition to foreign sales, Janine is developing a number of literary adaptations and other film projects at Portobello Pictures. These include *Wild Swans*, directed by Sergei Bodrov, *Darkness at Noon*, adapted by Ronan Bennett, Stefan Zweig's *The Post Office Girl* and the Zimbabwe set Ian Holding novel *Unfeeling*. She is Executive Producer on two original projects by writer/director Pawel Pawlikowski and is producing a remake of Gianni di Gregorio's Venice hit and award winner *Mid-August Lunch* and a first feature by Australian writer/director Hernan Bornas.

Eric Abraham (Executive Producer)

Eric Abraham is a film, television and theatre producer, best known for producing Jan Sverak's Golden Globe and Academy Award-winning film *Kolya* (Best Foreign Language Film, 1996). A South African-born former journalist and human rights activist, he became a producer of BBC TV's *Panorama* before going on to form his own production company, Portobello. He went on to produce many acclaimed television dramas including John le Carre's *A Murder of Quality* and the BBC TV primetime crime series *Dalziel & Pascoe*.

Films he produced included Roald Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World*, with Jeremy Irons; Jan Svěrák's films *Dark Blue World*, *Empties* and *Kooky*; Tim Roth's *The War Zone*; Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* and Jiri Menzel's *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*. As a theatre producer his credits include *As You Desire Me* with Kristin Scott Thomas and Bob Hoskins; Christopher Hampton's *Embers* with Jeremy Irons; the 2008 Olivier Award-winning *The Magic Flute/Impempe Yomlingo* (Crystal Globe for Best Opera, Paris); and Athol Fugard's *The Train Driver* (The Fugard and Hampstead Theatres). In 2010, he underwrote the construction of The Fugard Theatre in Cape Town and became its founding producer.

Domenico Procacci (Executive Producer)

Domenico Procacci is an award-winning producer and founder of the Rome based production company Fandango. Over the last 20 years, films produced by Fandango have won numerous awards and participated in scores of international film festivals including Cannes, Locarno, Berlin, Venice, Rotterdam, Toronto, Tribeca, Rio, Sydney, Pusan, Tokyo and Sundance. Procacci has won the *David di Donatello* Best Producer award three times for: *L'ultimon Bacio* (The Last Kiss), which also took home awards for best director, supporting actress, editing and sound recording, *Respiro* (Grazia's Island) and *Gomorra*. Fandango productions *La Corsa dell'Innocente* (The Flight of the Innocent) and *Come due Coccodrilli* (Like Two Crocodiles) both received Golden Globe nominations for Best Foreign Film. Other Fandango productions or co-Productions, which received multiple David di Donatello or Silver Ribbon nominations and awards include *La Stazione* (The Station), *Radiofreccia* (Radio Nights), *L'Imbalsamatore* (The

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Embalmer), *Velocita' Massina* (V-Max), and *Ricordati di Me* (Remember Me). In 2005 *Le Conseguenze dell'Amore* (The Consequences of Love) won five David di Donatello awards, including Best Film and Best Director for Paolo Sorrentino, having competed at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004. *Gomorra* won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2008 and was the official Italian entry for the Academy Awards in 2009. It went on to win European Film Awards for Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Screenplay and Best Cinematography, the Arri Zeiss Award in Munich, the Silver Hugo Best Screenplay Chicago and seven David di Donatello awards. It also gained a Golden Globe nomination for Best Foreign Film, a BAFTA nomination for Film Not in the English Language and was nominated Best Foreign Film at the Cesars.

Hunter Gray (Executive Producer)

Hunter Gray is a founding partner of Verisimilitude, a New York film production company, and of Artists Public Domain, Inc, a non-profit supporting organization of artistic film endeavors. He also serves on the board of IFP, the Independent Feature Project, which is dedicated to the support of independent filmmakers. Hunter recently produced the feature film *Terri*, directed by Azazel Jacobs and starring Jacob Wycocoki and John C. Reilly, and Mike Cahill's narrative film debut, *Another Earth*. Both films premiere in dramatic competition at Sundance in 2011. He also recently finished executive producing *The Loneliest Planet*, starring Gael Garcia Bernal. Hunter's past credits include executive producer on the documentaries *The Ballad of Ramblin' Jack* (2000) and *You See Me Laughin'* (2002), associate producer on *Half Nelson* (2006), executive producer of *Zero Bridge* (2008), and producer of the films, *Momma's Man* (2008), *Voy a Explotar* (2008), and *Memorial Day* (2008), as well as the short film *Eve*, directed by Natalie Portman.

