

San Francisco International Film Festival 2002—Part 2

Four films

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This is the second in a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival (April 18-May 2)

The Inner Tour

Only months before the most recent Israeli assault on the population of the Occupied Territories, Israeli documentary videomaker Ra'anán Alexandrowicz filmed a Palestinian group on a three-day tour of Israel. At that time it was still possible for Palestinians from the Occupied Territories to cross the Green Line and enter Israel with a tourist permit issued by the Israeli military for an organized sightseeing excursion. *The Inner Tour* follows a busload of Palestinians through the lands they regard as their home.

The documentary is divided into seven chapters, headed by fragments of dialogue such as "I never imagined I would walk among the Jews." One of the first stops is a museum on a kibbutz hosting an exhibition about the pre-1948 conflicts. The exhibited items suggest that the Arabs were criminals and murderers, or willingly sold their land to Jews. There is discussion afterward among the Palestinians: "Where did all the Arabs go? Did they evaporate in the sun?"

As the tour progresses, the Palestinians begin to tell their stories. An elderly Palestinian describes how in 1948 the Israelis were "firing mortars at us—our few guns were no better than sticks." One man has been arrested six or seven times during the *intifadas* and one woman's husband is serving a life sentence for his part in the uprising. Another woman, whose husband was killed by the Israeli military, expresses anger and disgust; she now receives only a very small monthly compensation.

One young Palestinian, Wa'el al-Ashqar, whose father was killed in the Israeli-Lebanese war, explains that with a Palestinian passport he is not allowed to visit his mother in Lebanon. The film shows mother and son at the Lebanese border separated by a barbed wire fence. She tosses him a packet of family photos.

Upon seeing Tel Aviv one Palestinian quips: "Once in a while we should exchange places"—a miserable refugee camp for a modern city. The tour visits the spot where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing Israeli student in 1995. Middle-aged Abu Dahab recollects being in prison where he met Rabin, who was on an official visit, in a corridor and told him: "The Jews suffered in Germany, we are suffering now."

The filmmaker Alexandrowicz describes his documentary as an effort to show one of the "two parallel and contradictory books, which reflect the history of our country." But the film testifies to

something more than two parallel histories. *The Inner Tour* provides a small glimpse of the suffering of a population driven out of their homes and dispersed, into refugee camps and exile. Everyone in the tour has had a family member imprisoned or killed by the Israeli military. Everywhere the bus goes someone sees his or her land. The tour participants are especially moved by the sight of Zippori, which had been the largest Arab settlement. While passing Ben-Gurion Airport, someone yells that it is "Lydda [airport, the pre-Israeli name], not Ben-Gurion."

The elderly Abu Muhammad Yihya was forced out of his village in 1948 after having fought for six months during which time he lost his parents and his children. On tour with his granddaughter, he looks into the camera and says: "My dear brothers, our hope comes from seeing how lovely the land really is, and our pain from opening the wounds and memories.... We stand steadfast, our feet embedded in our land. And from here, by the al-Jazzar Mosque, we say 'Let no one doubt! We are a people that won't disappear and die!'"

Bastards in Paradise

Bastards in Paradise is a superficially tough-minded look at the discrimination Chilean immigrants face in Sweden. Chilean-born director, Luis R. Vera, was himself exiled following the fall of the Allende government in 1973 and, after studying cinema in Czechoslovakia, emigrated to Sweden in 1979.

The movie focuses on the relationship between three young people: Manuel, the son of exiled Chilean parents, and Kalle and Lena, two native Swedes. The three have been close since early childhood (a recurring image is of the three children playing together, impervious to ethnic differences), but the pressure of an anti-immigrant social atmosphere destroys their innocence and ruptures their friendship. Manuel responds to his own difficulties and to the outcast status of his parents by turning to crime, Kalle becomes a skinhead bouncer in a club and Lena, involved in a doomed love affair with Manuel, joins the police. It all ends very badly for the three friends.

Adding to the film's overall bleakness is the simultaneous moral and psychological unraveling of Manuel's father and of his favorite high school teacher, both political activists overwhelmed and defeated by the entrenched ethnic fault-lines within Swedish society. Manuel's father, chronically fantasizing about returning to Chile (better to be a fighter against dictatorship in one's own country than an unemployed and victimized alien), increasingly becomes a house-bound drunk. The teacher also becomes a

homeless alcoholic, reduced to ranting in the streets about the demise of the “Swedish welfare model,” berating the corrupt few who now run the country in the interests of a globalized market.

