

Toronto International Film Festival 2007—Part 5

The lives of two overlooked women

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This is the fifth and final article in a series devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 6-15).

One of the most impressive films seen by this reviewer at the Toronto festival, *Dans la vie* from French director Philippe Faucon (*Samia, La Trahison*), delicately constructs the argument that Arabs and Jews have lived harmoniously together in the past and can do so again. It also polemicalizes, in a quiet and dignified manner, for recognizing the value and substance in human beings who are undervalued or even discarded by contemporary society.

The film's script was conceived, as Faucon indicates in the accompanying interview, in 2003 at the time of stepped-up violence by the Israeli Sharon government against the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories. Faucon began filming in France as the US-backed Israeli war against Lebanon was getting under way.

In Faucon's lovely and thoughtful work, Esther (Ariane Jacquot) is an older Jewish woman confined to a wheelchair. Feisty and ill-tempered, she makes life difficult for the revolving door of caretakers her son Elie (Faucon), a neurologist, is continuously forced to procure. More than once, she declares her desire to die ("I'm sick of this!"). The situation changes when Sélima (Sabrina Ben Abdallah), a young nurse of North African descent, enters the household.

Sélima has her own crosses to bear. We see her making visits to other patients. One backward type says, "I don't like your sort." To which Sélima replies curtly: "Well, today an Arab is taking care of you." She also faces the disapproval of her fundamentalist aunt and cousin about the fact that she smokes and drinks, and has a black boyfriend.

Sélima's family is hostile to her being employed by Esther and her son because they are Jews. Sélima's mother, Halima (Zohra Mouffok), like Esther, was born in Oran, a city in northwestern Algeria. Claiming to hate all Jews from her native town, she launches into a particularly bitter anti-Jewish tirade as she watches a news broadcast reporting Israel's bombing of Lebanon.

Esther has prejudices and a difficult personal history, having been subjected to anti-Semitic laws during World War II when Oran was occupied by the forces of Vichy France. She remembers, however, a time in Algeria when Jews and Arabs coexisted peacefully, although, she's quick to add, they never intermarried.

The unlikely pair of matriarchs is brought together when another of Esther's caregivers quits and Elie gets Sélima to recruit her mother for the job.

In need of extra money for a planned pilgrimage to Mecca with her husband, Halima soft-sells her working for Jews to her family. Obviously a skilled negotiator, she is a poker-faced expert when it comes to getting her way.

Halima and Esther become close, each challenging a lifetime of psychological conditioning, at a high point in the tensions between their respective communities. In addition, one is the employee of the other. Nonetheless, Halima undertakes bold excursions to the kosher butcher

(who flirts with her) and defends her "unkosher" mixing of meat and dairy.

When Elie is forced to leave town for an extended trip, Halima takes Esther into her home. In close quarters, an inevitable explosion erupts. (Halima: "This isn't Gaza!" Esther: "[Arabs are] always like that, friendly, then they stab you in the back.") The tempest is short-lived and Esther becomes a regular in the predominantly Arab neighborhood.

A trip to the Turkish baths—a complicated undertaking given Esther's size and disability—creates one memorable sequence. Another occurs at an Arab café, populated entirely by male customers, where Halima's husband recharges the battery for Esther's wheelchair. Everyone is made a little uneasy, including Esther, by her sudden presence in their midst, but they all maintain their composure. Amusingly, the two women get on so well that Halima's irritated husband at one point has to remonstrate with the pair of giggling women, "You're chatting all night!"

The presence of the Jewish woman causes a certain amount of friction between Halima and her Muslim neighbors and family. After an argument with a woman neighbor, Halima's son tells her, "Everyone's talking." She doesn't put up with his efforts to control her life: "You make me sick!" When she decides on a course of action, nothing dissuades her. Her husband calmly supports her all along, "It's her decision."

In these scenes and others, the film subtly layers its presentation to the point that when the inevitable parting of the two women finally takes place, it is a viscerally painful, if understated moment. Far from having "nothing in common," as one of Halima's family members has insensitively claimed, they have more in common than any other two characters in the film.

Dans la vie has no tour-de-force moments, but instead develops through the accumulation of discrete truths that add up to something far larger than the individual parts. The film is making a case for these people, in opposition to a social order that pits human beings against one another for its own rotten purposes.

Halima and Esther, both of whose peoples have suffered oppression, succeed in overcoming a socially conditioned enmity and impart something valuable to each other. Esther gets a new lease on life, while Halima attains a confidence and independence that is unusual for her class, religion and gender.

