

1999 Sydney Film Festival

Works of genuine artistry, worthy efforts and some others

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15 July 1999

Every film festival presents its patrons with a dilemma. What to choose from the large and varied array of work screened? What "cinematic windows" to look through? The general principle that I follow is to first see the movies recommended by WSWs reviewers from other film festivals. This is imperative given that the majority of these films will never be shown on commercial release in any Australian cinemas.

Next, I try to watch a broad cross-section of work from new and leading international filmmakers, as well as the latest work of veteran directors. And finally, if the opportunity arises, view any classic films on show. Fulfillment of all these priorities is rarely possible, but a cut in the Sydney Film Festival's duration this year, from 15 to 12 days, made the selection process even more difficult.

This year's festival, which screened more than 150 films from 43 countries, included several inspiring and artistically convincing works by directors deeply concerned with the human condition. The most outstanding included Bertrand Tavernier's *It All Starts Today*; *The Hole* by Tsia Ming-liang, *The Power of Kangwon Province* by Hong Sang-Soo; *The Adopted Son* by Aktan Abdykalykov; Ken Loach's *My Name is Joe* and Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (see links to WSWs reviews of these films below). Many of the images, characters and events depicted in these films will resonate with me for years.

The festival also featured some thoughtful and challenging works from Italy, Brazil, China, Iran, Indonesia and Senegal. Although not on the same artistic level as those previously mentioned, these films reveal that many filmmakers are thoroughly dissatisfied with tired cinematic platitudes and are attempting to explore some of the complex issues confronting humanity at the end of the 20th century.

Children of Heaven, written and directed by Iranian director Majid Majidi, was one of the better films. A sensitive warm-hearted story set in a Tehran working class district, it deals with the problems that arise after a young boy (Ali) loses his sister Zohre's only pair of shoes. The family is poor and so Ali, with the reluctant support of his sister, decides to keep the loss a secret from their parents. Ali persuades Zohre that they must share his worn-out sandshoes until the family's finances improve. Zohre will wear the shoes in the morning, Ali in the afternoon.

Life, once so simple, has now become extremely complicated and full of stress. Ali's father is unemployed and there seems little hope that the family's economic fortunes will change. Ali, who must wait until midday each day for the sandshoes, is always late for school and constantly in trouble with his teachers. He lives in fear of his parents discovering that he lost his sister's shoes.

A ray of hope appears in the form of an inter-school running competition and the chance to win a new set of running shoes. This challenge, however, is complicated by the fact that the new shoes are for third place in the competition. Ali, who has the ability to win, must pace

himself, dampen the enthusiasm of his teachers and come in third.

This meticulously crafted film has many similarities to *The White Balloon* by Jafar Panahi, and is produced with the same confidence that simple stories involving ordinary children will reach audiences of all backgrounds. Like that movie, *Children of Heaven* mainly uses non-professional actors.

Majidi, who was born in Tehran in 1959 and began his film career as an actor, has been able to extract extraordinary performances from the young actors. An interesting feature of the film is its subtle but insistent exposure of the class divide in Iranian society. Given the strict censorship and prevailing political conditions in Iran, this aspect of the film is quite unique.

Rehearsals for War, directed and written by Mario Martone, is a thoughtful and multi-layered work about a poor Neapolitan theatre company preparing to stage a solidarity performance of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* in Sarajevo, during the Bosnian war. (Aeschylus' ancient classic, set during a civil war and city siege, is a terrifyingly vivid portrayal of the psychological terror, delirium and breakdown in social relations produced by war.) Leo, a young actor and the film's main character, conceived of the project in response to a friendship with a Bosnian director he had met before the war.

The rehearsals take place in a run-down theatre in Naples' Spanish Quarter where the everyday life of the locals and the rehearsals constantly intersect. Poverty, unemployment, neighbourhood disputes, police harassment and the activities of small-time gangsters intertwine with the work of the actors. The passion of the dedicated young actors, willing to risk their lives or careers in the dangerous plan to perform in the midst of the war, is contrasted with the complacency of the Civic Theatre, an established and well-funded theatre company in the city.

Short of funds, Leo is forced to turn to the Civic Theatre and its cynical director in order to keep his production alive. The Civic's director agrees to help Leo if he allows Sara Cataldi, a well-known star, to perform in the play and thus release her from an expensive contractual arrangement with the Civic Theatre.

As the date approaches for the Bosnian performance, the district where rehearsals have been taking place becomes embroiled in its own conflict, with a murder and the eruption of a bloody struggle between local gangs over who will control the area. Leo also learns that a grenade has killed his friend in Sarajevo and that *Seven Against Thebes* cannot go ahead in Bosnia. The film ends with the Civic Theatre company celebrating its latest performance and wondering whatever happened to Leo's company.

