Toronto International Film Festival 2003—Part 3

Intimate moments, genuine protest

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Directed by Sarah Gavron, screenplay by Rosemary Kay

Filmmaker Sarah Gavron chose a difficult subject matter for her first feature film. With a rare degree of intelligence and sensitivity, the young British director's film, *This Little Life*, tells the tale of baby Luke—born 17 weeks premature.

When Sadie's water breaks during her 23rd week of pregnancy, she is rushed to an emergency prenatal hospital unit. The baby has little chance unless delivery can be delayed for another 24 hours. During this tense interval, parenthood genuinely begins for newlyweds Sadie (the remarkable Kate Ashfield) and Richie (David Morrissey).

Overcoming the first hurdle, Luke is born but given only a 20 percent chance of survival by Sadie's physician (actor/director Peter Mullan). Nothing could prepare Sadie and Richie for the tortuous and torturous process that ensues as the medical team relentlessly struggles for Luke's life, a process that will proceed, as their doctor dryly notes, through the stages of "extremely critical," "very, very critical," and merely "critical."

Unable to hold or even touch her child, permitted to see him only through the incubator's plastic screen, Sadie begins recording the baby's ordeal. One day's entry tabulates a total of 19 X-rays and 12 blood transfusions so far for the tiny creature, as well as the regular cleaning out of his lungs. As Luke miraculously hangs on, Sadie refuses to leave the hospital. How will she endure the ordeal? Her doctor tells her, "Imagine a beautiful summer's day, you're drinking wine and watching a healthy 7-year-old who doesn't even remember being here." With Richie forced to work a great deal of overtime, a transcendent bond develops between mother and child—Sadie becomes increasingly attuned to Luke's inner life. Indeed, that future 7-year-old, suggested to her by the physician, begins to appear to her, running, playing, mischievously sticking out his tongue.

In a conversation, director Sarah Gavron described her approach to this delicate material: "The idea was that it [Luke's] was a life. Time, as a filmmaker, is what you deal with a lot. You can play with time and you can extend time. For that baby every moment was so precious and a minute of its life was worth so much. That kind of emergency situation creates an extraordinary kind of intensity between parent and child."

Also, in the prenatal unit, an immigrant family is enduring a similar trauma with its infant daughter. Sadie, now fully engaged in Luke's medical care, tries to convince the mother that in the hands of the unit's "Dr. Magic," the baby has a chance. When the child dies, Sadie becomes a more important source of comfort for the grieving woman than even the closest family members.

At the precise moment when doctor and staff become convinced that Luke is in the clear, Sadie, on the other hand, senses something different and becomes very agitated and demanding. Her "visions" have increased. Concerned about her physical and mental state, Luke's caregivers and husband Richie encourage the distraught mother to spend one night at home.

When Sadie returns to the hospital in the morning, her son is ill. A few days later, little Luke is diagnosed with meningitis. Sadie is furious, "Nobody believed me that something was wrong!" Scans reveal the infant has almost nothing left of his brain. Withdrawal of treatment is the only serious option. It's a terrible moment, but Sadie has gotten to know the valiant Luke and sees him as far more than a seemingly unconscious being whose existence spanned only a few months. Having found some sort of resolution, now she must convey to Richie her understanding that Luke's life had a certain content, a genuine fullness.

When asked if the apparent lack of sufficient hospital staff or other problems during Luke's final crisis played a part in his contracting the fatal bacterial infection, director Gavron replied: "I did not want to make this an issue drama, which might be valuable in its own right, specifically about the National Health Service in Britain and things such as short-staffing. There is a certain truth in the fact that oft-times parents have a better sense when their child is unwell than the medical staff because they are paying such close attention, and maybe they do have some sort of extraordinary bond."

The film's attitude towards death movingly, but objectively, strikes the right note. "We wanted death in the film not to be a tragic moment, but part of a natural cycle," said Gavron. "We also wanted to convey hope and the sense that Richie and Sadie do have a future."

Gavron's film treats a "little life," almost a pre-life, with great seriousness and intensity. Without being prompted, the viewer is made aware of the need to treat every instant of life as a profound moment with all manner of sensual and emotional significance. As we noted to Gavron in our conversation, the seriousness with which her film treats life inevitably makes it a protest against a society that throws life away and tries to desensitize and accustom the population to its wars and other atrocities. The director was pleased that we saw the film in this light.

The artistic strength of *This Little Life* is that it is an exploration, a plunge into the unknown, rather than a pat, pre-packaged formula. Said Gavron: "The actors and myself were engaged in a completely terrifying process throughout the whole film. I did not know in advance that this would make a film, that it would sustain itself.

"I like dealing with situations that are on the extreme of life, which really deal with emotions at their rawest level. I had to modulate the emotional level of each scene and was very concerned that we were pitching it to the right emotional level." As a result, Gavron stated, "it was a tough film to make and a tough film to sell commercially. The

minute you do something that goes deeper, people get scared of it."

