

Frank Capra Meets the Dardenne Brothers in Bulgarian Drama 'Glory'

A railway worker finds money on the tracks and decides to do the right thing. He gets more than he bargained for in Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov's absorbing tale.

[Eric Kohn](#)



"Glory"

Sometimes a simple premise leads to deep results. Such is the case with "[Glory](#)" ("[Slava](#)"), Bulgarian directors Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov's stirring third feature, which plays like a parable that keeps expanding its themes. Solitary railway worker Tsanko (Stefan Denolyubov) discovers a pile of cash in the middle of the tracks and, good samaritan that he is, calls the authorities. From that straightforward opening, "Glory" borrows a page from the Frank Capra playbook of working class men thrust into the limelight and disoriented by forces beyond their control.

Building on territory last explored in their 2014 feature "The Lesson," Grozeva and Valchanov utilize the naturalistic style of Belgian duo the Dardenne brothers — documentary realism, a slow-burn pace — where everyday social realities take on poignant dimensions. Those familiar traditions mean that "Glory" breaks no new ground, and at times its morality play can seem pretty straightforward. But it's so confidently directed and performed that even the obvious bits sink in.

Hailed as a hero by the propaganda-hungry government, the baffled Tsanko's experience becomes the pawn of a bureaucratic agenda. The movie's smartest maneuver arrives shortly after its inciting incident, when the story expands to another central character: Workaholic publicity executive Julia (Margita Gosheva), who concocts the initial scheme to reward Tsanko with a public ceremony. As the movie shifts between Julia's hectic image-conscious world and the lonely world that Tsanko inhabits, "Glory" transforms into a savvy look at the disconnect between two facets of Bulgarian society — though the

premise could apply to any number of settings. One can easily imagine “Glory” getting snatched up for an English-language remake.

It’s clear from the moment the media thrusts a camera in Tsanko’s face that he’s not the easiest symbol of civic duty, as he suffers from a debilitating stutter and doesn’t exactly revere the authorities. Nevertheless, Julia rushes the soft-spoken, bearded figure to a flashy presentation with the transit minister, where he’s promptly rewarded a digital watch. In the process, Julia snatches Tsanko’s older watch from his wrist, not realizing that it has sentimental value to the man and ignoring his half-formed sentences when he tries to protest. Adding insult to injury, when he wakes up the next morning, the gift no longer works. When Tsanko calls the transit administration to get it back, Julia tries to shrug him off, not realizing that he’s got other reasons to feel disdain for the authorities — a missing paycheck, and the conviction that his employers have been ignoring recurring criminal activities on the railroad responsible for stalling his salary. Reaching a tipping point, he finally decides to act out, and that’s just the first of several showdowns as “Glory” builds a firm sense of intrigue over which side has the upper hand.

The filmmakers deepen the emotion on both sides of the scenario by attempting to make Julia as much a figure of sympathy as the poor man she persecutes from afar. It doesn’t totally work — she’s the story’s antagonist, and even when she means well, serves as the story’s grinch — but she’s an electrifying presence nonetheless. Dashing between meetings and frantic phone calls, Julia tries to satiate her husband by attempting embryonic fertilization therapy, even as she remains uncertain about motherhood.



“Glory”

Caught between professional and personal responsibilities, her cluttered priorities lead to both dramatic confrontations and unlikely comedy. One great visual punchline finds her injecting fertilization drugs into her uterus while standing by her desk, shrouding herself with the country’s flag. Like Tilda Swinton’s fierce lawyer in “Michael Clayton,” Julia’s a complex figure trapped by immoral responsibilities, and Gosheva’s performance brilliantly conveys that divided state.

Meanwhile, Denolyubov mainly conveys Tsanko’s troubles with his solemn

expression; he only mutters a few words for the duration of the running time. Consoled at home only by his pet bunnies, he's such a fragile, tender creation that "Glory" enters tearjerker territory even before its biggest twists. But when it gets there, the script (credited to the directors and Decho Taralezhkov) develops a keen ethical quandary for both sides: Tsanko would make his life easier if he stopped meddling in government business, and Julie could just go a little easier on the guy.

Unfortunately, none of the other characters receive more than a few perfunctory traits, and mostly just offer crude asides to draw attention to the meanness of the system that gives the story its *raison d'être*. Yet even as "Glory" falls short of building out its world, it maintains just enough uncertainty about what might happen next.

Cutting between its two protagonists throughout, "Glory" builds sufficient intrigue around what might happen once their paths again. When they do, the filmmakers make it clear that two people with different priorities can't possibly stand on common ground. The abrupt, unsatisfying finale lacks the closure expected of this routine, but at least "Glory" avoids the trappings of a squeaky-clean conclusion. It's not exactly a happy ending, but as "Glory" makes clear, the most obvious happy endings are usually just myths.

