

Toronto International Film Festival 2007—Part 3

Compassion toward the most despised and other matters

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This is the third of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 6-15).

British director John Crowley's film *Boy A*, based on the 2004 novel by Jonathan Trigell, is inspired by the notorious Jamie Bulger case. In 1993, in Merseyside, England, two 10-year-olds were convicted of murdering Jamie Bulger, aged 2, without any consideration of the social and psychological traumas that produced the boys' offense. During the course of the trial and afterward, the British media spared no effort in portraying the pair as savages who were inherently and irredeemably evil.

Boy A explores, in the words of director Crowley, "why people demonized these children." The film opens with Terry, a social worker (Peter Mullan), sitting across the table from "Boy A" (in this manner the British courts conceal the identity of child defendants), who, at age 24, has spent most of his life in juvenile detention. Terry is encouraging Boy A to choose a name as part of establishing a new identity. To help launch his second life, Terry gives the newly named "Jack Burridge" (Andrew Garfield) a pair of "Escape" brand sneakers. Escaping, in all manner, the glare of a vindictive world, will be Jack's mode of existence.

This reality is reinforced by the vicious newspaper headline, "Evil comes of Age," announcing Boy A's release from incarceration. With his life dependent on a successful reinvention, Jack, nervous and awkward, begins a job. Entering into society has its hazards: the closer he gets to people, the greater the threat of exposure.

The terrible strain of this burden becomes clear when pent-up anxieties, unleashed by the drug "Ecstasy," explode during Jack's first social outing. He lets loose in a frantic, jarring spasm of dance; and later, in a violent subduing of a friend's attackers. Shielding himself from a societal war against him has created a terrible war within.

Flashbacks reveal that the young perpetrators suffered childhoods of poverty, sexual abuse and gross neglect. The social and psychological impulses responsible for Boy A and Boy B (Eric, at the time, and Phil, respectively), the latter now deceased, joining forces at age 12 are firmly established. Their union offsets a cruel isolation and leads to the "perfect storm" moment that results in the murder of a female classmate. "Jack" is now haunted by Phil's death. The official finding of suicide does not quell his suspicion that his friend was found out and assassinated. Phil's fate and the hellish challenges facing Jack are sensitively brought into relief with every excursion into the past.

In one flashback, Phil recounts with a terrifying coldness how he kept his sanity during repeated sexual assaults by his brother. Another, a courtroom scene featuring a self-righteous, vindictive prosecutor and two bewildered, child defendants whose short legs dangle above the floor, is particularly effective. Far away from these events, Jack finds love with a workmate, Michelle (Katie Lyons), and rescues the victim of a car accident to become a local hero. Terry proudly views him as his "most

successful achievement."

Tensions escalate until Terry's jealous and disoriented son (James Young) hits back at Jack in a devastating fashion.

Boy A skillfully tackles the reactionary notion that there exists a "bad seed," that is to say, a human being with an unalterably wicked character. (During the Bulger trial, one policeman involved in the case was widely quoted as saying: "I believe nature spurts out freaks. These two boys were freaks who just found each other.")

In a question-and-answer session after one of the movie's screenings in Toronto, John Crowley pointed to the undemocratic, and irrational, nature of putting children on trial: "The law mandates that a person be tried by a jury of one's peers. If that's the case, then these boys should have had a jury of 12-year-olds.... The thing about children is that they have no boundaries. Kids don't seem to have a compass that can pull them back. And the murder is an example of how the personal and social can tragically intersect. These were essentially kids that had no childhood. That was even the case with Terry's son."

Crowley's film is a compassionate antidote to the British (and global) ruling elite's "law-and-order" mania—a socially regressive preoccupation with containing the population and desensitizing it in the process. Its appearance also reflects a shift in popular mood against this drive.

About the Bulger case, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in June 2001: "The essential aim of the efforts to demonize Thompson and Venables [the two boys convicted of Jamie Bulger's murder] was in order to forward an agenda for the destruction of social reforms. To justify this, it was necessary to repudiate any attempt to understand the broader social, economic and cultural processes that could give rise to aberrant behavior by children or any other social problem. Any attempt to do so was rubbished as an expression of 'wet liberal do-gooding' and blamed for rising lawlessness. Public discourse was brutalized in anticipation of the further brutalization of society itself."

