

## FLORIN ȘERBAN (1975 - )



Photo: Paul Katzenberger, 2015

### LIFE

Florin Șerban a Romanian New Wave film director who was born in Reșița, Romania, in 1975. He has a BA in Philosophy from Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. After graduation, he did an MA in Philosophy of Culture and Hermeneutics. In 2002, he graduated from Film Directing at U.N.A.T.C., in Bucharest. After this, he received an MA scholarship at Columbia University in New York. There he had as acting teachers Phillip Seymour Hoffman and John Erman. At Columbia, Florin studied directing and screenwriting with Eric Mendelsohn and Adam Brooks. After studying and teaching at Columbia University for 5 years, Florin Șerban returned to Romania and made his first feature film: *When I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (2010). The film had established actors (Clara Vodă, Mihai Constantin), actors debuting at the time (George Pișteranu, Ada Condeescu) and non-professionals (inmates from Romanian penitentiaries). It won the Grand Jury Prize at the Berlin International Festival, as well as the Alfred Bauer award for Innovation in Film.

Next he directed *BOX* (2015), where the main roles are played by Hilda Peter, a well-known theater actress of Hungarian origin, and Rafael Florea, a debutant. The film won the FIPRESCI award in Karlovy Vary. Then, Florin Șerban released the *Trilogy of Love: Dragoste 1. Căine* (*Love 1. Dog*) (2018), which won the CICA Award and the Cineuropa Award; *Dragoste 2. America* (*Love 2. America*) (2020); (the third film is probably due in the near future).

His latest feature film, *Hamlet*, is in post-production, with Cosmina Stratan in the lead role. Florin Șerban currently works as a director, screenwriter and producer at Fantascopie Films.

## FILMOGRAPHY

*If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* - 2010

*Box* – 2015

*Love 1. Dog* - 2018

*Love 2. America* – 2020

*Hamlet* - 2023

## AWARDS

- 2010 Berlin International Film Festival – The Silver Bear
- 2010 Berlin International Film Festival – The Alfred Bauer Award
- 2010 Cinedays European Film Festival – Best director Award
- 2010 Cleveland International Festival – The award for the best Eastern European film
- 2010 Santa Barbara International Film Festival – The best Eastern European film -Eastern Bloc Competition
- 2010 Annonay International Film Festival – Best debut award
- 2010 Zlin International Film Festival – Best debut Award
- 2010 Beaune Thriller Film International Festival - New Blood Award
- 2010 Transylvania International Film Festival – Best Romanian movie award
- 2011 Gopo Awards (Romania) – Best directing
- 2011 Gopo Awards – Best debut
- 2015 The Karlovy Vary International Film Festival - The FIPRESCI Award
- 2018 The Sarajevo International Film Festival - The Cineuropa Award
- 2018 Sarajevo International Film Festival - ART CINEMA CICA Award.

