A passionate take

ANA Kokkinos has just returned from Spain's San Sebastian Film Festival, where her new film, Blessed, won a standing ovation and the prize for best screenplay. At the end of the screening, the audience emerged from the auditorium and formed a ''guard of honour'' for her, actress Miranda Otto and producer Al Clark.

The Melbourne filmmaker describes it as one of the most moving moments of her life.

Closer to home, her emotional film about the universal and primal relationship between mothers and children is also striking a deeply resonant chord with audiences. It is not uncommon to see viewers sobbing when the film ends, audiences staying until the end credits have unreeled.

Kokkinos came to filmmaking relatively late. Now 51, her impressive body of work includes the 50-minute drama Only The Brave and the features Head On and The Book of Revelation.

Her films, many of which are made in collaboration with her partner of 23 years, Mira Robertson, share their makers' deep-felt interest in contemporary mores, multicultural society, migration, sexuality and marginalised individuals.

Almost all are set in the western suburbs, where Kokkinos grew up. Born in 1958, she is one of three daughters of Greek migrants who arrived in Australia four years earlier.

Her parents chose Australia, her father convinced that after World War II and civil war in Greece every future war would take place in Europe. He also wanted to be free of the rigid social constraints of Greek society.

"He could have had a more comfortable life in Greece than he ended up having here. He felt the social constraints of Greece were too much. He wanted to be in a more free and open society, which is why I think he chose Australia."

While her parents had ''certain cultural hangovers'', they were, generally speaking, progressive and open-minded.

For Kokkinos' mother, her daughters' education was paramount. "Because what she knew as a woman was that it gives you independence. [Education] is every migrant's dream, but I know that for my mother it was a passion because a lot of those women weren't literate in English or even their own language.

"In some ways I call them the lost generation because they were women who were shackled in many ways, by language, by economic circumstance and their dependence on men. It was those three things that particularly women of my mother's generation felt acutely."

The family settled in Yarraville, the only Greek family in an Irish working-class street, later moving to St Albans during Ana's high school years.

St Albans in those days was filled with new arrivals from Malta, Yugoslavia and Croatia. "It was a very potent mix; even in those days there was a lot of tension. It was not uncommon for that kind of inter-racial, inter-cultural stuff to spill over into the community."

She started watching "serious European art-house" films in her teens.

Though she didn't fully understand Ingmar Bergman's Cries and Whispers back then, she remembers the colours and the faces of the female characters. It was a seminal film.

Now she understands why the celebrated Swedish filmmaker became a constant companion. "He's the only filmmaker to have such psychological insights to his characters and sometimes the truth of what he uncovers takes my breath away in a way no other filmmaker can."

As it turned out, there would be a lengthy detour from her teenage years watching art-house films in the western suburbs to her own turn behind the camera. After completing school at St Albans High, she went to Monash University to study arts-law. ''What attracted me to law at that age was the idea of being a social justice warrior,'' she says with a hint of self-consciousness.

She admits she wasn't a great student, but says she was invigorated by student politics and political battles against the likes of fellow student Peter Costello. "We were all people who were going to go out into the world and change it; that was our view."

There was never any doubt that Kokkinos would work for a Labor-leaning law firm when she started practising. She joined Slater & Gordon. But engaging with people, hearing their stories and being party to their problems rekindled her passion for film .

Then came a fork in the road. She was offered a partnership.

She says that throwing in law was a very difficult decision: "I know what I've given up, but what I've gained as a filmmaker is extraordinary."

She completed a one-year postgraduate course at what was then Swinburne Film and TV School in 1991, where she made Antamosi, a black-and-white film very much in a European neo-realist style and in sharp contrast to the prevailing ''film school style'' of the day, in which three generations of a Greek-Australian family reconcile the civil war with the promises, both real and illusory, of life in a new country.

Her new film, set in Melbourne's unglamorous western suburbs, traces a day and a night in the life of a handful of disparate teenagers making their way in a harsh and unforgiving world. Halfway through, the film changes tack to reveal the mothers' perspectives of what's elapsed.

The film is based on the play Who's Afraid of the Working Class?, which she optioned when it was performed at Melbourne Workers' Theatre in the late 1990s.

The play, by Andrew Bovell, Patricia Cornelius, Melissa Reeves and Christos Tsiolkas, consisted of four separate but interwoven stories about working-class life in Australia and was largely a polemical response to the social impact of the Kennett era.