Boy A's most serious weakness lies in its treatment of Terry and his son. First, it strains credibility that Terry would inform the unstable youth about Jack's terrible secret. He insists on one cardinal rule to Jack: never tell anyone. "Never! Never!" Furthermore, that Terry's son is angry and irrational enough to set off a chain of events with possibly deadly consequences has simply not been prepared by the drama up to this point. This development feels contrived and artificial.

Moreover, there is a certain diluting of the social argument. The film seems to be hinting that even individuals as humane and self-sacrificing as Terry are perhaps *fatally* flawed. The director says: "Terry is supportive of Jack, but is a failure as a parent." It's not a secret: everyone has weaknesses. But does that prevent human beings from helping each other and making the world a better place? There's a certain concession here to retrograde moods.

Overall, the film is very strong and compassionate. The festival catalogue cites an oft-quoted Faulkner observation in its notes on *Boy A*: “The past is never dead. It’s not even the past.” The movie rightly sets its sights on the atrocious social reasons, and social forces (courts and media), why this is so destructively true for Boy A and Boy B and many others. It does so in a truthful and moving manner.

Arguably one of the greatest opera singers in history, Maria Callas is the subject of the documentary *Callas Assoluta* (*Absolute Callas*) by French director Philippe Kohly. The film, a look at the artist’s life (1923-1977) and career, makes its focal point Callas’s supposed 25-year effort to resurrect the “myth of the diva.”

“Nearly thirty years after her death,” wrote *Opera News* in 2006, “she’s still the definition of the diva as artist—and still one of classical music’s best-selling vocalists.”

As *Callas Assoluta* surveys the various stages of its subject’s life, beginning with her birth in New York City (in Astoria, Queens), through her musical training in Greece to the fulfillment of her career in Italy, what comes across most forcefully is that whether Callas strove to be a “diva” or not, this was subordinated to her fanatical seriousness as an artist.

In fact, one feels that the diva-as-artist theme is something of a diversion, given that Callas’s enduring contribution is to music, not celebrity or opera mythology. Callas biographer Arianna Stassinopoulos said: “She brought ‘finish’ back to the music: each phrase, each word was meticulously weighed...she never allowed it to become meaningless embroidery.” This quality will be remembered long after the elegance of her attire, or even the force of her personality, will have been forgotten.

The documentary confirms that her ethic as an artist was present from the start of her operatic education. Singing coach Maria Trivella speaks of Callas’s uncompromising, body-and-soul dedication. Callas herself recalls that at the conservatory she was the first one to arrive and the last one to leave, devouring music for hours on end.

In fact, the great Italian film director Luchino Visconti took up opera direction in the mid-1950s in order to work with Callas. The film shows a portion of a remarkable television interview with Callas and Visconti—two great artistic figures being questioned about the former’s infamous “perfectionism.” Her reply, almost in passing, “That’s how you make a thing of beauty,” says something about the diva-artist dichotomy. (It is intriguing that Callas spent a good deal of time in the company of two outstanding Italian filmmakers, Visconti and Pier Paolo Pasolini, both men of the left.)

The issue of Callas’s voice, as the film points out, continues to be debated. The Italian critic Rodolfo Celletti stated: “The timbre of Callas’s voice considered purely as sound, was essentially ugly...yet I really believe that part of her appeal was precisely due to this fact. Why? Because for all its natural lack of varnish, velvet and richness, this voice would acquire such distinctive colors and timbres as to be unforgettable.”

Callas’s voice was capable of enormous emotional expressiveness, as was her acting. In Kohly’s documentary, Callas describes preparing her facial expressions in order to better offer them to the public. One feels the enormity of the gift.

As the film chronicles her sad decline, in the aftermath of her doomed relationship with shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, Callas complains of a culture that builds up idols and destroys them so easily. At age 52, one year before her death, Callas listens to her old recordings and says, “I’m totally useless.”

Sarah Gavron is a British director of considerable artistic ability. Her first full-length drama in 2003, *This Little Life*, about the life of a prematurely born infant, is a work of unusual depth and sensitivity.