## THEMES

1. **Desire/Attraction** Sexual desire is present from two angles in *If I Want to Whistle*. On the one hand, there is Ursu's homosexual attraction to Silviu, and on the other hand, there is Silviu's physical attraction to Anna. We witness Ursu's desire for Silviu in the first scene of the film. Silviu, in turn, is physically attracted to Anna. From the moment he first sees her, he feels drawn to her. In this movie, sexual desire is a power play and it enhances the tension of the action. Simion is physically attracted to Irina from the moment he lays eyes on her. After checking to see if she has anything broken, he goes to the woods to masturbate. In the film, physical attraction appears as tension, as an act of desire to obtain what one does not have. There is great attraction between Anton and Beatrice, which is evident in the scenes where they make passionate love. Even on their last day together, they have intense sex and seem equally attracted to each other. The great attraction between Beatrice and Anton speaks volumes about their great love for each other outside of words and gestures. In these movies, the attraction is raw and intense, making for passionate love-making scenes and a loaded conflict.
2. **Violence** In *If I Want to Whistle*, there are numerous fights between inmates, Ursu raping Silviu is an act of violence, and Silviu taking Ana hostage is full of violence. The language is also violent. While Ursu's violence is justified only by sexual drive, Silviu's violence is owed to his love for his brother, whom he does not want to lose. The violence in *Love 1. Dog* shows Simion as an unstable man, capable of committing murder and crime. Simion is violent towards his dog, Irina and eventually, towards Mircea. These acts of violence remind us of the dangerous way of life of people living alone in the mountains of Romania. There are few acts of violence in *Love 2. America*: the fight between the two men and Anton's fits of rage. Violence in the movie is there to tell us about the unstable character of Anton and about the drama of his parting from Beatrice. In Serban's movies, violence is a trigger for the action as well as, most of the times, its denouement.
3. **Appearance/Lies** Lying seems to be the rule in the prison system of *If I Want to Whistle* as the inmates have to deal with oppression from other prisoners and power hierarchies. Everybody lies in prison, including Silviu, such as when he says he wants to go to the bathroom but goes to see his brother instead. Lying is a means of survival in this movie. In *Love 1. Dog*, Irina practices the form of lying which is hiding the truth. We do not ever learn who it is who beat and raped Irina. Lying has disastrous effects as Simion comes to kill Mircea on mere inference and guessing. In *Love 2. America*, we witness lying as Beatrice's disloyalty to her husband. When she returns from her date with Anton, she tells David that she has been to buy bread. David realizes that she is lying since no bread is brought back home and he is aware of the affair between Anton and Beatrice. It is hard to say that Beatrice is disloyal to David and at the same time faithful to her true love. Because of this great love, Beatrice appears to feel little guilt for her betrayal of David. David, on the other hand, is aware of the affair and is jealous of Anton. In all three movies, lying comes as a way of coping with, or overcoming, a difficult situation or an obstacle.

