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42 Km Film Production, Les films du Worso, Komplizen Film  
PRESENT

# THE WHISTLERS

A FILM BY CORNELIU PORUMBOIU

Romania, France, Germany - 1h38 - Scope - 5.1

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# SYNOPSIS

Not everything is as it seems for Cristi, a police inspector in Bucharest who plays both sides of the law. Embarked by the beautiful Gilda on a high-stakes heist, both will have to navigate the twists and turns of treachery and deception. A secret whistling language spoken on the Spanish island of La Gomera might just be what they need to pull it off.

# INTERVIEW WITH CORNELIU PORUMBOIU



## **Where did the idea for the film come from?**

Corneliu Porumboiu: Ten years ago, I saw a report on the whistled language El Silbo, practised on the island of La Gomera. At the time, I had just finished my film *Police, Adjective* on language and the way in which it is used for political ends. The whistled language struck me as a possibility for pursuing this theme differently.

## **Your film is more edgy, imaginative, and seems to deal with reality less than your previous ones. Where does this new departure in your cinema come from?**

My film is very different from the others but it wasn't premeditated. The history of a secret language, used for criminal ends, was the core that determined my narrative style and staging.

## **What did you want to relate through the story of a corrupt cop and double agent?**

Within the context of a very ambiguous police investigation, I tell the story of a disillusioned cop, Cristi, who shows up at La Gomera to meet a woman (a femme fatale) and learn a whistled language. But things get more complicated and nothing goes according to plan. The policeman embarks on an initiatory journey, a kind of adventure with many turns and surprising twists.

## **What do the English title *The Whistlers* or the Romanian title *La Gomera* evoke?**

The Romanian title refers to the name of this island in the Canaries, a place to get away from it all, a lost paradise. The French and English titles refer to the mysterious whistled language that exists in many different places in the world but whose roots are unknown. I like to speculate that this language is our original or primal tongue, before that of speech. This island of La Gomera is closely linked to the tradition of these whistles. *The Whistlers* sounds very cinematic, almost like *The Searchers* by John Ford.

## **How do you use this whistled language to structure your film?**

The language El Silbo Gomero allows us to code spoken language, in a similar way to how film codes reality. So I started playing with the codes of very different genres – from the detective film or film noir, to the western or comedy. I wanted to tell a story with characters who lie, who play a double game.



**In *Police, Adjective* from 2009, almost shot in real time, an idealist policeman fought for a fair justice system and against corruption. Cristi, your policeman in *The Whistlers*, is more disillusioned and elusive. How would you define this enigmatic character?**

Cristi no longer believes in his vocation, he starts to work with the mafia and to make money from drug trafficking. He's a person who no longer believes in anything, in his professional life, his private life, and he seeks to escape all of this when he gets to the island of La Gomera. As a police officer, he is part of the power structure and he thinks he's in control of his life, but rather quickly he is caught up in a storm of events beyond his control.

**How did you compose this eclectic international cast?**

I looked for powerful characters, capable of marking a scene in the film within a very short time, with no more than their physical presence – a bit like in the big film noir classics. I had a few references. Gilda (Catrinel Marlon)

is the femme fatale, and Magda (Rodica Lazar), the prosecutor, Cristi's boss, is a strong and cold woman in the style of Marlene Dietrich. I chose Agusti Villaronga, who plays the mafia boss, to give this character an aristocratic side, to avoid the cliché of the mafioso. I wanted an offbeat and surprising cast and I chose rather atypical actors for their roles.

**Is this very dark film a comment on human relations and today's society?**

Yes, in my first film *12:08 East of Bucharest*, people talk a lot, ponder things, to try to define this revolution that eventually overthrows the power that was unshakeable for so long. In this new film, my characters are caught up in a world dominated by strong opinions, where everyone wants to impose their point of view on others: it's a permanent power play. In a dark world where everything must be negotiated, genuine communication functions better through a secret language that enables (for those who master it) the ability to extract oneself from the control of very tense human relationships, to be able to preserve a kind of sincerity. This secret language is crucial for Cristi, as he comes to use it for personal ends that have nothing to do with the criminal reasons for which he had to learn it.

