

Sydney Film Festival 2001

Two flawed attempts to dramatise child poverty

Ali Zaoua and Animals Crossing the Road

Mile Klindo
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Ali Zaoua and *Animals Crossing the Road*, two of the seven movies included in the Sydney Film Festival's New Directors category, attempt to examine the lives of poverty stricken youth. The first deals with street children in Morocco; the second, set in Rome, is about a teenage girl caught up in petty crime and her conflict with local police.

While both films exhibit some degree of sympathy for the plight of these children this healthy starting point is not matched by convincing plots or serious character development and little effort made to provide the social and political context that condemned these kids to a life of poverty.

Ali Zaoua is the second feature film by Nabil Ayouch and follows his thriller *Mektoub* (1998)—one of the most popular Moroccan films in recent history. *Ali Zaoua* is also the name of the film's central figure, a 12-year-old boy (Abdelhak Zhayra) living on the streets of Casablanca, who dreams of escaping the misery of street life.

The film opens with an on-the-spot interview with Ali for a television program about homeless children. Surrounded by his friends, Ali tells the journalist that he wants to become a sailor and that he ran away from home because his mother (Amal Ayouch) did not love him or, as Ali puts it, she wanted to "sell my eyes." It later emerges that his mother is a prostitute.

Dib (Said Taghmaoui) and his gang of street kids, one of the many in Casablanca, confront Ali and his friends—Kwita (Mounim Kbab), Omar (Moustapha Hansali) and Boubker (Hicham Moussoune)—after the television interview. They demand that the four boys rejoin the group. Ali stands his ground against Dib, an overbearing older boy with facial scarring and a speech defect, but pays for this defiance with his life when one of the gang throws a stone hitting him on the head and killing him instantly.

Shattered by his sudden death, Ali's friends hide his body

in a hovel next to the port before eventually deciding to organise their own burial for Ali. This poses several seemingly insurmountable obstacles, in particular their lack of finance and the belief among some street kids that only pure souls deserve a proper burial ceremony. Kwita, Omar and Boubker, however, decide to confront these problems.

Prior to his death Ali told his friends that he dreamt of sailing to a mythical island with two suns. Determined to fulfill this fantasy, the boys set about trying to raise money for the burial and the sailor's uniform Ali always wanted. "He may have lived like a piece of dirt," one of them says, "but he will not be buried like that."

Kwita and Omar track down Madame Zaoua, Ali's mother, intending to tell her of her son's death. She invites Omar into her modest flat and shows him Ali's bedroom decorated with boats and other sailing paraphernalia. Omar, who is fascinated by the room, which contradicts Ali's stories about his mother's neglect, leaves, unable to tell her that the boy is dead.

Meanwhile Kwita, who regards himself as Ali's closest friend, wanders the streets sniffing glue and hallucinating about sailing away to the island of two suns with a beautiful schoolgirl he sees in the streets. While Dib and other gang members continue to harass Kwita, Omar and Boubker, the boys, who are attempting to raise money by selling cigarettes and picking pockets, gain an unexpected friend—the captain of a fishing vessel who Ali used to sail and fish with occasionally. The captain decides to help them bury the boy.

Ali Zaoua is a technically proficient, and at times stylish looking film with capable performances by the three boys, who were Casablanca street kids. Their raw energy draws viewers into their unforgiving world. Ayouch's film, however, has many problems. The most serious of these is the limited plot development and the director's romantic

portrayal of the young boys' efforts to bury Ali.

While Ayouch does not paint a pretty picture of street life itself, his film implies that the boys can transcend the poverty and squalor of their lives if only given the opportunity to dream. These dreams are symbolised in a series of childlike animated sequences, which are used to depict Kwita's fantasies and then later, when the three boys lie at night on the pier looking at the sky, to illustrate their response to Ali's story about the island.

The film ends with the boys, Ali's mother and the captain sailing off to commemorate Ali's spirit and his dream. Ali is lying in a coffin dressed in a sailor's suit and the kids in Dib's gang, who are now in awe of Kwita's determination and love for his friend, watch them sail away. The film dissolves into another animated sequence as the final titles appear.

Animals Crossing the Road by Isabella Sandri is set in suburban Rome and follows a few weeks in the life of Martina Curto (Francesca Rallo), a 14-year-old girl drifting into a life of crime. Susanna Curto (Cristina Donadio), Martina's mother, works nights as a prostitute and the brothel where she is employed is running drugs. Ali, the brothel-keeper, is Susanna's common-law husband and, as we later learn, Martina's real father. During the day Martina, who refuses to attend school, and her boyfriend Sciu (Salvatore Grasso) wander the streets picking pockets and stealing from shops. Sciu spends most of his time away from home in an abandoned warehouse, which he shares with other neglected or poor kids.

The film's other main protagonists—Police Inspector Fiammetta Saracina (Enrica Maria Modugno) and Giovanni Scalia (Andrea Renzi), a welfare worker—attempt to help the girl in various ways. Scalia is trying to persuade Martina to go back to school but the girl, who is happy drifting along and spending her time on the streets, has no such ambition.

Martina is caught stealing on a bus and taken into police custody where Inspector Saracina decides to take a personal interest in her case. The inspector's decision to help the young girl is connected to her generally humane approach to poor young offenders—she came from a poverty-stricken Calabrian village—and her efforts to rekindle a former relationship with social worker Scalia. Saracina, who is struggling with her own personal emptiness, is still in love with Scalia.

Inspector Saracina, however, is also attempting to bust the drug racket where Martina's mother works, and together with Scalia, who is trusted by the young girl, asks her to provide evidence against Ali. When the young girl refuses, the two become implacable opponents. Determined to get evidence on the drug racket, Saracina authorises a raid on the brothel and then a high-speed police car chase of Martina

and Sciu on a motor scooter through Rome's outer suburbs. The car chase culminates in an accident and the death of the young girl. The film ends with Inspector Saracina deeply distraught over the girl's death.

An experienced documentary director, Sandri began her filmmaking career in 1984 and made her first feature, *The World Upside Down*, in 1994. Her last two projects were documentaries—*The Spirit of a Thousand Hills* (1997) about Hutu refugees from Rwanda and *The House of Lemon Trees* (1999), which deals with Palestinian children from Sabra and Shatila refugee camps of Lebanon.

Sandri has used her documentary making skills to give *Animals Crossing the Road* a “real life TV” quality with lots of handheld camera and rough editing. Her decision, however, towards the end of the film to focus almost exclusively on Saracina's inner turmoil, which is largely presented as an individual issue, detracts from the work. It's not that Enrica Modugno lacks conviction in the role. In fact, the emotional and professional conflicts between Saracina and social worker Scalia, are dramatically effective and have a certain edge. But one is supposed to reserve all one's empathy for the emotionally torn inspector rather than the real tragedy unfolding before our eyes, the unjustifiable death of a poor young girl. This one-sided and superficial approach, combined with the clichéd “real life” production style, gives the work a cold and shallow quality.

A thoughtful and compelling examination of life confronting troubled youth or street kids has escaped these directors not because they lack technical or aesthetic ability. On the contrary, both are fairly skilled directors. The essential problem in both cases is an underlying conception that little can be done to change the social situation confronting their characters. Martina's death is inevitable in *Animals Crossing the Road*, according to Sandri, while Ayouch's answer for Casablancon street kids is some kind of heavenly reward.



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