4. **Justice** In *If I Want to Whistle*, Silviu takes justice in his own hands when he realizes that justice has failed to do its part. In order to save his brother, he takes Ana hostage, as the only solution he has left for preventing his mother fleeing to Italy with his brother. In *Love 1. Dog*, Simion murders Mircea. Simion chases Mircea to the top of Mount Omu to kill him. Before shooting him dead, Simion asks Mircea to take a stone and hit himself on the head the same way he did to Irina. If the wolf had killed the goat, he would do it again, Simion says earlier to Irina. Thus, his crime is justified in his eyes. There is no justice for lovers in *Love 2. America*. Although we feel all the time that Beatrice and Anton are made for each other, their being together is curtly interrupted in the movie by Anton's departure to another country and Beatrice's return to her husband, David. Thus, no justice is performed in terms of love or of a relationship that was supposed to last. This lack of permanence is what makes the tragedy in the movie. In all movies, justice appears impossible, either as an act which goes against the law, or as man's self-imposed limitations.
5. **Family** *If I Want to Whistle* depicts family relationships through Silviu's connections with his younger brother and mother. When Silviu was a child, his mother, who worked in Italy, took him to Italy. And when she had a boyfriend, she sent him back to Romania. Silviu believes that his mother ruined his life. Silviu is very protective of his younger brother, whom he has raised all his life while his mother was in Italy. The theme of family also appears in *Love 2. America*, but through the crooked lens of adultery. Beatrice is married to David, but she cheats on him with Anton. Beatrice and David's is a loveless marriage and love is channeled solely in the relationship between Beatrice and Anton. Their love is so great for each other that it seems to evade the constraints of society and family. When Beatrice returns to David, it is not because she wants to get back to her husband, but because she cannot follow Anton to a different country. Family relations are marred in Florin Șerban's movies and we realize it is because society has too many constraints on the characters.
6. **Love/Caring** The most important love in *If I Want to Whistle* is Silviu's love for his brother. Silviu risks his life in prison for his brother. When his brother comes to see him for the first time, Silviu sneaks out of the security area to see his brother and to find out who brought him there. He then calls his brother and gets a cell phone with the help of Ursu to call his mother to the prison. Finally, he realizes that he can only keep his brother by his side by forcing his mother to not take him away, so he sacrifices everything in his life by attacking a police officer and taking him hostage. Silviu is also in love with Ana, a social worker. He dreams of making love to her one day and going out for coffee with her. In *Love 1. Dog*, Simion takes very good care of Irina. First, he rescues her from the forest after she was beaten and knocked unconscious. When she wakes up, Simion asks her if she wants to go to the village, but she refuses. He also asks her what happened to her, but she does not want to tell him and he does not insist. The main theme of *Love 2. America* is love. It is impossible not to be moved by the tragic ending of this love story. Both protagonists love each other very much. But of the two, it is Beatrice who loves Anton more. 'Do you think I would die without you?', Beatrice asks Anton, to which he answers 'Yes'. Beatrice cannot imagine her life without Anton. Love is very strong in all of Florin Șerban's movies, creating stories that are hard to forget.
7. **Freedom** Freedom is probably the most important theme in *If I Want to Whistle*. It explains the movie's title and represents the hero's hidden quest. After Silviu has taken Ana hostage and obtained from his mother the promise not to take his brother to Italy with her, Silviu has one more demand: he asks that he is given a police car in order to take Ana out for a coffee. Freedom represents an ideal for Silviu, yet one which he can sacrifice out of love for his little brother. In *Love 2. America*, despite his love for Beatrice, Anton's unspoken desire is to go to another country and be free. All we know is that he will be transported by cargo, probably secretly at night. This may refer to the fact that many people fled the country in this way during the communist period in Romania. In other words, Anton craves the freedom that he does not have in his homeland. Freedom seems to be Anton's real reason for leaving Beatrice, and a rather comprehensive one, given his great love for his mistress and ex-wife. In these two movies, freedom represents an ideal of growth and independence from the oppressive systems of the prison and of the communist regime.
8. **Crime** In *If I Want to Whistle*, Silviu's act of violence is an outburst of accumulated anger due to Ursu's assault and the pressure of having to save his brother. Silviu realizes that attacking the social worker and taking Ana as hostage will result in a longer sentence in prison and, in turn, the loss of his brother. He chooses the solution of crime as the only way to save his brother. The three crimes that occurred in *Love 1. Dog* are: the beating and possibly rape of Irina; the beating of the dog; and the murder of Mircea by Simion. Nothing is known about what happened to Irina, except for the marks from the beatings on her skin. She was so badly beaten that she could hardly speak or eat. The killing of Mircea is an act of rage and jealousy by Simion. In *Love 2. America*, we witness Anton's violence again when he enters the house after shooting the stereo and we hear two more shots. We might infer that he first killed Beatrice and then killed himself, but in this case the film does not give us enough information to draw a firm conclusion. The violence is there to show the passive-aggressive attitudes of the male characters and the devastation that such attitudes cause. Crime is present in all three movies because they are stories of passion and great love with big barriers in front of them.

9. **Alienation/Otherness** In *If I Want to Whistle* Silviu, is appalled by Ursu's advances, but there is nothing he can do about it as long as Ursu has all the power. In this prison culture, you have to be on good terms with Ursu in order to make phone calls, smoke cigarettes, and just be at peace. If Ursu has a problem with you, you are in big trouble. In *Love 1. Dog*, Simion is a lonely man. He lived with his father for two years before his father died, and then for the next 12 years he lived alone in the mountains in the middle of nowhere. His only friend is Gheorghe, a mountain guide. Simion used to live in the city, but it didn't work out because he didn't like people and people didn't seem to like him. He confesses to Irina that he was afraid to live in the city. When he finds Irina, both his home and his ways are plagued by a mysterious new existence that is very different from his own. In *Love 2. Dog*, Anton seems to be an alienated, lonely man, who cannot find his own place in his own country. Beatrice is his only home, as Beatrice herself points out. The theme of alienation is ever-present in the movies and it goes hand in hand with the solitary, austere landscapes shown in these films.
10. **Suffering** All of the main characters in the movies suffer greatly. Silviu suffers because he fears losing his brother and because he is assaulted in prison and deprived of freedom; Simion suffers because he wants to have Irina too much, only to lose her for good later. The two protagonists of *Love 2. America* suffer because they are about to end their extraordinary affair and because of their own inner turmoil. Suffering is ever present and it gives a bitter note to all these stories but it also makes the characters a lot more humane. Without suffering, Silviu's crime would be just a serious criminal offence. In the absence of his own suffering, Simion would appear a raw, rugged man who has closed in on himself for good. Suffering is what absolves the two characters of *Love 2. America* from committing adultery. Suffering makes all these stories tragic and adds to the drama in the movies.

