2000 Toronto International Film Festival—Part 4

Children in the mountains

A Time for Drunken Horses, written and directed by Bahman Ghobadi

David Walsh
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I first encountered Iranian Kurdish filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi's work in a surprising manner. A short film of his, *Life in Fog*, turned up uncredited on a videotape of another Iranian filmmaker's work last year at the San Francisco film festival.

The 28-minute film caught my attention. It was more or less a documentary about four kids living in terribly hard conditions, apparently on their own, in the mountains. Their reality seemed to be composed of fog, snow, rain, cold, earth and stones.

A Time for Drunken Horses takes up these same children and works their story into a feature-length fiction. It's a very painful, very beautiful film, made with extraordinary intensity and sincerity.

The children are Kurds, a stateless people, whose population of more than 20 million is divided up among four countries in the region. Their mother is dead, their smuggler father's away. In fact, everyone smuggles here on the border between Iran and Iraq. The two nations fought a bloody war here for nearly 10 years. Mines are buried everywhere; border patrols and god knows who else lie in ambush. It's hard to imagine a harsher existence. One wouldn't want to.

In the middle of all this, the children act toward one another with the greatest love and devotion. Ayoub, the eldest boy, has to work night and day to keep food in all their mouths. His sister Ameneh goes to school, maybe she'll make something of herself. Madi, 15, is deformed. He needs constant treatment. A doctor tells the children that he'll die if he doesn't have an operation, and, at that, the operation will only prolong his life by several months.

Ayoub works even harder, but there is too much going against him. He can't raise the money to pay the hospital on the Iraqi side of the border. Rojin, the eldest sister, agrees to marry an Iraqi Kurd on condition that the family pay for her brother's operation. When the girl arrives, the other family reneges, they want nothing to do with the crippled boy. The mother-in-law: “I don't want him. I sent for a bride.” Instead they offer a mule in compensation. But Rojin must go through with the marriage. It's hard to bear.

Ayoub, planning to sell the mule in Iraq to raise the money for the operation, joins a group of smugglers crossing the border. Nothing will stop him. The smugglers are attacked. They need to flee, but their animals have been given vodka to keep them warm (hence the film's title) and can't get to their feet. It's a terrifying, chaotic moment. Ayoub, despite everything, continues. When we last see him he's picking his way over barbed wire.

You remember the faces of these young people, above all, against a remorseless landscape. You would imagine that a tiny, isolated rural community, nearly cut off from the modern world, must generally produce a hothouse atmosphere: all the energy of its inhabitants expended in a small space and applied to a limited number of tasks. The external pressure exerted on the Kurds and their sense that they have no friends in the world only intensifies those internal bonds, almost to the point of madness. The persistence and loyalty and love are so intense, it's almost difficult to watch.

Ghobadi may be the only Kurdish filmmaker presently working. Conditions in Iran, which are slightly better for the Kurds, make that possible. He doesn't see himself as an Iranian director, or, at any rate, sees his work as different from theirs, but clearly the influence of Iranian cinema, if only in making it aesthetically and intellectually possible to treat such realities, is considerable.

In conversation Ghobadi is a charming and friendly man. He's made what is in certain ways a brilliant film. Yet I found myself disagreeing with a number of things he said. He repeated to us that these children were happy, that their harsh conditions were the only ones they knew, that they found nothing wrong with their lives because they had nothing to compare it to and so forth. The film suggests something different. It shows poverty and misery, children nearly destroying themselves or nearly being destroyed by their circumstances. They don't look happy about it for an instant.

To watch Rojin as she sells herself in marriage—for a mule!—and Ayoub as he watches in agony as his sister goes to her wretched fate ... if Ghobadi is not registering a protest here, then what is he doing?

In any event, even in the most isolated region there are class differences, those who live even in relative luxury and those who don't. I don't believe there's a human being alive who can't tell when he's being beat up by the world around him. (Whether he thinks there any prospects of doing anything about it is of course another matter.) The film is a devastating critique of social life in the region and the conditions masses of children face in many parts of this unhappy globe. Ghobadi the filmmaker is more advanced than Ghobadi the social commentator.

In any event, *A Time for Drunken Horses* exists, and we're fortunate that it does.

We arranged an interview with Ghobadi because of our response to the film.

David Walsh: Can you explain or express your own views about the Kurdish question?

