

52nd Sydney Film Festival

Some valuable dramatisations of social life

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Modern filmmaking is a difficult and profoundly social process, not just because of the complex division of labour and skills required but also because of the extraordinary economic pressures relentlessly imposed on directors and screenwriters. The demand for maximum financial return is constantly at odds with the struggle for genuine artistry and an honest depiction of social life. Those able to maintain their artistic integrity and tackle the bewildering maze of economic and political hurdles are rare.

Many contemporary filmmakers have responded to these difficulties by turning to the latest developments in filmmaking equipment and relatively cheap production technology to reduce costs or self-finance their films. This gives them the right to final cut and freedom from focus groups and other market testing mechanisms. While relatively low production movie making is now possible, this alone, however, cannot guarantee that the final product will challenge the social and psychological status quo.

Together with some comments on *Yesterday*, a South African drama about AIDS/HIV, this article will examine the success or otherwise of some of the smaller budget dramas screened at this year's festival. These include: *Story Undone* (Iran), *My Summer of Love* (Britain), *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (US) and *Blacktown* (Australia).

Story Undone is the second feature by writer and director Hasan Yekapanah and has many positive features. A low-budget work with some comedic elements, it dramatises the plight of economic refugees attempting to flee Iran. Yekapanah's first movie, *Djomeh* (2000), explored the life of a young and newly arrived Afghan immigrant to Iran (see "Drama, protest, sensuality").

Every year thousands of Iranians, assisted by smugglers or other semi-criminal elements, illegally cross into Turkey seeking a better life. Deemed by governments to be "illegals", "aliens", "queue jumpers" and worse, they risk the possibility of death, imprisonment, deportation or a hand-to-mouth existence in a foreign land, separated most of the time from family and friends.

Story Undone is a thoughtful portrayal of one of these "people smuggling" operations. It is told from the standpoint of two filmmakers' attempts to document the plight of the hopeful emigrants.

The film begins by documenting the efforts of the filmmakers to join a bus that is smuggling people to one of Iran's mountainous semi-desert border regions.

After hailing the vehicle and bribing a guide, the filmmakers climb on board. Not long after, however, they are ejected for interviewing a young refugee without his parent's consent.

The director and cameraman eventually track down the group again, but are attacked by some of the thugs running the venture and their expensive video camera is destroyed. Just as the filmmakers are being ordered to leave, the police arrive and threaten to arrest everyone. The filmmakers, however, convince the cops that a movie is being made and that the

refugees and some of the smugglers are actors.

Having now won the trust of both the emigrants and smugglers, the filmmakers continue on the bus as the journey to the border resumes. They borrow a digital camera from one of the emigrants and begin interviewing the passengers, who explain why they are leaving the country. One woman is fleeing with her child, whom she has kidnapped from her husband. Her husband has abandoned her but will not allow a divorce. A young couple tell the filmmakers they are leaving Iran to marry each other, instead of those chosen for them by their parents.

The night before crossing the border, the passengers are told to disguise themselves by wearing wigs, dyeing their hair or removing their headscarves. Some are reluctant, but all yield, realising that they have little choice. *Story Undone* effectively captures the tragedy and comedy of this scene as the emigrants, blonde and bewigged, scamper across the hills.

On reaching the border, the film director confesses that he wants to join the crossing and follow the fortunes of the emigrants. The police arrive, gunshots are fired and panic breaks out as the bus passengers make a run for the border. Only a few, however, successfully make it over. These final scenes are shot in slow motion, framed by a haunting Persian musical soundtrack.

Story Undone lacks the sophisticated narrative and visuals of better-known Iranian filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf and its attempt to mix comedy with serious drama is not entirely successful. Yekapanah's movie does, however, have some genuinely moving moments. Its strength lies in its humane approach, which generates a real connection between the plight of the emigrants and cinema audiences.

My Summer of Love, a low-budget feature by British director Pawel Pawlikowski (*The Stringer* [1997] and *Last Resort* [2000]) and based on the novel by Helen Cross, is a poetic and refined work. Set in Yorkshire, the movie centres on two teenage girls—the working class Mona (Nathalie Press) and the privileged Tamsin (Emily Blunt)—and, as the title suggests, dramatises the relationship that develops between them one summer.

