53rd Sydney Film Festival—Part 4

Middle East and North African focus

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This is the fourth part of a series of articles on the 2006 Sydney Film Festival, held June 9-25. The first part *was posted July 17, the* second *on July 19 and the* third *on July 22.*

Fifty years ago, the first Australian film festivals aimed to provide local audiences with access to the best available international cinema. Programmers no doubt hoped to give patrons a more visceral appreciation of the world and thus help to overcome Australia's insular cultural climate.

While new and innovative European cinema was readily available, there were few films—dramas or documentaries—screened in Australia from the Middle East and North Africa. Egypt, and a handful of other Arabic-speaking countries, had long-established film industries, but their movies made only rare appearances at Australian festivals. This gradually began to change in the 1990s.

An important feature of this year's event, therefore, was several films from or about Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Morocco. These were screened under the "Shifting Sands: the changing face of the Middle East and North Africa" section of the festival.

Prisoners 345, a documentary by Ahmad Ibrahmin and Abdallah el-Binni, examines the plight of Sami Al-Haji, a 36-year-old cameraman who has been incarcerated without charge in Guantánamo Bay since June 2002. The Sudanese born Al-Hajj, who is married and has a child, was sent by Al Jazeera to cover the US-led military invasion of Afghanistan. It was his first assignment for the network, and he never returned.

Al-Hajj and another journalist travelled to Afghanistan in October 2001 but were arrested by Taliban not long after entering the country. Released after the regime collapsed, the two men travelled to Pakistan, where they waited for a new assignment.

In December, Al Jazeera directed Al Hajj back to Afghanistan to report on the situation there. But Al Hajj was arrested at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and jailed in a Pakistani prison. He was then handed over to the US military who transported him, hooded and shackled, to the US air base at Bagram in Afghanistan. Al Hajj was beaten and accused of being linked to Al Qaeda. The US military also claimed he had made videos for Osama bin Laden. He was then moved to Kandahar and imprisoned there for the next five months, and in June 2002 was transported to Guantánamo, where he still remains.

Over the past four years Al Hajj has been interrogated more than 130 times. According to his lawyer, almost every session has been aimed at forcing him to say that Al Jazeera is a front for Al Qaeda.

Along with footage shot in Afghanistan by Al Hajj, the documentary includes interviews with former Guantánamo prisoners and British citizens Moazzam Begg, Jamal Al-Harith and Martin Mobanga, who were repatriated to Britain in 2004. They provide further damning information about the US torture of prisoners and other Geneva Convention violations. This is a valuable documentary not only because it highlights Al Hajj's plight, which has been largely ignored by western media outlets, but also because it adds to the mountain of evidence of US war crimes. (See accompanying interview with director Abdallah el-Binni).

Al Hajj writes in one letter from Guantánamo of the "dark horrid gloominess" of the prison and how it "strips prisoners of their humanity".

"Punishment follows punishment," he writes. "It is almost as if the prisoner is on a sea whose waves crash against each other: he is ripped apart time and again and he holds his breath as he chokes in the bitter, salt water of that sea. The program of punishment for this prisoner continues with years of subjection and oppression. This question rings so often in the ear of the prisoner and he hears its annoying drone: why am I being punished?"

My Country, My Country, a 90-minute documentary directed by Laura Poitras, is set in Iraq during last year's elections and helps puncture some of the official lies and media spin about the US-controlled vote.

The film's central figure is Dr Riyadh, a Baghdad doctor and an election candidate for the Sunni-based Iraq Islamic Party. Riyadh has tremendous illusions in the ballot, but Poitras's camera follows the doctor's daily routine, exposing the real nature of the elections and the tremendous crisis afflicting ordinary Iraqis. Everyday life is dominated by ongoing US military repression, terror bombings, sectarian kidnappings and the lack of basic services.

Some of the film's more interesting moments are those with Peter Towndrow, an Australian security contractor. He explains that he was hired by the US military so it could assume a less visible role in the election and somehow give the ballot process badly needed credibility. Towndrow is filmed purchasing weapons and being briefed by US military officers.

In another scene, a US State Department official pompously tells journalists that the US will "run this show better than anybody ever thought possible." Later, a US military officer tells Iraqi election officials that his principal aim is to convince "Joe Iraqi" that the elections are fair. I don't give a damn, he declares, "what Denmark thinks" about the stage-managed process.

"Although *My Country, My Country* focuses on the January 2005 elections," director Poitras comments in the movie's publicity notes, "it is a broader story about US foreign policy post-9/11. The use of preemptive military force and the goal of implementing democracy in the Middle East mark a radical shift in US and world politics and I wanted to document some piece of this shift."

My Country, My Country is not innovative cinema and its passive 'fly on the wall' technique limits it to only the most surface observations. Nor does the film contain any explanation of the economic and geo-political factors motivating the US-led invasion. Given Poitras's stated concerns about the rise of American militarism, this is a major omission.

The Diameter of a Bomb, directed by Andrew Quigley and Steven Silver, documents the human impact of a Hamas suicide bombing on a suburban Jerusalem bus in June 2002. The terror attack killed 20 passengers, including the bomber, and injured 50. The Canadian/UK production includes lengthy interviews with the victims' families, bus

drivers, firemen, doctors and various scientific experts.