Kokkinos was drawn to its vivid and "visceral" characters, but couldn't see a way of freeing them from their theatrical origins and transforming them for a screenplay. The breakthrough was the word "blessings". This is how the welfare-dependent mother (Rhonda in the film, played by Frances O'Connor), the most traumatised of the characters, refers to her children who have slipped away from her.

From there, says Kokkinos, the idea took shape for a film where the central theme is the unbreakable connection between mothers and children. "Each story is a take on what that precious story is really about. Even though it may be fraught with conflict and difficulty, it's a universal truth that the children literally, physically and metaphorically return to the mother's embrace."

However, it is Rhonda's story that defines so much of what Blessed strives to achieve. Hers is a classic Greek tragedy. "In storytelling terms there's the climax, the tragedy and then catharsis, and from catharsis comes hope," Kokkinos says.

It is, she says, a love letter to mothers, a film of life and hope.. Kokkinos' mother died before her daughter made Only The Brave, which was inspired by Ana's experiences of her childhood and adolescence.

The filmmaker was 21 when she came out, and for a long time afterwards the topic was not discussed. But after they met her partner - Mira Robertson, who is also a screenwriter - and sensing that she would be around for a while - her parents accepted the relationship.

She and Mira were bound closer to the family when her mother died, says Kokkinos. ''Not that my mother had a resistance, but death brings a family together in ways that perhaps weren't there before.''

She chose not to have children, but half-jokes that on the set of her films she plays an ''uber-mum''.

Almost all of Kokkinos' films are set in the western suburbs. They are often tagged as bleak and pessimistic, descriptions that miss the point of what the films are saying. As one of the mothers says to one of the children in Blessed: "You're not bad. Not really. Being poor is bad. Being hungry is bad. Having no decent education is bad."

Says Kokkinos: "There's no doubt that there's bleakness is certain parts of the city. Growing up in St Albans was bleak, there's no other way to describe it. No one's invested in proper infrastructure out there for years.

"You go back out there and it hasn't changed. I guess that if you live in leafy streets in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne that have constant upgrading of infrastructure and amenities. When you look at some of the landscapes in my films, they're not that pretty, but that is the reality.

"Part of the reason I've wanted to tell these stories is to highlight those social inequities. To me it's an outrage that when I grew up in the western suburbs it was a socially disadvantaged area. I go back out there and shoot films there now and it's largely the same.

"Why is that? Why after all the incredible economic development that's occurred in this country do we still have those profound social inequities in those areas? To me, that is outrageous, it's unacceptable.

"One of the reasons I went to university is when Whitlam opened the floodgates for students to have access to free education, people like me went to university. If I now was in a similar position, the likelihood of me going to uni would be zero because of the user-pays system. I accept that things move on, but those inequities are just as entrenched today as when I grew up."

CRUCIALLY, while the characters of most of her films, and particularly those in Blessed, are trapped, she doesn't regard them as victims.

"They have great courage, great dignity, great senses of humour. Even though they may be down and out or struggling with a particular issue, they're feisty, they allow their vulnerability to come to the surface but they also have a lot of chutzpah and bravado.

"That was something I always felt, that as screen characters they had a lot to offer an audience."

Many filmmakers depict working-class characters as miserable and at worst inarticulate, she says. "My experience of growing up in the western suburbs wasn't that everyone was inarticulate or stupid. In fact, the opposite, people read books, they were engaged in everyday life, there's a vibrancy out there that continues to exist. I didn't plan it, but it's ended up being a place that I could go back to because I knew it from the inside."

She makes no apologies for creating films that make demands on the audience and often stray into emotionally raw and tough territory. "We have the capacity to make intelligent films for intelligent audiences and that's to be celebrated."

As a filmmaker Kokkinos makes heavy demands on herself and her collaborators. A lot of what she did during the 10-plus years it took to develop Blessed was "hold it close and protect it".

"On this film, though I didn't write, I tenaciously did not let anyone read the script until I felt that we'd gone as far as we could go with it ... I think I've been vindicated because you end up making a piece of work that is true to itself."

To her joy, European journalists at San Sebastian didn't feel the need to ask why she hadn't made a "happy" film. "One of the first questions I was asked at the press conference at San Sebastian was, 'It seems to me this film is about love.' I said, yes, it's about the struggle to love and be loved.

''That's the departure point in Europe. They're not coming to the film saying why aren't we making more commercial films? They're coming to the film from the experience you've just offered them.

"The question for us as an industry and for the media is how do we break that really negative, facile engagement with Australian film so that we genuinely look at the film that's been made and ask: what is it telling us, is it a good film or not very good film, what is the filmmaker trying to say?"

Article from The Age