



Emir Kusturica performing with the No Smoking Orchestra, left and right; Kusturica at the 10th Kustendorf International Film and Music Festival, below; with actress Monica Bellucci in his new film *On the Milky Road*, far right

DRAGAN TEDOROVIC ZENKO

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

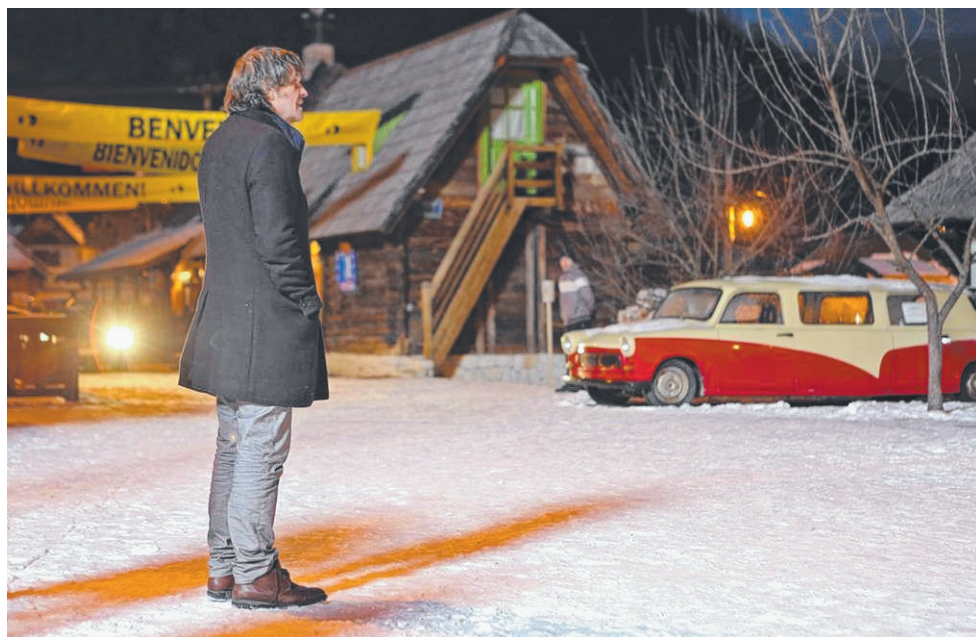
The threat of musical anarchy won't be far away when visionary musician and filmmaker Emir Kusturica and his band take the stage in Adelaide, writes **Jane Cornwell**

It's the opening concert of the 10th Kustendorf International Film and Music Festival in Serbia, and founder-director Emir Kusturica has sticks of gold confetti in his long grey fringe and an electric guitar strapped across his uncharacteristic black tuxedo. Five similarly besuited musicians on instruments including fiddle, accordion and tuba are seated around him, performing some of the tunes they have played on every Kusturica movie soundtrack since his acclaimed 1999 screwball comedy *Black Cat, White Cat*.

The band's name is the No Smoking Orchestra and it is fronted by the outspoken Kusturica, who is also a two-time Palme d'Or-winning independent filmmaker. And tonight the orchestra's turbocharged gumbo of gypsy swing, Serbian rock, Slavic folk and Greek and Jewish wedding music — a sound labelled “unza unza” — is being played straight and sedate, in collaboration with a big band from the Serbian city of Novi Sad. The threat of musical anarchy, however, is never far away.

“And God said, ‘Oh my God! What's happened to the human being / Wake up crowd / Wake up from your boring dream,’” run the lyrics of *Unza Unza Time*, the No Smoking Orchestra's frenetic 2000 hit; which, like most of its English/Serbian repertoire, has a left-field, anti-globalist aesthetic.

A capacity audience in the Noam Chomsky Theatre in Kustendorf, the wooden village Kusturica built on a mountainside in western Serbia, applauds warmly after each track. This isn't your usual mile-a-minute NSO gig, in which bare-chested band members in cowboy hats pogo and crowd-surf, and sweaty fans mosh and storm the stage. “This is dance music that one cannot resist because no two feet remain calm when it plays,” trumpets the band's biography.



