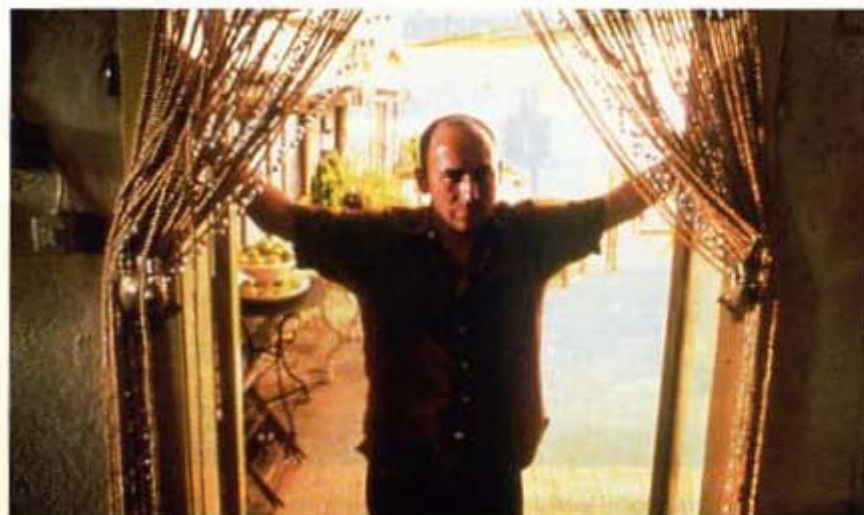


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Young Turk in old Rome

The Turkish director of the popular coming-out film *Steam* talks about his new film, *His Secret Life*, already a hit in Italy **By Michael Giltz**



Ferzan Ozpetek borrowed props from his friends to decorate a gay man's home in *His Secret Life*.

Turkish-born film director Ferzan Ozpetek has turned crossing cultures into a signature style. His first movie, the surprise international hit *Steam*, was one of the few films about Turkey to be released in the United States and perhaps the only Turkish film that revolves around an Italian gay man's coming-out. Ozpetek's latest film, *His Secret Life*, crosses gay and straight cultures within his adopted home of Italy—where it has become another unexpected audience favorite.

"The distributors here in Italy said, 'We'll distribute it, but we don't think it will be a success,'" says the openly gay director through a translator, on the telephone from Rome. "But more than 2 million people saw it—and for Italy, for an Italian film, that's a big success. And having people talk about it, debate about it, change their ideas because of it, that was the biggest success."

A subtle drama that marks a leap in quality for Ozpetek, *His Secret Life* is

about a middle-class widow (Margherita Buy) who discovers her late husband had a parallel existence with a male lover named Michele (Stefano Accorsi). Once the shock wears off, she finds herself falling in love with the world of this young man and his extended circle of former lovers and flamboyant friends.

The film's portrayal of this tight-knit group—with its casual inclusion of all varieties of sexuality—was new to Italian audiences. "It's not common to see a family like that in Italy," Ozpetek says. "Michele's family is not a blood family but a family where someone can choose his relatives."

Although no widows have been popping up on Ozpetek's doorstep, *His Secret Life* is clearly a deeply personal work for the director. It was filmed in the Roman neighborhood where he's lived for the past 25 years, and Michele's apartment was filled with items from the homes of the director's real-life friends.

Indeed, the film's chosen family mirrors Ozpetek's own, which developed

during a 20-year relationship that has since ended. Although he has a new boyfriend, "I have a big family around me because I kept a relationship with everyone from that time," Ozpetek says. "At a certain moment in the life of a man, you don't have to close the relationships, you have to open them up." Meaning a sexually open relationship? "Not like that," he says. "One lover and many friends."

The members of Ozpetek's blood family—all of whom are still in Turkey—are his allies as well. "My family loves my films," he says, pointing out that his two brothers (he also has a sister) have produced or distributed his last two movies in their homeland. (Ozpetek's second film, *Harem Suare*, was not released in the United States.)

Ozpetek loves shooting movies so much, he says that when he's consumed with one project the only way he can relax is to think about other movies he might make in the future. He must now be planning films number 5 and 6, then, since as we speak he has just begun filming his fourth film, *The Opposite Window in Rome*, the story of a young married couple who befriend an old Jewish man.

"But there is always something [in my films] about homosexuality," he promises. "In the movies, I first saw something about the gay world in the John Huston film *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. Not just that movie, but every one I saw after that with a gay character, I thought the movies weren't fair—the gay characters were bad. I'm trying to do something better."

His films' commercial success bodes well for his artistic mission, as does the fact that he's enjoying life. "I'm 43," Ozpetek says. "I like very much being in my 40s. When I was 30, I said, 'Forty is an old man!' But I'm very happy. Wait for 40. It's wonderful." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.