All sorts of details are provided—what happened when the bomb went off, how body parts were collected and identified, and other forensic data—but almost nothing about the political reasons for the bombing. Information about the underlying motivations of Mohammed Al Ghoul, the young Palestinian who carried out the attack, and the almost 60-year dispossession and oppression of the Palestinian people, is perfunctory, at best. The accompanying musical soundtrack is crude and more appropriate for an action thriller.

The Diameter of a Bomb is a manipulative work and one that will be seized on by the Israeli government and its allies to justify further repression of the Palestinian people. This is partially indicated in the film itself, which notes in passing that rescue workers were prevented from moving any bodies and the numerous pieces of human flesh from the bombed-out bus until former prime minister Ariel Sharon had arrived at the scene and was photographed by the media. The documentary makes no comment on this callous and politically calculated response, but simply continues bombarding viewers with gory forensic details.

A WSWS review in 2002 of *A Wedding at Ramallah*, a documentary by Sherine Salama, a Sydney-based filmmaker, about the arranged marriage of a Palestinian couple, raised important questions about the challenges facing contemporary documentarians:

"Some documentary filmmakers, particularly those following the 'direct cinema' genre, argue that directors should adopt a non-interventionist, hands-off approach. The limitations of this technique are apparent when more complex social issues are posed. It is not simply a question of showing 'what is' and how it impacts on individuals. Events can only be understood by probing into their origins—that is, by providing an historical appreciation of why they took place."

This comment applies with even greater force to *The Last Days of Yassar Arafat*, Salama's latest work, which obstinately refuses to probe anything.

A Wedding at Ramallah had humanity and a certain spontaneous charm, and highlighted some of the difficult conditions facing ordinary Palestinians. By contrast, *The Last Days of Yassar Arafat* is focused almost entirely on Salama. It records her yearlong efforts in the West Bank to obtain an interview with the 75-year-old and very frail PLO chairman.

Salama provides no historical background on Arafat, one of the most complex, courageous and yet tragic political figures from the Middle East in the past 40 years, or any details about the situation that faced the Palestinian people when the film was made. Instead, she concentrates entirely on her pleadings with PLO press spokesmen and political minders at Arafat's compound.

Not far into the 77-minute film, Salama is offended when one of the media spokesmen rejects her list of questions, declaring them to be childish. These characterisations prove to be totally accurate. When the director is eventually granted a brief press interview with Arafat, her questions are truly infantile—"What was the highlight of your life", "What was the lowest point of your life", etc, etc. Arafat politely responds with generalities about his devotion to the Palestinian people. It turns out to be Arafat's last press interview.

The Last Days of Yassar Arafat is little more than a cinematic record of a wasted opportunity.

While *Marock*, *Waiting* and *Aahlam*—three of the "Shifting Sands" dramas that I saw—are not sophisticated works, they contain some intelligent social insights. Even *Marock*, the slightest of the three films, has its moments.

Directed by Laila Marrakchi, *Marock*, short for Morocco, is set in Casablanca in 1997 and deals with the lives and loves of a group of middle class teenagers.

The story rarely ventures outside the relatively privileged life of these young people, but its focus on a love affair between Rita (Morjana Alaoui), a 17-year-old Muslim girl, and Youri (Matthieu Boujenah), a Jewish boy, is well done and convincing. Rita's brother, who has just returned from Paris and begun to embrace militant Islamic ideology, is hostile to the blossoming relationship.

While the film works within the framework of teenage romances, circa 1960s or 70s, Rita's refusal to accept the religious and social conventions demanded by her brother and some of his friends is passionate and convincing.

Waiting (Attente), by Palestinian director Rashid Masharawi, charts the tireless efforts of a well-known theatre director to find actors suitable for a yet-to-be completed National Palestinian Theatre in Gaza. Every aspect of the process highlights the plight of the Palestinian people, as the director travels from Gaza and then into neighbouring Jordan, Syria and Lebanon to audition actors.

Waiting has echoes of Iranian director Mohsen Mahkmalbaf's *Salaam Cinema* with all sorts of characters appearing before the camera to present their talents and problems. But the major difference and central foundation of Masharawi's film is that none of these people has a homeland. Each audition reveals another side of the tragedy confronting the Palestinian people.

Ahlaam, written and directed by Iraqi director Mohamed Al-Daradji, was perhaps one of the most harrowing movies in the "Shifting Sands" collection. Shot on location in Iraq over a 55-day period, and therefore under the most difficult and dangerous conditions, *Ahlaam* is critical of both the Hussein regime and the US-military occupiers.

It begins with the US bombing of Baghdad in 2003 and then flashes back to 1998 and the psychological collapse of the film's key characters. They suffer mental breakdowns, a product either of the repressive measures implemented by the Saddam Hussein regime or the Iraqi defeat in the 1990-91 Iraq War, and are confined to a Baghdad hospital.

The film then moves forward to 2003. The hospital is bombed during the US invasion and the inmates flee in fear into the city streets. With the help of one of the inmates and a self-sacrificing doctor, the terrified and disoriented patients are eventually rescued and returned to the remains of the building.

This is not a sophisticated work, technically or dramatically, and it lacks the visual artistry of films by Bahman Ghobadi, the Kurdish-Iranian director of *Turtles Can Fly* (2004) and *Time for Drunken Horses* (2000). But it has a raw power that exposes some of the horrors of the US invasion and subsequent occupation.

To be continued