Mona lives above a pub with her brother Phil (Paddy Considine), a born again Christian. They are poor and lead empty lives. Their mother has died of cancer and they barely know their father. Phil seeks refuge from his violent temper and run-ins with the law in religion, and has turned the pub into a temple.

Mona is seeing a married man, but the relationship is purely physical and falls apart. One day in the countryside Mona encounters Tamsin, a beautiful, haughty and a self-confident young woman and the two gradually fall in love.

Director Pawlikowski explained to one writer that he was not interested in simply showing stereotypical teenagers, bored and incessantly watching TV. One can sympathise with this. Mona and Tamsin are delightful together and he unashamedly celebrates their love and their spontaneous and cheeky challenges to the world around them.

As well as the film's sensitive rendering of the developing relationship, *My Summer of Love* also explores Phil's confusions and his desperate striving for solace in religion. When Tamsin fakes a sexual overture towards him to demonstrate how easily he can be tempted, he is enraged but cannot dismiss his response and her jibes. His doubts in religion grow and, in a violent rage, he ejects his Christian friends from the "temple" denouncing them as "fakers".

My Summer of Love and the relationship between the girls ends after Tamsin suggests to Mona that they run away together. But when Mona arrives at her friend's mansion, Tamsin is packing for her return to boarding school. Other events at the house illustrate that perhaps the social barriers between the two girls are unbridgeable and that Tamsin may have been toying with Mona all along. The "undoing" of their relationship is sudden and rather artificial.

Notwithstanding this weakness, the movie's allure lies in its heart-felt protest against the drabness of Mona's social existence and the possibility of a different life—something that transcends the monotony of the grey and half-forgotten village through which trains pass but never seem to stop.

Written and directed by Los Angeles artist Miranda July, *Me, You and Everyone We Know* is an interesting first feature that attempts to explore love, loneliness and fractured human relations in suburban America. July, who is obviously influenced by Robert Altman, effectively uses the latter's intersecting storylines technique to create a strange atmosphere of melancholy, dark humour and optimistic whimsy.

The film's central character is Christine (played by Miranda July), a lonely video-artist working part time as a taxi driver for the elderly and trying to persuade an unfriendly local art gallery curator to show her work. She meets and falls in love with Richard, a shoe salesman (John Hawkes).

Richard has recently separated from his wife and is trying to raise his two young sons—7-year-old Robby (Miles Thomson) and 14-year-old Peter (Brandon Ratcliff). He responded to his wife's announcement that she was leaving by setting his hand on fire and running into the yard. Naturally enough, his desperate appeal for attention did not stop the marriage break up. A few days later Christine, who also feels she doesn't have a friend in the world, is out shopping and meets Richard at the shoe store. While he is tentative, she is immediately attracted and over the next days the two begin a complex courtship.

Robby and Peter, who are generally left to their own devices after school in their father's small and run-down apartment, spend time fooling around on their father's home computer and stumble into a sex chat room. Seven-year-old Robby begins flirting online with a woman, who mistakenly believes him to be an older man. This produces some amusing email exchanges. Meanwhile, two teenage girls in the neighbourhood decide they want to experiment with their sexuality and choose Peter as their subject.

Miranda July is an imaginative director and her film eschews any sort of sensationalism or emotional confrontation with its audience. Without disclosing the entire plot, the issues confronting the movie's protagonists are amicably resolved.

Me and You and Everyone We Know is a calm and humane look at some of the problems of everyday life—of children trying to become adults and childlike adults disorientated and confused by the world around them.

Kriv Stenders, an award-winning Australian cinematographer and filmmaker (*The Illustrated Family Doctor* [2004]), made *Blacktown*, a love story set in the outer-suburban working class Sydney suburb, for about \$50,000—a pittance by today's standards. Praised by various Sydney film critics, Stenders' movie was voted one of the two most popular features during the festival.