Tyler Brodie (Executive Producer)

Tyler Brodie is a founding partner of Verisimilitude, a New York film production company, and of Artists Public Domain, Inc, a non-profit supporting organization of artistic film endeavors. In addition to *The Forgiveness of Blood*, Tyler recently executive produced *Another Earth*, directed by Mike Cahill, as well as Azazel Jacobs' new film, *Terri*. His past executive producer credits include *Pi* (1998), *The Ballad of Ramblin' Jack* (2000), *You See Me Laughin'* (2002), *Memorial Day* (2008), *Voy a Explotar* (2008), *Zero Bridge* (2008), and *Momma's Man* (2008). Tyler is also a co-owner of the record labels *What's Your Rupture* and *DFA Records*, which are based in New York City.

Gwen Bialic (Co-Producer)

Gwen Bialic has been working in New York independent film for thirteen years. Starting out on award winning projects like *High Art*, *Girlfight*, and *Personal Velocity*, she production managed numerous projects with directors John Waters (*A Dirty Shame*), Jim Jarmusch (*Broken Flowers*), and Michel Gondry (*Be Kind Rewind*). Most recently, she co-produced *The Messenger* directed by Oren Moverman; *Outsourced*, shot in Mumbai, India and now a show on NBC; *Staten Island* for Why Not Productions (France) and Europa Corp; and the Lou Reed concert film *Berlin* directed by Julian Schnabel. Gwen is co-producer of *The Forgiveness of Blood*

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Andrew Goldman (Associate Producer)

Andrew Goldman is a New York-based filmmaker and executive at the independent production company Journeyman Pictures. He is active in all facets of Journeyman productions. Goldman's short film *Bikini Lighters* premiered at SXSW 2010 and went on to screen at festivals around the country. Prior to Journeyman Pictures, Goldman worked in the writers' office of the HBO series *Flight of the Concords*.

Rob Hardy B.S.C. (Director of Photography)

Rob Hardy is a British cinematographer coming from U.K.'s Sheffield film and music scene. His short films as both director and cinematographer have won various awards including Best Short at London's Raindance and a BAFTA nomination. In addition to being a prolific lenser for commercials, Rob has, to date, shot eight features including *The First Grader* directed by Justin Chadwick. Other credits include the award-winning *Red Riding: 1974* directed by Julian Jarrold, *Blitz* directed by Elliot Lester and *Exhibit A* directed by Dom Rotheroe. As well as shooting *Is Anybody There?* starring Michael Caine, Rob worked with John Crowley on the highly acclaimed *Boy A*, starring Andrew Garfield & Peter Mullan for which Rob won the BAFTA award for Best Cinematography.

Tommaso Ortino (Production Designer)

Tommaso Ortino spent the early part of his career in Europe, after graduating from the Accademia di Belle Arti of Florence, and receiving his masters in film from the University of Paris VIII, in Paris. Since 2003 Ortino began amassing an impressive and diverse range of film credits including, *Sangre de mi Sangre*, Grand Jury Prize winner at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, *Against the Current* and *Toe to Toe*, both selections at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, and *The Good Guy*, a 2009 Tribeca Film Festival selection. His most recent credits include *Holy Rollers* a 2010 Sundance Film Festival selection released in May 2010 and *White Irish Drinkers* for director John Gray, a 2010 Toronto Film Festival selection. Tommaso just concluded working on *Someday This Pain Will be Useful For You*, for established director Roberto Faenza.