Faucon's work takes its time with and is desperately interested in people who generally register below the society's radar screen. They are not attractive or rich, and therefore count for little. In a no-sparks and graceful way, they show how human relations can, and why they should be, lifted out of the muck.

The story of three sisters trapped in a Macedonian factory town is the basis of Macedonian filmmaker Teona Strugar Mitevska's movie, *I am from Titov Veles*. The town, Veles, and its people are dying from the plant's deadly emission of lead dust. Children have tumors "the size of a football." On the psychic plane, everyone is suffering a spiritual asphyxiation.

The eldest of the sisters is Slavica (Nikolina Kujaca) who copes by injecting methadone. The next, Sapho (Ana Kostovska), gives away sexual favors to obtain a visa to Greece, and Afrodita (Labina Mitevska), the youngest, has opted to become mute. If the residents of Veles are being poisoned, at least they are employed. It soon becomes known, however, that the factory's new owner, the boorish Victor, intends to strip the facility and sell off the pieces.

The ethereal Afrodita functions as the town's lost soul, embodying the reality that, like the rest of the former Stalinist bloc, Veles is a shadow of its former self. Always in and out of a dream state, she proves in spades that human beings are not meant to endure endless punishment. In essence, the devastation of Veles is the devastation of a people.

The film is highly stylized portrait of post-Stalinist Macedonia: a place where life is being suffocated, a place that renders people mute. The lyrical quality of *I am from Titov Veles* is unusual for a product from a former Stalinist country, whose movies are generally either unrelentingly gloomy or thoroughly accepting of the new "free market" reality.

The young filmmaking team includes both director Mitevska and her sister Labina, the film's producer and lead character, Afrodita. The duo describes their project as "a film in search of beauty everywhere, even in the most unexpected and uncomfortable places and aspects of daily life."

However, for all of the film's undeniable poetry ("a long deep breath of very cold air" says Mitevska of her movie), it is largely a limited and impressionist view of contemporary Macedonia.

The question arises—what is meant by its title? Are things better or worse since the collapse of Josep Tito's Yugoslavia? After one of the film's public screenings in Toronto, the director told the audience that her film "is a cry for help. A wake-up call." She was unclear as to whether she thought it better to have the 13 factories in Veles that "under communism were providing bread but killing people," or the 2 that remain today creating more poverty but a cleaner environment. The fact that some third alternative exists is, unfortunately, a closed book to eastern European directors at this point, blocked off as they have been from a left-wing analysis of Stalinism.

Titov Veles is a critique of the post-Soviet privatizations and destruction of communities like Veles. But believing, as Mitevska does, that what existed under Tito was "communism" leaves the filmmaker largely clueless as to an alternative.

As she begins her film with ambivalence, so she ends it: Not able emotionally or physically to leave Veles, Slavica and Afrodita simply evaporate. In a final internal monologue, Afrodita says: "Don't be sad. Don't be sad. I have not come here to die, but to weep. Mine are not tears of pain. No. They're part of something that can never be. We will go where magic still exists."

Mitevska explains this "magical disappearance" as a product of there being "a better future somewhere else." Where, she does not say. Although she is not entirely at fault, the fact the Mitevska has not in any way attempted a reckoning with Stalinism weakens her film and may lead her to unsavory territory in the future.

Veteran Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine's new movie, *Chaos*, co-directed with long-time collaborator Khaled Youssef, opens with a student demonstration in Choubra, a Cairo neighborhood, viciously set upon by the authorities.

The assaulting police are led by Hatem (Khaled Saleh), a corrupt official, who runs his territory like a mafia kingpin, spouting the motto, "Whoever is ungrateful to Hatem is ungrateful to Egypt." His lawlessness is being challenged by a new district attorney, the young Sherif (Youssef El Sherif), whose mother Wedad (Hala Sedky) is a school headmistress and anti-government figure. Her plan to set the government right revolves around seeing her son in office. Toward this end, she encourages one of the school's students, Nour (Mena Shalaby), to pursue Sherif, hoping that he will leave his pot-smoking fiancée.

Sherif eventually discovers his feelings for Nour, but the psychotic Hatem—obsessed with Nour since she was a child—stops at nothing, including kidnap, rape and murder, to possess her.

