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January review – Pinteresque winter’s tale in wolf-filled Bulgarian badlands

Andrey Paounov’s opaque but arresting feature turns on mysterious disappearances and wolfish arrivals in a deep dark forest



Petar and the wolves ... January Photograph: Svetoslav Stoyanov

Peter Bradshaw, Mon 23 Jan 2023

Here’s a bitter, odd, quirky shaggy-dog ghost story with a wintry chill. Award-winning Bulgarian documentary film-maker Andrey Paounov makes his fiction feature debut with this adaption, along with British co-writer Alex Barrett, from a stage play by Bulgarian author Yordan Radichkov. Two middle-aged men are shivering in a remote snowy hut just on the border of a dark forest full of wolves. They are the Porter (Samuel Finzi) and the Old Man (Iossif Surchadzhiev), and they are ... what? Forest rangers? Officials at a science research station? A third resident, Petar, has gone into town earlier, taking with him the horse-and-sled and his rifle.

While Petar is away, a sinisterly threatening man (Zachary Baharov) shows up with another man whose face is obscured by scarves, demanding help with his damaged snow plough. An aggressive priest (Leonid Yovchev) also arrives, demanding to know where Petar is. But then Petar’s horse returns, without Petar, and with a frozen wolf in the back of the sled. One by one, the visitors insist on taking the horse-and-sled through the forest into town, and each time, the horse comes placidly clip-clopping back, with no human there – just another frozen wolf in the back.

This weird little parable looks a bit like a middle-European Pinter, or a sketch of the eastern European mind paralysed by the ghost of Soviet communism. But then it takes a bizarre left-turn, switching from black-and-white to colour, pastiching Kubrick's *The Shining*. Why? I don't know. It's not a particularly successful idea, and in fact undermines the distinctive identity of the rest of the film. But Paounov maintains the movie's intense fixity of mood, and the effect is arresting.

January is released on 27 January in cinemas and on digital platforms.