Blacktown was shot on mini-DV cameras and edited on a home computer and was originally planned as a documentary on Tony Ryan, an Aboriginal actor, musician and local social worker. Heavily influenced by Dogma movies and the work of American independent filmmaker John

Cassavettes, Stenders decided, however, to produce a drama.

The film's storyline is completely undemanding. A local office worker (Niki Owen) is attempting to get her life together after recently separating from her husband. After some disastrous relationships and ongoing harassment from her former husband she meets Tony. A gregarious but complex man with a chequered past, Tony becomes deeply involved with her and the couple fall in love and marry.

Like the Dogma group, which was established by several Danish filmmakers in the mid-1990s to protest against Hollywood-style movies, Stenders has stripped down filmmaking to its basics. There is no music soundtrack or artificial lighting and everything is shot with hand-held cameras. This approach is supposed to result in honest and unaffected work.

As Stenders told one interviewer, *Blacktown* was made "off the hip" and according to a "scriptment"—a scene-by-scene plot line but without any dialogue. All dialogue was improvised during the shoot. "[I]t was ... more [like] putting the camera where the story was and really not worrying about the location or how it looked or how it was lit. In that respect it was quite liberating," he remarked.

Stenders has certainly demonstrated that almost anyone with access to basic film production equipment can make a feature. But is this enough? Overall, *Blacktown* is thin gruel. Rather than liberating, the film's amateurishness, including some excruciatingly bad sound recording, simply grates.

Granted the film has moments of raw honesty: there is a genuine chemistry between the two principle actors and Ryan's brief monologue about his time in prison is compelling and says much about urban life for Australia's Aborigines. But dramatic spontaneity is no replacement for detailed attention to form and the struggle for serious artistic work. Ryan and Owen's undoubted acting talent could have been put to better use.

Yesterday by South African director Darrell Roodt is about the tragic impact of HIV/AIDS on a Zulu family. A skilled filmmaker and well-known campaigner against social injustice, Roodt began making features in the mid-1980s. His best-known movies are *A Place of Weeping* (1986), *Sarafina!* (1992) and *Cry, Beloved Country* (1995) which boldly challenged South Africa's racist apartheid regime and won wide international audiences.

Roodt's latest movie, the first-ever in the Zulu language, is a simple but important work that dramatises the devastating consequences of the AIDS pandemic in South Africa, and the poverty, ignorance and superstition that sustains it.

Yesterday (Leleti Khumalo) is married with a young daughter called Beauty (Lihle Mvelase). Her husband (Kenneth Khambula) works in the Johannesburg gold mines and is rarely able to spend time at home with his family. Yesterday, who has been feeling increasingly ill, learns that she is HIV positive and, on her doctor's advice, visits Johannesburg to tell her husband. His response is to beat her, suggesting that she contracted the disease from somebody else. Eventually, he returns home, desperately ill with AIDS.

Demonstrating incredible resilience, Yesterday does everything to care for her sick husband and their young child. There is no room at the local hospital and no real medical treatment in the vicinity.

At the same time, local villagers falsely fear that Yesterday's husband will spread the disease and demand he be kept outside the village. Yesterday builds a hut on the outskirts of the village, where her dying husband spends his last days. As her health fails, she tells her doctor that she wants to live to see her daughter begin school. After accomplishing this, she walks out of the village, looking for death.

Roodt and the film's producers hope the film will raise further awareness of the AIDS crisis and generate medical and financial assistance. In a country of 40 million, where 28 percent of the population has been affected by HIV/AIDS, this is an urgent necessity.

Beautifully shot against the spectacular Drakensburg mountains, *Yesterday* has some strong performances, particularly by Leleti Khumalo. Roodt starkly portrays the poverty and lack of medical facilities and drugs. But the film is virtually apolitical, which is a major limiting factor, and it often veers into fatalistic sentimentality.

The fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic and for elementary medical facilities and pharmaceuticals, is a difficult one. It requires an understanding of how the profit system—the giant drug companies and their allies in government in Africa and the West—constitutes the greatest barrier to the elimination of what is a largely avoidable tragedy. Serious dramatists and filmmakers need to explore this issue and attempt to grapple with it in the course of developing their artistic work.

Concluded



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