**We don't immediately understand that Cristi is wire-tapped and suspected by the police. His character does not lend itself to immediate identification, but the film gradually reveals his secret to us.**

Cristi, a complex character, initially thinks he's controlling things but he's mistaken because very soon he is caught in a storm, a vertiginous triangle. He is no longer the master of his fate. In the end, we understand that the strongest characters are the women around him: Gilda, Magda, and his mother. The women are pulling the strings to move the story forward. Here, we understand that he is being carried along by the women. In the end, his decisions are not his choices! (laughs)

**Is the femme fatale played by Catrinel Marlon a purely filmic fantasy and/or the driver of the film-noir tale?**

She's the archetype of a woman who plays the femme fatale: she betrays the men, turning against them. Catrinel Marlon plays this lure very well, as an ambiguous and unsettling character who manages to manipulate others without them realising it. She succeeds in giving full weight to the scene of the kiss with Cristi, staged to dupe the police officers following them. It is a moment that reveals her power. In the film, she always knows how to play her different roles before the surveillance cameras and she masters some very tense and borderline situations. Gilda eventually escapes this constant roleplaying, gradually revealing herself to herself, and becoming a more real or realistic woman. All the while remaining a film character!

**How did you direct Vlad Ivanov to play this ambiguous policeman?**

I worked with Vlad Ivanov (who has often acted in my films) on unspoken subtext and on his voice, to make it deeper. His character, Cristi, is quite opaque and doesn't show much emotion, but he shows his hand at a key moment: when he negotiates Gilda's future with the mafia. He is madly in love with her. So we discover the truth about the characters only through their actions.

**There's an impassive, Buster Keaton side to him.**

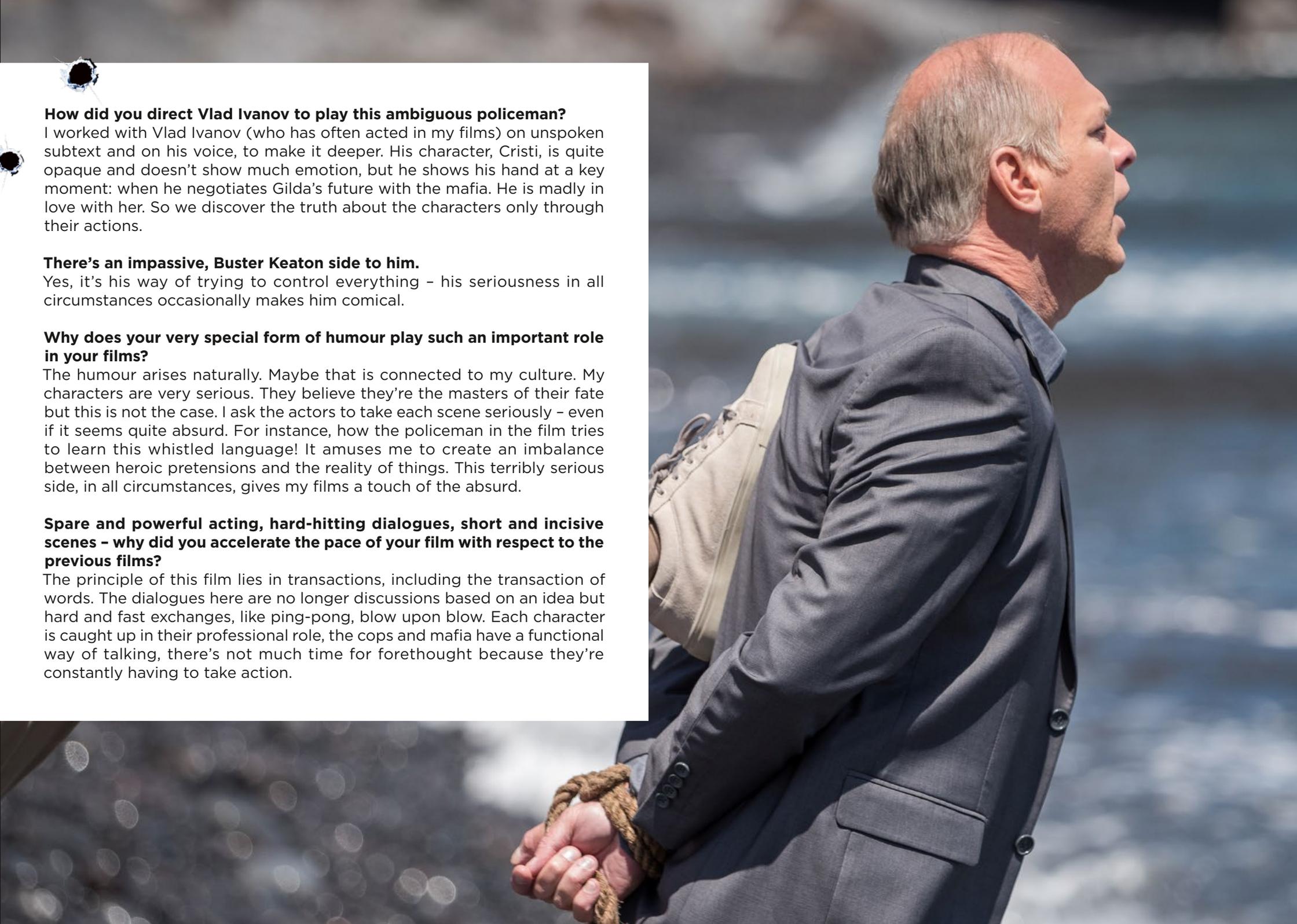
Yes, it's his way of trying to control everything – his seriousness in all circumstances occasionally makes him comical.