## CHARACTERS

### *Brave*

Silviu (*If I Want to Whistle*) Silviu is a brave man as he confronts his destiny with audacity and self-sacrifice. His act of taking Ana hostage represents his great courage under the pressure of losing his brother. Silviu stands for the courage of setting up your own rules when the law system is unjust.

Irina (*Love 1. Dog*) Irina is a courageous woman who does not fear to venture in the wild mountains on her own. Moreover, she is not afraid of Simion's dog and befriends it, having the courage of going outside to greet and feed it. Irina is keen on her independence; this is why she is brave enough to confront all sort of difficult situations.

Anton (*Love 2. America*) Anton is a brave man because he plans to illegally immigrate, knowing that if he gets caught, he risks being killed on the spot. He is also brave in his love for Beatrice, having the courage to love her despite her now being married to another man.

### *Adventurous*

Silviu (*If I Want to Whistle*) Silviu is an adventurous man, as we can tell from his behavior prior to his taking hostage action. In order to take care of his brother, he lies to the guards and ventures well beyond the prison precinct and makes illicit phone calls. His last act of hostage-taking is indicative of his adventurous mind.

Irina (*Love 1. Dog*) Irina is an adventurous young woman. Probably knowing the dangers of the wild mountain she ventures on a mountain hike on her own. She agrees to live under the same roof with a stranger rather than be taken to the village. She has the guts to leave Simion when she sees that he has lost his reason.

Anton (*Love 2. America*) Anton is an adventurous man. He dreams of going to another country where he would find the freedom he lacks in his home country. His immigration is an illegal one and he risks his own life should he be caught by the guards in the act of trying to cross the border.

### *Asocial*

Silviu (*If I Want to Whistle*) Silviu is asocial in the sense that he does not have many friends in prison. We can see his resistance to the outside world when he interacts with the male social worker whom he attacks. Silviu is easily wounded by other people's words and actions.

Simion (*Love 1. Dog*) Simion is the most asocial of Florin Șerban's characters. He has lived alone for the last twelve years of his life. He went to live in the city once, but he says that the people did not like him, nor did he like the people there. The only person he relates to is Irina.

Anton (*Love 2. America*) Anton is not exactly asocial, but we can sense in him a certain inadequacy to the outside world. A man in his late thirties to early forties, Anton's only friend is David whom he gets into a fight with

over Beatrice. Anton is the type of man who is not well adjusted for society and his inadequacy may be due to the fact that he and Beatrice are not fully together.

#### *Social/Friendly*

Ana (*If I Want to Whistle*) Ana, the social worker, is a friendly and polite young woman. She smiles a lot even when she is under great pressure. She tries to relate to Silviu in a professional and friendly way but, seeing that Silviu keeps hitting on her, she interrupts the meeting.

Irina (*Love 1. Dog*) Irina is friendly towards Simion, even if she still hides many secrets from him. Simion opens up to her because of her availability and gentle manners. She is also friendly with the dog whom she feeds and becomes friends with.

Beatrice (*Love 2. America*) Beatrice has good social skills to the point, we could say, of manipulation. Her verbiage about the love between Anton and herself leaves Anton with no choice but admit he loves her just as much as she loves him. She knows how to speak well, is eloquent and articulate.

#### *Unhappy*

Silviu (*If I Want to Whistle*) Silviu is unhappy in prison because he gets abused by Ursu. Then he is unhappy because he does not want his brother to go to Italy with their mother. He is also unhappy because of his situation as a prisoner – he is not able to be with Ana, as he would very much like to.

Irina (*Love 1. Dog*) Irina is unhappy because of the trauma of having been beaten and raped. We can see this sadness in her eyes, in her slowed-down movements and in the melancholy air she has all the time. The relationship with Simion does not necessarily make her happier.

Simion (*Love 1. Dog*) Simion is unhappy because he has become jealous and obsessed with Irina. He cannot find his peace until he finds the culprit and brings about justice. He is an unhappy man also because of his alienation which prevents him from seeing reality and evaluating properly.