Bahman Ghobadi: The Kurdish population in the world is more than 20 million. And most of them, each in his or her own way, in the different areas, want independence. At the present time, I don't believe in the creation of an independent Kurdistan. For a few reasons. Since there is a general conflict right now among the Kurds themselves, there is not a

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clear-cut idea of who is going to be the leader, who's going to guide this independent Kurdistan. Unfortunately, the Kurdish leaders have already become accustomed to the internal conflicts. Guns and ammunition have become the way of dealing with each other.

At the time being, the common people, the best people, in my view, are the ones who are getting hurt and getting killed in this violence from all sides. As you know, there are four different countries that have a Kurdish population: Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran. In my opinion, the safest place at this time is Iran. To prove that point, Iraq would not have allowed such a movie as mine to be made, but the Iranian government allowed it.

I had a meeting with a Kurdish leader on the Iraqi side, and I told him that with all the guns they have not accomplished what I have with this film, because the film has put the Kurdish issue into the public eye. People are talking about the Kurds, without any guns or anything else. Kurds in Iraq have raised $6 million and they are going to build a theater in Germany, and part of the set-up will be classes that I'm going to teach in film production.

I believe that Kurds should become one, a united Kurdistan, but I think it should be in Iran. Calmness and serenity for the people is what I'm after, I don't care for the ones with the guns. I care for the common people. If you go back through history, there's always been fighting, they've been able to buy the guns. That's been the way people have been able to defend themselves, to defend their rights.

DW: Do you have an attitude toward the repression in Turkey of the Kurds, toward which the US turns a blind eye?

BG: I don't have too much information on the present situation. From what I know the treatment is not good, it's very harsh. In Turkey because of the conflict with the PKK, the government has made no distinction between the ordinary people and the PKK. That's one political group. For example, when you go into a country and you say, “I'm a Kurd,” they ask you if you have a gun with you. The common people are different than the PKK. The Turkish government is making it miserable for everyone. I don't have personal knowledge, but this is my understanding. All the ordinary Kurds are experiencing a lot of hardship, they are living in very bad conditions. The Kurds are a very nice, very simple people. I just wish they could have a peaceful and safe life.

Anywhere in the world it would be very surprising to find a Kurdish family that has not had one or two kids killed in these wars. Even prosperous families.

DW: If I hadn't read the notes I might not even have known that the film was in the Kurdish language. I would have said it was a beautiful and unusual film. It treats ordinary people in a poetic way. We can watch it, because of its universal quality.

BG: Movies have no border. Even when this movie is shown in Tehran the film has an impact on people that goes beyond borders and boundaries, people see real life. My experience has indicated that, as I've gone around the world, and seen the reaction to the movie in different places. There was a showing in the US after which 200 people were standing around, very emotional. A couple of them, as I walked out, they were crying. One woman came up with a stack of hundred dollar bills and said, “Please, take this money and give it to the kids.”

In Telluride, at the film festival, they had seven showings. There was so much emotion, that I could feel it. In my opinion, it wasn't just the movie, it was the experience of their heart being affected.

DW: The children obviously grow up hardened under these conditions. What are the consequences for the society as a whole?

BG: These kids have never seen any other place. And if you take the hardships out of the life of the Kurds, in my opinion, they won't know what to do. I spent two or three years in this area, during the fighting, and for these kids, they don't know there is another life. There is no point of reference, there is no comparison to what you and I know. Hardship is the reality of their lives.

They think that this is what life is. All schools are like their schools, all kids live like they do. All kids work. They've never had electricity, they've never had televisions. If you haven't seen anything else, what you live is reality. They don't have the same feeling about themselves as others do. Like the kid in the movie, nothing stops them.

If you pay attention to Madi's situation, everything they do for him is simply to extend his life for another five months. It's not to save it, but simply to extend it for five months. Would a city kid have done what these kids did? Look at Ayoub, the way he works. Or Ameneh, the way she takes care of the kid. The way the older sister sells herself essentially, and her reasoning is Madi gets to have an operation to help him live for a few months more. You won't see that in a city kid.