SLOBODAN PIKULA

The 11-piece Serbian band will play WOMAdelaide this month, but tonight the focus is on Serbia. Serbian Minister of Culture Vladan Vukosavljevic has already made a short speech talking up the festival's policy of creative exchange between young directors and seasoned moviemakers, along with its mission to highlight local traditions and geography. Beaming at the minister's elbow, 62-year-old Kusturica — visionary, uncompromising, bullishly controversial — is a surprisingly avuncular presence, wearing his national treasure status as comfortably as he might a puffer jacket and chunky boots, Kustendorf's outfit of choice.

There is no red carpet at this bijou week-long wingding. Previous years have seen the likes of Johnny Depp, Audrey Tautou and Monica Bellucci — who features alongside Kusturica in his new film, *On the Milky Road* — mingling with international auteurs and fresh-faced representatives from the “new authors” category, whose short films vie for the festival's main prize, the Golden Egg.

Helming this year's festival Jury is the award-winning Chinese novelist and screenwriter Geling Yan, whose fragile beauty belies a long stint in the People's Liberation Army, and who skilfully negotiates the village's icy streets, variously named after Fellini, Bruce Lee and tennis champ Novak Djokovic.

“We have a good place here, far away from symbols of the civilised world,” says the bear-

like Kusturica the day after the concert, relaxing in the Library, a basement hangout whose walls are stocked with novels and reference books and bottles of Kustendorf's organic wine. “I used my authority with the government to bring roads, canals and electricity to the mountain. There was nothing when I first came except a haystack destroyed by [a storm].”

Boasting a film school, an Orthodox church, basketball courts (a tribute to the three world championships won by the former Yugoslavia), a wellness centre with swimming pool and even an attendant ski slope, the hilltop retreat is open to guests all year around. Fans from as far away as Canada, Japan and Morocco make pilgrimages to Kustendorf (which is also called Drvengrad or “wooden town”) in the hope of meeting their idol, one of the most celebrated filmmakers in Europe and a man regarded by many as a sort of Serbian Tarantino.

Kusturica has a pied-a-terre in the Serbian capital of Belgrade, though he rarely stays there. But when not making movies, overseeing the building of another village in the nearby Serbian Republic of Bosnia (Andricgrad, after Nobel prize-winning writer Ivo Andric), or touring the world with the NSO (more of which in a moment), he and his wife Maja Mandic live in Kustendorf, in a two-storey house with a helipad, single railing fence and wandering gaggle of snowy white geese.

Built for his 2004 film *Life is a Miracle*, and

set amid some 11,000ha, the village is a working model of what Kusturica calls “new communalism”. It's a political ideology he insists offers real freedom — as opposed to the restrictive liberties drip-fed by an anxious, corporate-controlled West.

“We have investments. We are ecologically and culturally protected. We pushed out a British company who wanted to mine the nickel here and made this area national park,” he says. Out there are deer, lynx and bears; *On the Milky Road* sees his character feeding wedges of orange to a bear from his mouth. “We are out of range from the new colonialists who would impose their bad infrastructure.”

He has said he lost his city, Sarajevo, the capital of the Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the war, and after stints in Paris and New York wanted somewhere to belong (he was last in Sarajevo in 1992). His decision to live in and identify with Serbia was seen as traitorous by many Bosnians, especially since Kusturica, who is descended from a long line of Bosnian Muslims (and before that, Orthodox Christian Serbs), rarely speaks out against Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian leader who ravaged his homeland.

Kusturica's metaphor-packed, parable-like films suggest an acute awareness of the contradictions of Yugoslavia's troubled history. He has always insisted he didn't choose sides: “Just because I believe in the identity and integrity of my country doesn't make [me] a xenophobe or a nationalist,” he told Britain's *Daily Telegraph*. He once challenged ultranationalist Serbian politician Vojislav Seselj to a duel in Belgrade; Seselj refused, stating he would not be responsible for the death of a naive artist.

“Do you see that line down there?” Kusturica points towards the beautiful, snow-dusted Mokra Gora valley spreading out below us. Somewhere amid the pine forests is the frontier of the Bosnian Serb portion of Bosnia.

“War is frequent in our area, which makes us a very tragic nation. As Andric says in his important book, *The Bridge on the Drina* [which Kusturica is adapting for the screen], wars never solve the problems that started them, but they open new chapters and ask new questions that we have to answer in a new conflict.

“Anyway, when I finished shooting *Life is a Miracle* — in which a Serbian engineer falls for his Bosnian Muslim hostage — “we built a town for the people, with no borders and no prejudice. A protest against this idiocracy [sic] of the mass product, which is the sign and the symbol of all the world today.”