Mario Martone, who has 20-year career in Italian theatre, is the founder of Falso Movimento, Italy's best-known avant-garde performing group. He assembled the film from footage shot during rehearsals of his 1995 stage production of the Aeschylus classic, together with scripted scenes

filmed two years later in Naples' Spanish Quarter. Martone has explained that he made the film out of concern that his generation had no understanding of the tragic events in Yugoslavia.

"Are there any words that can be said about what has happened? All words seems to fall on deaf ears, crushed as they are by the images of horror that poured into our homes through the live war broadcasts on TV. The ideological confusion clouds our ideas and makes it difficult to distinguish between right and wrong and victims and aggressors ... I decided to make this film to penetrate the void," he said.

Unfortunately, in spite of capable performances from a strong cast and the almost seamless merging of the rehearsals, actors' lives and the local Neapolitan population, *Rehearsals for War* falls short of his aim. And while Martone is certainly not obliged to produce an historical thesis, little is explained about what produced the Yugoslav tragedy, either directly or symbolically. Nor is this weakness overcome by simply making comparisons between Sarajevo and Aeschylus' ancient Thebes.

Despite these problems, Martone's third feature undermines any conception that civil war, of the type seen in Yugoslavia over the last decade, could not erupt in another European country. In fact, the constant references to the social conditions in Naples blur the line between that city and wartime Sarajevo, underlining the universal character of the problems facing ordinary people everywhere.

Friendly Fire, from Brazil, is the second feature by Beto Brant. This short dramatic film tells the story of four friends previously involved in the armed underground resistance to the Brazilian military dictatorship in the late 1960s and earlier 70s. All were jailed, tortured or lost close friends and loved ones.

The film begins with the now-middle-aged men reuniting, apparently for a fishing trip. But Miguel, one of the four who has remained politically active, has brought his three friends together in order to hunt down and exact revenge on one of the police officers responsible for horrendous torture of the men 25 years earlier.

According to official government records the police officer died. In fact he was moved to another part of the country and provided with a new identity. Miguel, who has discovered the torturer's location, eventually persuades his three companions that they must execute the former policeman. Miguel's plan turns into a bloody tragedy after the dying ex-police officer declares that one of the four is an informer and responsible for the previous capture and the death of their former comrades and lovers.

Friendly Fire, recreates, through a series of flashback sequences, the arrest and torture of the four men, the brutality of the military regime, and the suppression all popular opposition. And for those with some understanding of Brazilian history in the early 1970s, these sequences also point to the fact that the urban guerrilla groups, and their perspective of bank-robberies and terror against the regime, had reached a dead-end.

The main weakness of *Friendly Fire* is its tendency to skim the surface of the political and emotional issues it raises. The film is surprisingly shortâ€”only 76 minutesâ€”for such a serious subject, no doubt indicating that countless unresolved political and emotional questions still remain from this period of Brazilian history.

Several films were shown dealing with youth poverty. They included *From the Edge of the City* (Greece), *Leaf on a Pillow* (Indonesia) and *The Little Girl Who Sold "The Sun"*.

Leaf on a Pillow, which will be reviewed in a later article, is a sincere drama dealing with the situation facing homeless youth in Indonesia. *From the Edge of the City* by Constantinos Giannaris, is about teenagers of Greek ethnic origins who grew up in Russia and, following the liquidation of the Soviet Union, have come to live on the outskirts of Athens. A subject with much potential, the film is pretentious and tends to worship the cycle of drug-taking, petty thievery, whoring and other activities dominating the lives of these young men.

The best *The of Little Girl Who Sold "The Sun"* last film produced by Djibril Diop Mambety, an acclaimed Senegalese director who died, aged 53, in Paris last year whilst undergoing cancer treatment. Mambety, who began working in films as an actor, made eight films and is most well known for *Hyenas* (1992) and *Le Franc* (1993). His low-budget films are short optimistic pieces about Senegal's poorâ€”villagers, workers and street people.

The Little Girl Who Sold "The Sun" is about a Sili, a crippled young street girl in Dakar. Sili, who can only move around with the assistance of crutches, begs near young boys hawking the local daily newspaper. One day after the rough boys knock her to the ground and humiliate her, she decides to stop begging and sell newspapers like everyone else. Her first day selling is an immediate success but then she has to face new attempts by other newspaper hawkers to intimidate or drive her away. This sparse but beautiful film about courage and determination is the second of a series of films entitled *Stories of Ordinary People*.