Despite its significant subject matter, *Bastards in Paradise* has many serious flaws. Character presentation and development remain almost exclusively primitive and external. The approach makes it very difficult for the spectator to experience in a profound way intrinsically significant events in the lives of the characters.

It is also difficult for the viewer to get involved with characters about whom the filmmaker is emotionally ambivalent. One senses an underlying pessimism and condescension towards the struggles and tribulations of all his characters, as well as an acceptance of such apparent inevitabilities as Lena becoming a cop—this decision is uncritically presented as a form of salvation. (Although one also gets the feeling the filmmaker is pinning some meager hopes on anti-globalization activism.) All this accounts for the movie’s generally hysterical tone and its lack of visual imagination.

In addition, the shaky, Dogme-inspired digital video camerawork renders pivotal scenes trite and at times unwatchable. A great many aesthetic considerations are sacrificed to the goal of supposedly squeezing “raw truth” out of the cinematic moment. Unfortunately, these moments, rather than enlightening, expose the filmmaker’s lazy approach to very complex psychological and social issues and his deeply-ingrained skepticism towards the possibility of any progressive solutions.

July Rhapsody

Veteran Hong Kong filmmaker Ann Hui’s film, *July Rhapsody*, depicts the fragility of family dynamics when parents drift apart. Lam, well played by Hong Kong pop-star Jacky Cheung, is a high-school teacher of Chinese literature frustrated by his inability to inculcate in his students the same love of poetry that his teacher, Seng, inspired in him. When Seng returns to Hong Kong to die of cancer, family secrets emerge as Lam wrestles with his marriage and a growing interest in his flirtatious student, Wu.

The film is well constructed and has a lyrical pace and rhythm. However, as conflicted as the central characters are, and as frequently as their mid-life angst is backlit by the eternally poetic Yangtze river, the film is a complacent effort that rarely penetrates the outer skin. Comments by Lam to the effect that life is a never-ending process of self-examination seem unintentionally at odds with the reality of characters who are bumbling along semiconsciously.

July Rhapsody does convey a certain truthfulness about all its characters, both major and minor, but in each case the filmmaker’s focus is too narrow. Why is there such a chasm between the cultural levels of Lam’s generation and that of his students—a problem that sets much of the film’s drama into motion? The film’s presentation of personal malaise never contains any connection, either overtly or covertly, to the more general social malaise. Visual references to Hong Kong society are largely incidental or dealt with as intrusions. “The river will flow and nothing will be left,” says Lam at the film’s end. Poetry and beautiful images, so bountifully present in *July Rhapsody*, can only enlighten and elevate when they are not used as a substitute for a more difficult and penetrating investigation. Such an investigation will always, on some level, involve social insights.

The Price of Forgiveness

Fables invoking a nobler, happier past have become commonplace in African filmmaking. Faced with a cash-starved, desperately struggling film industry (many of whose leading figures live and work in Europe), in a region area where entire countries and populations face unspeakable social blight, it is perhaps not shocking that few African films deal with present-day reality. Overwhelmed by the social misery and politically and ideologically at sea, many filmmakers are attracted to depictions of a mythical heritage that is cohesive and uncomplicated, where heroes are invented and more or less imaginary worlds celebrated.

The consequences of acute financial and social problems are not the only obstacles facing African filmmakers at present. Bourgeois nationalist and Pan-African illusions also play their pernicious role. Many African artists, despite the failure of nationalist projects throughout the last half-century, cling to such illusions. It is hard to see how African artists will find renewed inspiration and cease being held hostage to the ideological and material difficulties unless they find their way to an internationalist, anti-capitalist perspective.

The Price of Forgiveness by Senegalese director Mansour Sora Wade follows the pattern of movies that focus on ancient legend. It is well-made, aesthetically beautiful, bursting with color and does open a window, albeit small, on present-day Africa.

The fate of a small fishing village is determined by the ability of its three main protagonists to cleanse their souls and harmonize despite terrible crimes committed by and against one another. Tribal proverbs and customs, such as celebrations of marriage and death, figure prominently.

Grace and simplicity are the order of the day and all individual actions impact on the whole. The film’s intense sense of community, encompassing the good and the bad, the strong and the weak, is clearly aimed at countering present day social atomization and alienation. But considering the present state of affairs, *The Price of Forgiveness* is a slight work with few enduring rewards.

To be continued



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