Malcolm Jamieson (Editor)

Malcolm Jamieson has worked as an editor in film, television, and the visual arts since graduating from Glasgow School of Art in 1991. He is currently on his second season of the acclaimed HBO series *Treme* which is his second project with the network, having previously cut the pilot for *Bored to Death*. Prior to *Treme*, Malcolm cut the pilot and three seasons of the AMC series *Mad Men* with show creator Matt Weiner (writer/producer on the *Sopranos*). In those three seasons Malcolm was part of the collaborative team honored with dozens of Emmy and Golden Globe awards. Malcolm has over nine feature film and documentaries to his name. Most notably *Diggers* for HDNet, *The War Within*, a political drama which premiered at the 2005 Toronto Film Festival, and *Down to the Bone* by Debra Granik. The latter won Best Director and Special Jury Prize for actress Vera Farmiga at Sundance 2004 and was also honored by the LA Critics Circle Awards. In addition to being an Adjunct Professor at Columbia University he has enjoyed teaching at The Edit Center, The Bolton Institute in the UK, and has been a regular at the Sundance Institute's Directors Lab, working as part of the editing crew.

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Leonardo Heiblum and Jacobo Lieberman (Composers)

Leonardo Heiblum and Jacobo Lieberman work together at their music studio Audioflot, writing, performing and producing music for all kinds of visual arts, mainly film. Their most notable credits include: *Desierto Adentro*, *Trade*, *Maria Full of Grace*, *The Maldonado Miracle*, *Francisca* and *Frida*. Their most notable documentary credits include: *Kassim the Dream*, *One Minute to Nine*, *Cocalero*, *En El Hoyo* and *The Devil's Miner*. Heiblum studied piano and music theory at university. Subsequently, he studied the *jarana* in Veracruz and music in India. He has worked as a recording engineer for Philip Glass for over five years. Lieberman studied guitar, piano, and drums and co-founded Santa Sabina, one of Mexico's main rock bands. He is also an actor.

Emir Turkeshi (Costume Designer)

Emire Turkeshi is a painter and Costume Designer. She has worked on critically acclaimed features and short films. Her feature film credits include *The Moonless Night*, *Alive!*, and *Amnistia*. Her short film credits include *The Stairs* and *One Night with Good Weather*. Turkeshi graduated from the Fine Arts Academy with a degree in painting.

PRAISE FOR MARIA FULL OF GRACE

'From the very beginning, Marston's movie, which has swept a path of success through the Sundance and Berlin festivals, holds us tightly in its grip.' – Washington Post

'Writer-director Joshua Marston's strikingly confident debut maintains an unblinking focus and sustains an almost unbearable level of tension. The drama is superbly calibrated at every turn and never predictable. By turns chilling and emotional, its suspense is fueled by keeping its gaze trained squarely on what's at stake for the characters and by steadily upping the audience's emotional investment in them. There's not a false moment in the performances, and Marston excels in the many scenes of intimate confrontation -- not only in scenes of high tension but also in the early action, notably Maria and Juan's mutual admission that they are not in love.' - Variety

'In his feature debut Marston reveals that crucial gift of blending acute observation with spontaneity, leavened with humor and compassion. What's more, in its vitality and finesse, "Maria Full of Grace" is all of a piece — and both artistically and spiritually itself full of grace.' – Los Angeles Times

'The movie has the freshness and urgency of life actually happening. There's little feeling that a plot is grinding away; instead, Maria takes this world as she finds it and uses common sense to survive. 'Maria Full of Grace' is an extraordinary experience for many reasons, including, oddly, its willingness to be ordinary. We see everyday life here, plausible motives, convincing decisions, and characters who live at ground level. The movie's suspense is heightened by being generated entirely at the speed of life, by emerging out of what we feel probably would really happen.' - Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times

'"Maria Full of Grace" sustains a documentary authenticity that is as astonishing as it is offhand. Even when you're on the edge of your seat, it never sacrifices a calm, clear-sighted humanity for the sake of melodrama or cheap moralizing. Even the airport interrogators aren't monsters, just everyday officials efficiently carrying out their duties. Maria's desperate decision may be reprehensible on one level. But on another, deeper level, it is an act of courageous self-assertion. You applaud every step of her scary lunge toward personal liberation.' - The New York Times