The first in Mambety's series was the prize-winning *Le Franc*, which concerns a poverty-stricken street musician in Dakar, way behind in his rent, who finds some money and buys a lottery ticket. The ticket wins but because the ticket is stuck to his door, the only way he can collect his winnings is by presenting the door. The story centres on his attempts to claim the prize.

Commenting on the series Mambety said: "Ordinary people are important because they are the only ones who are consistent. They are the only people who are naïve, which is why courage is theirs ... It is also a way of paying a tribute to the courage of street children. The love of children encourages me to defy the old, the corrupt and those who are rich, without being rich in their souls."

Many of the films screened, however, failed to approach the simple honesty of *The Little Girl Who Sold "The Sun"*, or even attempt to deepen the audience's sensitivities to society and life in general. This is no surprise, considering the political confusion and troubled times in which we live. But a sincere attempt to produce an authentic work, even if it fails, is superior to those that never even attempt to go beyond the usual clichés.

Perhaps the most frustrating films screened were picture postcard-style worksâ€”the cinematic equivalents of vacuous coffee-table booksâ€”that combine spectacularly photographed scenery with mysticism or confused calls for a return to the simplicities of pre-capitalist society. *The Tree of Life*, *Heart of Light*, and *Under California: The Limit of Time* fit into this category.

The Tree of Life from Iran, written and directed by Farhad Mehranfa, is a part documentary, part folk-tale, romanticising nomadic life in the spectacular Talesh Mountains, in northern Iran. The film appears to be an attempt to emulate Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* but lacks the poetry or soul of that film. It has no real character development and relies almost entirely on the scenery and costumes to maintain audience interest. The film's central message is direct but superficialâ€”life would be healthier and happier if this supposedly idyllic existence could be protected from encroaching modern civilisation.

Heart of Light, directed by Jacob Gronlykke, is the first full-length feature film produced in the Inuit language. Set and filmed entirely in Greenland by a Danish production company, *Heart of Light* is a confused film. Early scenes consist of a fairly accurate and convincing portrayal of the life and social problems confronting native Greenlanders. The second half is self-indulgent and mystical.

The film's main protagonist is Rasmus Lynge, a native-born Greenlandic whose father supported Danish control of the vast island. Rasmus' father dreamed of a modern Greenland, a place of social reform and plenty. The reality, however, for Greenlanders is a disaster with poverty, unemployment, sub-standard housing and education, and rampant alcoholism. Rasmus, who attempts to maintain old customs and traditions,

has a serious drinking problem and is losing touch with his wife and two sons, and reality.

Rasmus' drunken behaviour at a birthday party ultimately results in the suicide of one of his sons and the murder of another son's girlfriend. Shaken by this tragedy, Rasmus leaves town and sets out with his husky-dog sled across Greenland's icy wastes. In the course of his journey across some astonishing Arctic scenery Rasmus encounters two European tourists, a rescue helicopter that is trying save him, and Qivittoq, a strange long-haired ghostlike hermit. Qivittoq leads Rasmus him to a mystical place where he discovers a secret message engraved on a hunting rifle given to his father by the Danish king years ago. This discovery, and several other mysterious events, allows Rasmus to reconcile himself with the past and overcome his trauma.

Heart of Light is Gronlykke's first feature and not an auspicious beginning. Prior to making this film he worked in television and was for many years the creative director for advertising and communications giant Saatchi and Saatchiâ€”not the best training grounds for the cultivation and development of artistic rigor, let alone the quest for aesthetic truth.

Under California: The Limit of Time, by Mexican filmmaker Carlos Bolado, opens in southern California with Damian, the film's main character, accidentally running down a pregnant Mexican woman in his pickup truck near the American-Mexican border. Damian, who is a successful environmental artist, flees the accident, but guilt-ridden and unable to cope with the mental trauma, decides to leave his wife and travel south into the Mexican desert to locate his indigenous grandmother's gravesite.

On reaching the desert he torches his car and sets off across the barren land. His journey becomes a cathartic experience in which he confronts the ghosts of Jesuit missionaries and the local indigenous people, discovers his own mortality and comes to terms with the trauma of the accident. The film concludes with the spiritually reinvigorated Damian making his way back to California, his wife and their new baby.

Publicity notes describe the film as "part passion, part western, and part road movie" and a "breathtaking homage to the powers of nature, art, ritual and love". These banal phrases do little to disguise the artistic emptiness and generally reactionary message of this film. To assert that the problems confronting Damian, and by implication those facing humanity as a whole, can be resolved via a simple pilgrimage into the wilderness and one's inner soul, is an evasion.



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