In its formal storyline, *Chaos* is an uneven melodrama. At its heart, it is a film that unloads firepower against the Egyptian dictatorship and its political police. Chahine, in the movie's production notes, states: "In *The Chaos*, I try to bring out the fate of my fellow citizens, who have so few to say regarding the way our country is handled. Destitute of almost everything, education, means of communication, they suffer from a heavy repression imposed by the authority. Some manifestations [demonstrations] appear like mini-civil wars where a couple of demonstrators cope with four or five thousands of local policemen.

"All you have to do is watch the misery in which live most of the families to realize that, in every autocracy, it's the common people, and especially the lower classes, that pay the piper. The authorities threaten populations in the name of order to annihilate freedom. And this is the mess that rules all the Middle East."

The film's most penetrating scenes are those featuring Hatem. (Egypt "needs a government of steel. I'm the government!" Is this semi-covertly intended as a portrayal of President Hosni Mubarak?) He operates secret cells in the local prison where political opponents are tortured—no doubt similar to those where CIA detainees are rendered. He shoots anyone in his path, with the blessing of his superiors. He is irredeemably twisted as a human being, always ready to lash out against a restive population. Hatem is the quasi-fascistic social type that is increasingly coming to the fore.

On the other hand, Hatem's nemesis, Sherif, is largely a product of the filmmakers' wishful thinking. Of course, it's soothing to believe such a Robin Hood-type could emerge in the form of an attractive, incorruptible public prosecutor, hell-bent on freeing political prisoners and pursuing politically connected miscreants. Nonetheless, *Chaos* stands out for the degree of outrage it levels against a brutal social set-up.

As we have previously noted, French filmmaking has produced some of its finest work in the recent period by turning its attention to the Algerian war (1954-1962). One such example is Alain Tasma's *October 17, 1961*, reviewed by the WWSW after its screening at the 2005 Toronto festival. The film's screenplay by Patrick Rotman skillfully brings to light a little-known police massacre of hundreds of Algerians in Paris.

Rotman is again the scenarist for a film about the Algerian conflict, *L'Ennemi intime*, by French director Florent Siri. As French military operations in Algeria's mountain region are escalating, a high-minded idealist, Terrien (Benoît Magimel), takes over command of a French outpost.

In the course of combating guerillas from the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale)—the Algerian independence movement—Terrien crosses swords with a colleague, the war-weary, cynical Sergeant Dognac (Albert Dupontel), who, unlike Terrien, has no problem torturing captives to extract information. Initially, each fights the enemy with opposed sensibilities, but both wind up equally ruthless and in a similar state of psychic disintegration.

Much as it depicts the brutality of the French, the film takes a troubling turn by seeming to equate the colonialist violence with the violence, and sometimes brutality, of those fighting for independence.

In the movie's production notes, Rotman best articulates *L'Ennemi intime*'s plague-on-both-your-houses' premise: "For a long time, they [the French government] refused to call it a war, instead speaking of maintaining order and peace. As in any war where the occupying army is faced with guerilla activities, there is an invisible enemy to be hunted down and information is essential.

"We know all about the spiral of violence that leads to strong arm interrogations and torture to obtain such information. There is also the violence used by the adversary. The unfortunate Algerian people were the stakes in a battle between the French army and the FLN. Both were

equally violent and used their own means to win over the population. That was the special nature of this war and of guerilla warfare of the time. The film's title obviously refers to the enemy within each of us, which can drive any individual to commit terrible acts. It also refers to the fact that this war is taking place in Algeria, with an adversary that is French, since at this time, 'Algeria is France.' It's an internal, intimate war. It's a colonial war but also a kind of civil war."

Rotman is mistaken in putting an equal sign between the violence of the Algerian resistance and that of the imperialist army, striving to maintain French rule over an enslaved people. The inequality of the foes is masterfully underscored in Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*. At one point in the film, one of the captured leaders of the FLN, Larbi Ben M'Hidi, is asked during a press conference organized by the French army whether he thought it was "cowardly to use women's baskets and handbags to carry explosive devices that kill so many innocent people?"

M'Hidi replies: "And doesn't it seem to you even more cowardly to drop napalm on defenseless villages, so that there are a thousand times more innocent victims? Of course, if we had your airplanes it would be a lot easier for us. Give us your bombers, and you can have our baskets."

Although there were elements of civil war, the Algerian war was fundamentally a colonial conflict. The Algerians had every right to use the means at their disposal to rid themselves of French domination. That the ruling elite propagandized for the war with the phrase "Algeria is France" does not alter this actuality. In referring to the "special nature of this war" as "internal," a "kind of civil war," Rotman is dangerously close to repeating the reasoning used to sell the war to the French—and Algerian—populations.

Concluded



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