

Balkanisator

Just completed, and screened privately in the Berlin test market, "Balkanisator" is a major new Greek production that should find a slot in one of the big festivals this summer. A funny, ironic road movie about a couple of rogues trying to make a fast dollar, pic should perform well on its home turf and snag arthouse distribution in other territories, with Eurotube programs also an obvious berth. Familiar tale of the misadventures of a couple of wily characters who hit the road hoping to hit the jackpot, pic has a clever script, engaging performances and notably good location camerawork by Stamatis Yannoulis. It's the sophomore directing effort from Sotiris Goritsas, who made his mark four years ago with "From the Snow," which captured prizes at the 1993 Thessaloniki fest.

By David Stratton

With: Stavros Gerassimos Skiadaressis Fotis Stelios Mainas Eleni Yiota Festa Marian..... Sabine Berg

Stavros and Fotis are in their mid-30s and have been friends for years. They're soccer fans who hang out at the same bar. Fotis is single and still chasing every woman he sees. Stavros is married to Eleni, who is far more mature than he is; she's just discovered she's pregnant, and her husband hasn't yet gotten used to the idea. Fotis isn't too bright, and Stavros not a great deal brighter, but they foolishly embark on a get-rich-quick scheme that calls for converting Greek drachmas into U.S. dollars, crossing into Bulgaria to convert the dollars into the Bulgarian lev and then moving on into Switzerland where the lev can, they're assured, be re-converted into dollars at a handsome profit. They need a large sum of money to start with, which Eleni supplies by "borrowing" 7 million drachmas from her boss, who's away for a week. The men have to return the money by the following Sunday.

The first setback comes when they have to haggle with a usually friendly money-changer over the current rate of the dollar, and don't get as good an exchange as they expected. Undeterred, they drive in Stavros' battered car into Bulgaria, where an initial attempt to exchange money in Sofia proves disastrous when the money-changer turns out to be a cop who demands a large cut to keep quiet. Problems with the car, which keeps breaking down, add to the friends' woes. But they eventually make an exchange they think will net them a handsome return, and, armed with \$32,000 worth of Bulgarian money, cross into Switzerland, where they promptly collide with a minibus driven by a Turk and are forced into another nail-biting delay while their car is repaired.

As the increasingly frustrating journey proceeds, Stavros and Fotis bicker constantly about everything under the sun. Fotis is forever trying to pick up girls, and actually succeeds with a charming French tourist guide. Most of the people they meet along the way, including a Bulgarian family of Greek origin who are celebrating both a wedding and a birth, are friendly toward the traveling hustlers. But the news they get from an urbane representative of a Zurich bank puts an end to this particular get-rich-quick scheme.

Gerassimos Skiadaressis and Stelios Mainas are terrific as the two friends, with Yiota Festa contributing welcome dry humor as Stavros' world-weary wife. Goritsas charts the adventures of these hopeless scoundrels with affection and humor, at the same time providing a revealing glimpse into contemporary Balkan attitudes. Production values are uniformly excellent.