Anton (*Love 2. America*) Anton is unhappy because, although he loves Beatrice, he has to leave her. Anton is a man torn between love and the need for freedom and this indecision makes him an essentially unhappy person.

Beatrice (*Love 2. America*) Beatrice is unhappy because she loves Anton very much and does not want to lose him. She verbalizes this unhappiness and frustration of hers. Her unhappiness is even greater as she returns home to her husband after deciding not to leave with Anton.

#### *Aggressive/Angry*

Ursu (*If I Want to Whistle*) Ursu is an aggressive man. He attacks and rapes Silviu in prison under the protection of the night (and probably the guards). He gets into fights all the time and keeps on picking on Silviu. He is a rough man who uses force and intimidation to impose his will.

Simion (*Love 1. Dog*) Simion is also an aggressive man. First, he beats his own dog. Then he shouts out and tells off Irina. Finally, he shows he is capable of murder when he goes and kills Mircea on the mountain top.

David (*Love 2. America*) David is aggressive mainly because of his jealousy and frustration. He attacks Anton and the two fight. David is never aggressive towards Beatrice, however.

#### *Kind*

Silviu (*If I Want to Whistle*) Silviu's kindness might not be evident since he is a criminal who takes hostages. However, this act is owing to the need to save his brother and it comes with his own sacrifice. Silviu's kindness is geared towards his brother, and Silviu is able to sacrifice his own freedom in order to save him.

The prison director (*If I Want to Whistle*) The prison director is kind towards Silviu. They are on friendly terms and, even after Silviu takes Ana hostage, the prison director talks calmly and nicely to Silviu. The prison director is the type of nice person who tries to understand the needs of his prisoners.

Simion (*Love 1. Dog*) Simion is kind towards Irina. He rescues her, takes her in his home, feeds her and tends to her wounds. At first, this act of kindness is completely selfless, but then it turns in the need to possess Irina.

Irina (*Love 1. Dog*) Irina is a kind person as we can tell from the way she relates to the dog. She feeds the dog through the house window and then befriends it in the yard. When Simion goes outside to beat the dog, she suffers.

#### *Cruel*

Ursu (*If I Want to Whistle*) Ursu is a cruel man who does not care for others' needs and, in order to achieve his own, he beats, lies and rapes others. He rapes Silviu having no misgivings about Silviu's disgust of this act and keeps on abusing Silviu in prison. Ursu is a wretched, abusive man.

Simion (*Love 1. Dog*) Simion is paradoxical in the sense that he is both kind and cruel at the same time. His cruelty stems from his estrangement from the outside world and from the rough ways of mountain people. Simion is cruel towards the dog, Irina and Mircea.

#### *Unstable*

Silviu (*If I Want to Whistle*) Because of the pressure laid on him in prison, Silviu becomes unstable with all his efforts to control himself. It is enough for the male social worker to touch a sensitive chord in Silviu for him to become aggressive and hit the social worker.

Simion (*Love 1. Dog*) Simion is unstable in that he is blinded by his jealousy of Irina and this makes him react with rashness and violence. He kills Mircea on a mere supposition and loses his temper rather quickly in his rapport with Irina.

Anton (*Love 2. America*) Anton's instability lies in his oscillation between his love for Beatrice and the need to be free, to go and live in another country. This makes him unreliable in the relationship with Beatrice and is probably the reason why he loses her at the end.

#### *Loving*

Silviu (*If I Want to Whistle*) Silviu is loving towards his brother. He has raised his brother since the little boy was a toddler, and now that he is in prison he is trying his best to help his brother as much as he can. When Silviu talks to his brother, it is with affection and love.

Beatrice (*Love 2. America*) *Beatrice* is a loving woman. She is very much in love with Anton and she does not shy from showing it all the time. All her words and actions involve her love for Anton and she is tender and sweet with him.

Anton (*Love 2. America*) Anton is also tender and loving towards Beatrice. But he keeps more to himself than she does. We see this love when he loses his temper and when he asks Beatrice to join him in leaving the country. Anton loves and desires Beatrice very much.