It's natural for them. They experience life in such a profound way. Let me share an experience. One day I was walking in a remote part of Kurdistan, and I met these two kids carrying huge bags of nuts, almost bent double under the load. I stepped in front of them. They're so involved in their lives and work, that even though the kids saw me, they said, still bending over, “Please move out of the way. We need to get going.” These were nine or ten year old kids. I said, “I have one question for you. Are you fortunate or unfortunate?” They didn't even want to look at me. “Could you look at me for a moment?” The one kid wasn't willing to drop the bag. He looked at me, straining under the load. He said, “What do you think about yourself?” I said, “I think I'm fortunate, I have a car, I have a computer, I've got a home, I live in the city, I've got everything I need.” He said, “You only think you're fortunate.”

He took me to this one place. It was a clearing, and down below there was a lake, or a river. The whole time he was carrying the load. “Listen to the water. You don't have this sound. Look up and look at the sky. You don't have the trees, the sky.” I asked, “How much education do you have?” “Fourth grade.” “How many books have you read?” “Three hundred books.” I said, “How is it possible in such a remote village? How could there even be three hundred books in the entire town?” “My friends and I have only seven books, but we've read them three hundred times.” I asked, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” He answered immediately, “I'm going to be a dentist.” I said, ‘No, you should be a veterinarian.” He said, “No, no, no, only a dentist.” “Are you a crazy kid? Why don't you help with the cows, the other animals? Why a dentist?” The whole time he has the load and he's looking down, he's not even looking at me. He took me to his house. His mother came out, she had a cloth around her jaw ... because of a toothache!

This is one of the scenes I'm going to put in a film. You get goose bumps when you talk to these kids, each and every one of them. They see life in such a remarkable way.

DW: What is your view of art and reality?

BG: I went to university, I'm more educated than these people. But to write a screenplay I don't sit at home, I just go out and talk to people. I travel. I spend time with these people. We're so caught up in the struggle for money, financial distractions. We lose sight of life. There's more feeling in their life. We've lost something. My only worry is that as my films become bigger and better, that feeling will go away.

Art and reality complete each other. Without reality, art makes no sense; without art, reality has no meaning.

DW: How do you see yourself in relation to other Iranian filmmakers, if you see any relationship?

BG: For me it's a bit early to say, but from other people's points of view, they say I'm working differently. From the beginning of my career making films I decided to do something different from the others, because I realized that Iranian cinema was beginning to repeat itself.

DW: What is the difference?

BG: My concern was to make fiction and documentary at the same time. Also, I paid lots of attention to form and content. To bring the technical and artistic cinemas together. It wasn't my concern to make festival films.

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But for the people.

DW: But to achieve naturalness and simplicity is very difficult.

BG: I agree.

DW: It's very rare.

BG: I got a very good response from the people. In the future, I'm going to try to do different things and not repeat myself. My next film will be completely different in form and content.

I had a life like Ayoub. That harsh life is part of them, it's simply life for them. They are the most optimistic people.

DW: But most people will draw the conclusion from this film that the world should change. That conditions of such poverty should change, that the conditions of the children should change.

Joanne Laurier: Can you tell us about your life?

BG: I was born in Kurdistan, in northwest Iran, on the border. My father was a policeman. When the war began, it disrupted everything. We had to live in small villages, on the move. Eventually we moved to a town, it's the center of Kurdistan. My parents got divorced. Because I was the eldest son, I had to take responsibility for the family. There were eight of us. I had to go to work. After I finished high school, I moved to Tehran, I entered university. I didn't learn anything. At the same time I was working selling cigarettes. My hobby was photography. My father was against this hobby. I had an 8mm movie camera. I made short movies, also in VHS. My concern was to get close to the other moviemakers.

Every day I became more experienced, in life and filmmaking. I had no money at all when I made my first movie, a short. Everyone in my family contributed to the film. They were actors, and did everything. If I'm a filmmaker, the first reason is because of my father. Because he divorced my mother. I had a tough life and I learned through that experience. Before that I was so spoiled. We belonged to the elite in Kurdistan. I had a bicycle and other things, a lot of clothes. The second reason I'm a filmmaker is Kurdish culture. It's a very rich culture. The third reason is the war. I suffered a lot and became more sensitive to other people. This movie was made under very difficult conditions. But it was enjoyable.

JL: We respond to the film because suffering is not simply a Kurdish problem. People are suffering everywhere.

BG: I agree. I'm aware of the pain of Americans and Europeans, and others. At least you have a chance to express your pain here, but the Kurds don't.

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