Her latest film, *Brick Lane*, based on Monica Ali’s debut novel, is carefully constructed, lyrical and visually sumptuous. But despite its beauty, it is marred by its apparent lack of interest in the political events it

references.

The film’s production notes describe East London’s Brick Lane district as having “offered refuge to immigrants into London for 400 years and these communities have all left their distinctive mark on the area over the centuries. Since the late 1950s and early 1960s, the street has become the center of the biggest Bengali community outside of Bangladesh, mainly from the Sylhet region.... It was to work in the clothing factories around Brick Lane that the young male Bengali workers arrived in the late 1950s and through the 1960s. As they prospered, many brought over their families and established a new community in Brick Lane.”

Brick Lane centers on a young woman, Nazneen (Tannishtha Chatterjee), who is torn away from her beloved sister in a Bangladeshi village after their mother commits suicide and is sent to England in an arranged marriage.

Sixteen years later, she is settled in Brick Lane, now dubbed “Banglatown” by its residents, with two daughters and an intellectually frustrated, pot-bellied husband, Chanu (Satish Kaushik), who has trouble with life in general and with earning a living in particular. Nazneen’s custom-stifled world (“The test of life is to endure”) is blown open when a young British-Bangladeshi man, Karim (Christopher Simpson), offers her a way out of a joyless existence.

But as the Bangladeshi community is forced to contend with the fallout of September 11, Karim and others become attracted to Islamic fundamentalism. Nazneen distances herself from Karim and draws closer to Chanu. In the end, her destiny is with neither. She realizes that “the world is changing and me with it.”

Brick Lane attempts to address the difficulties of life for Britain’s immigrant community. The longing for home, the harshness of trying to get one’s bearings economically and culturally in a foreign land and the gap between parents and their children who more easily integrate themselves are perceptively presented. Mrs. Islam, the neighborhood’s ruthless moneylender, is a well-drawn character who brings out the intra-community strains. The way in which the film deals with its background story of escalating ethnic and political tensions, however, is where Gavron falls short.

During the film’s question-and-answer session, the filmmaker said she was interested in exploring two kinds of love: “One that takes your breath away and one that grows day by day.” She used the September 11 events to investigate how “the outer world impacted on the inner world” of her characters.

Unfortunately, the impact of these events is not really worked through in a convincing manner, and they become the occasion for a rather formulaic conclusion. Karim’s foray into Islamism is crude, as is that of the community. Chanu’s repudiation of fundamentalism and Nazneen’s eventual “empowerment” and independence seem to emerge from a certain (wishful) social schema rather than from an accurate and painstaking look at the reality facing immigrants and British society as a whole since the events of 9/11 and the unleashing of the “war on terror.” One senses that Gavron’s heart is in the right place, but that generally proves inadequate.

Filmed in 12 different countries over a period of six years, *Jihad for Love* is a documentary looking at the fate of homosexuals in the Islamic world. Director Parvez Sharma exposes the harsh political and religious repression and ostracism suffered by many Muslim gays. Sharma sensitively organizes their stories, revealing that in no small measure their torments come from their own efforts to reconcile their sexual orientation with Islam.

While Sharma is undoubtedly courageous and the project a necessary exposé (suicide is not uncommon among gay Muslims), the film fails to connect the horrible repression it records with the generally despotic character of many of the regimes (supported in general by the great “democratic” powers), which routinely practice torture and murder of

political opponents. Fundamentalism, with its “traditional moral values,” is resorted to by various religious and political leaders as a means of diverting attention from the devastating social conditions afflicting hundreds of millions and attempting to create a “national” or “communal” consensus to block the development of left-wing movements. At the same time, the wretched poverty and misery breed anti-gay bigotry and other forms of social backwardness.

The limitations of the film’s single-issue politics become clearer in the concluding sequence of the film: upon arriving in Toronto, one gay Muslim youth believes he is at last “free.” One can certainly sympathize with his relief at no longer suffering cruel persecution, but the moment speaks to the film’s view that the gay community is a separate, classless entity whose concerns are different from those of the general populace.

Jihad for Love was produced by Sandi DuBowski, director of *Trembling before G-d*, a documentary treating the issues facing Jewish Orthodox homosexuals.

To be continued



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