She continued, "As a filmmaker all I can do ultimately is to make films that I passionately believe in. Making this film drained me in every way. Something like this takes so much out of your being. In the end, what we wanted was a universality, because it is such a specific, particular story. I felt somehow it had to be universal, it had to touch people who had never been near that experience."

Directed by Tom Zubrycki

Through a detailed look at the fortunes of a group of Afghan refugees, veteran Australian documentarian Tom Zubrycki's *Molly & Mobarak* powerfully indicts the reactionary immigration policy of Australian prime minister John Howard and his government.

The film's opening text notes that between 1999 and 2002, boats carrying some 3,500 Hazaras—an ethnic minority in Afghanistan—fleeing persecution and ethnic cleansing arrived in Australia.

Howard then appears on screen to declare: "We cannot allow Australia to be seen around the world as a country of easy destination."

Zubrycki's film focuses on refugees who have newly arrived in the small rural town of Young, New South Wales. Most of them work in the local slaughterhouse and have only one year left on their temporary visas. The abattoir's manager Tony Hewson describes the Hazaras "as fantastic workers" who have helped the factory to expand. Hewson is not the only champion the immigrants find.

Several of the townspeople, including Lyn Rule, volunteer to teach English to the Hazaras. Lyn's 25-year-old daughter, Molly, and 22-year-old Mobarak Tahiri have developed a friendship. Mobarak, the youngest of three boys, has had little contact with his family back in Afghanistan. He explains that the Taliban forced the closure of the family farm and shop: "My family is gone—maybe they're fighting. The whole family wanted to leave, but my father could only smuggle me out." When Mobarak was finally able to speak with his mother on the telephone: "She was crying so hard she could not talk."

Molly successfully teaches Mobarak how to drive. With the exception of a backward minority, the people in Young genuinely embrace the refugees. In a particularly moving sequence, Molly, Mobarak and a crowd of Australian and Afghan youth line-dance at the local pub.

But Australian immigration officials claim that the establishment of the US puppet regime in Afghanistan has created a peaceful situation and that the refugees should be sent back. Mobarak tells the filmmaker: "Those who brought death and destruction for the last 25 years are still in government. They are bloodthirsty and have killed thousands of Hazaras. There's nothing for the Hazaras. The future will be a dark one." Mobarak's father believes that if his son returns he will be killed.

Molly, Mobarak and Lyn join a demonstration in Canberra against refugee deportation and the government's immigration policy. Mobarak has virtually become a member of Lyn's family and, in fact, has fallen in love with Molly—his first real contact with a young woman is undoubtedly an intense one. Molly tries with a good deal of sensitivity and maturity to keep the relationship on a platonic level.

Zubrycki's film reveals a significant historical irony. Young was the scene of a riot in 1861 in which Chinese miners were driven out of the goldfields, an incident that facilitated the introduction of the "Immigration Restriction Act," more familiarly known as the infamous "White Australia Policy." A racist film, *The Birth of White Australia*, made in Young in 1928, dramatizes the Chinese miners being driven out. In fact, Lyn's grandfather took part in the film.

When an anti-immigrant leaflet is circulated in the town, Hewson informs the Hazara workers that the flyer was written by a "neo-Nazi and crook from Sydney" and is an isolated incident. However, efforts to whip up backwardness in Young continue.

Meanwhile, Molly is preparing to leave on vacation, hoping that this will allow Mobarak to disconnect emotionally. He is broken-hearted, fearful that she will not return. Lyn tearfully encourages him to forget Molly by getting out of Young. The Afghan youth is also desperate about his visa and his future. Lyn tells the camera: "The trouble is that now Mobarak is too much like an Australian boy." Mobarak leaves for South Australia.

One of the most socially conscious and humane of the townspeople, Ann Bell, explains her attitude toward the refugees: "You can't just be a tutor—they have so many other needs. If they have to go, it will make a big hole in my life." She talks to Young's mayor about calculating the contribution made by the Hazaras to the town's economy for immigration officials.

After the December 2002 terrorist bombing in Bali, the Hazaras face increased racism and harassment in the workplace. One by one, they leave. Ann and others fail to get help from the unions.

Mobarak sums up the difficulties: "The Taliban are still in Afghanistan and are controlling some areas. My two brothers are still missing. If I go back, I will be treated as an infidel. I've come to Australia and I've changed. My beliefs have changed. Everyone is a human being. When I was in Afghanistan, I believed what they said—now they would stone me." Before Mobarak's meeting with immigration officials in Sydney, Molly streaks his jet-black hair blond.

In March 2003 there were only 33 Hazaras left in Young, as opposed to 90 the previous year. The refugees organize an Afghan New Year celebration to thank the people of Young, "who helped fill space in our lives, because our loved one are still in Afghanistan."

In its own unpretentious manner *Molly & Mobarak* is a deeply humane film that treats intimate moments with considerable tact and dignity. Zubrycki has created an unusual work, one that follows a complex human situation with an objective, but sympathetic, eye. What was necessarily implicit in Gavron's film is explicit here: a protest against official cruelty and indifference toward human life.