

51st Sydney Film Festival--Part 2

A timely and disturbing drama

Blind Flight, written and directed by John Furse

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Blind Flight, written and directed by John Furse, is a compassionate and at times disturbing depiction of the illegal detention of Irish teacher Brian Keenan (played by Ian Hart) and English journalist John McCarthy (Linus Roache) by Islamic fundamentalists in Lebanon in 1986.

Keenan taught English at the American University in Lebanon and was kidnapped by four Shiite militiamen outside his Beirut home on April 11, 1986. Forced into a waiting car, he was taken to a secret prison, stripped of his clothes and kept in solitary confinement and total darkness for months. He began to lose all sense of reality until he was moved to a new location and placed in a cell with McCarthy, who had been captured a week after writing an article on the Irishman's seizure. They were among a number of UK and American civilians, including Anglican Church envoy Terry Waite, who were held hostage at the time.

Deprived of any contact with the outside world, Keenan and McCarthy, ostensibly from different social and political backgrounds, developed an extraordinary relationship—one that helped them maintain their sanity and endure years of physical and psychological abuse.

Keenan hailed from working-class Belfast and was a supporter of the Irish Republican movement. He defiantly refused to submit to the dictates of his jailers and at first clashed with McCarthy, a quietly spoken and well-educated middle-class Englishman. Slowly, however, the two men discovered that they had much in common.

Blind Flight carefully explores the complexity of this friendship—how it developed and was sustained—and its impact on the two men's jailers.

Keenan and McCarthy were kept blindfolded

whenever their jailers were present. They had no access to newspapers, radio or television, and no idea how long they would be held. Keenan was eventually released in August 1990, after four-and-a-half years, and McCarthy a year later, following negotiations between the Irish, British, Syrian and Iranian governments.

Apart from the kidnapping and a couple of scenes depicting southern Lebanon—where the men were held for a period—the film is confined to their cockroach- and rat-infested cells. A brief excerpt from a speech by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher about “fighting terrorism” in the movie's opening moments is effective and indicates that the political rhetoric employed to justify imperialist meddling in the Middle East has changed little over the years. Unfortunately, the Thatcher speech is *Blind Flight*'s only political and historical reference point.

Background material on the Lebanese civil war and the political reasons for the kidnapping would have given the movie added depth and made clear that the detention and torture of the Western hostages was a desperate response to political aggression by the US and British governments, and the Israeli Zionists, in the Middle East. In fact, one of the reasons that the Iranian-backed militia kidnapped Keenan, McCarthy and others was to protest US and British support for Saddam Hussein in the Iraq-Iran war, and to secure the release of 14 Islamic radicals imprisoned in Kuwait.

Notwithstanding these omissions, *Blind Flight* has much to commend it. Performances by Hart and Roache are powerful and authentic, with moments of intense emotion. (Hart won the Tribeca Film Festival's best actor prize this year for his role.) To maintain an

ongoing screen presence for over 90 minutes is a difficult challenge for any actor, but Hart and Roache hypnotically draw viewers into their dark and claustrophobic cells, where little appears to change each day. Insanity and the threat of physical assault are always present.

Director Furse should also be commended for providing an entirely objective portrait of the Lebanese jailers. These characters, played by non-professional actors, are not caricatured in any way. The film shows how these men were dehumanised by the kidnapping and detention.

One of the jailers is young, and another a recent father who proudly brings his baby to the cells for the prisoners to admire. He later admits to Keenan and McCarthy, “We are prisoners too.” These brief moments are interspersed with outbursts of confused rage by militiamen against the hostages.

Most importantly, *Blind Flight*, by revealing some of the horrors perpetrated against those held captive in Lebanon in the late 1980s, highlights the criminal character of the current treatment of prisoners in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and Afghanistan by the US military and its allies.

Rather than opposing hostage-taking and torture, the Bush administration has “perfected” the medieval methods exposed in *Blind Flight*. In violation of international law and the Geneva Conventions, Washington and its allies have established a global network of state-run hellholes, where hundreds of people, including teenage children, are illegally held without charge and denied access to the outside world.

Over the past months, McCarthy and Keenan, who closely collaborated in the development of *Blind Flight*, have published memoirs about their years in captivity and denounced the Bush administration’s illegal detentions and torture and its so-called “war on terror.” McCarthy told BBC Radio Four that Washington’s treatment of prisoners was “barbaric and uncivilised.”

We were seized in Lebanon and held there, McCarthy said, but those now held in Guantanamo Bay “were arrested and detained in Afghanistan and then shipped somewhere else. They may not even know where they are on the planet, which would add to the terror, I mean trauma, that I would imagine they experienced.”

Kennan told the BBC that Islamic radicalism’s influence would grow because there was a

“fundamentalist in the White House who makes pronouncements about the axis of evil and promises to rid the world of this contagion. This will only serve to rally young impressionable minds to the cause.

“But are they terrorists?” he asked. “Terrorism, like the word Jihad, is a term bandied about for the gullible by the myopic. It serves to legitimise aggression as a form of righteous crusade. Just as I was chained in darkness for almost five years, my captors were chained to their guns in a profound darkness that I could see into. Tell me now, who is the prisoner here?”

Blind Flight was voted one of the most popular films at the Sydney Film Festival. Despite this, local distributors have refused to give it an Australian release, and the movie will only be available on DVD later this year. This is a serious mistake. *Blind Flight* deserves the widest audience, above all because of its balanced and enlightened outlook.



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