**Why does your very special form of humour play such an important role in your films?**

The humour arises naturally. Maybe that is connected to my culture. My characters are very serious. They believe they're the masters of their fate but this is not the case. I ask the actors to take each scene seriously – even if it seems quite absurd. For instance, how the policeman in the film tries to learn this whistled language! It amuses me to create an imbalance between heroic pretensions and the reality of things. This terribly serious side, in all circumstances, gives my films a touch of the absurd.

**Spare and powerful acting, hard-hitting dialogues, short and incisive scenes – why did you accelerate the pace of your film with respect to the previous films?**

The principle of this film lies in transactions, including the transaction of words. The dialogues here are no longer discussions based on an idea but hard and fast exchanges, like ping-pong, blow upon blow. Each character is caught up in their professional role, the cops and mafia have a functional way of talking, there's not much time for forethought because they're constantly having to take action.





**The opening scene, the almost triumphant arrival on the island of La Gomera, lays the foundations of the film: Cristi thinks he's in heaven but soon discovers he's bugged and under surveillance. He is in fact imprisoned by the gaze of others. Are you showing the degree to which constant monitoring and surveillance reduce the characters' freedom? What is your film saying about today's modes of communication?**

I was attracted by the idea of showing that in an increasingly controlled society in which everyone must play a role, a very old form of communication can allow people to escape it; to escape from this control and the constant power relations that determine the actions of each character.

**What is your relationship to reality, since artifice reigns here and everyone plays a role?**

Everything is connected: the characters are playing roles and I'm playing with the codes of language and genre. The visual references follow this idea. I didn't see the film any other way. Each character plays a role for others. Only Cristi's mother has retained a kind of sincerity and realism.

**How did you approach the very elaborate style of the film?**

The cinematographer Tudor Mircea and I were looking for a visual language referring to Edward Hopper, Alfred Hitchcock, and classic film noir. Arantxa and I – the artistic director, who is also my wife – decided to tint the various chapters of the film in rainbow colours, with each of the chapters bearing the name of a character who plays an important part in Cristi's story arc. We tried to establish a somewhat distanced, abstract aesthetic, to emphasise the idea of artifice and the roleplaying of each of the characters.

**How does the music – ranging from Carl Orff to Iggy Pop – add a very unique texture to the film?**

Music has a strong and important presence in this film with rapid shot or scene changes, since it permeates short scenes and quickly denotes a character's world. I also like to create interesting shifts using unexpected musical tracks. For instance, by playing classical music in violent scenes or action sequences. This is another way I play with the conventions of the genre film while subverting them.

Interview conducted by Marcus Rothe

# CAST

**Cristi**

Vlad Ivanov

**Gilda**

Catrinel Marlon

**Magda**

Rodica Lazar

**Kiko**

Antonio Buil

**Paco**

Agustí Villaronga

**Zsolt**

Sabin Tambrea

# CREW

**Director**

Corneliu Porumboiu

**Writer**

Corneliu Porumboiu

**Artistic Director**

Artantxa Etchevarria Porumboiu

**Director of Photography**

Tudor Mircea RSC

**Editor**

Roxana Szel

**Production Designer**

Simona Paduretu

**Costume Designer**

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