55th Sydney Film Festival—Part 4

Contemporary dramas from Israel, Australia and South Africa

Jerusalema

Mile Klindo
19 September 2008

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the 2008 Sydney Film Festival. Part 1, 2 *and* 3 *appeared on September 16, 17 and 18 respectively.*

The Band's Visit: slight but not without its charms

The Band's Visit, a debut feature by Israeli filmmaker Eran Kolirin, is about an Egyptian police band visiting Israel to play at the opening ceremony of an Arab arts centre. The band gets lost and ends up in a small, rather desolate Israeli town, stranded and with nowhere to stay.

Recognising their plight, Dina (Ronit Elkabetz), a tough but kind Israeli café owner, persuades Itzik (Rubi Moscovich), one of her regulars, to billet some band members for the night. Dina agrees to provide accommodation for Tewfiq (Sasson Gabai), the strict traditionalist band leader, and Haled (Saleh Bakri), a restless young man with an eye for the ladies. Personality clashes between Tewfiq and the young upstart Haled are inevitable.

The band's second-in-command, the mild-mannered Simon (Khalifa Natour), and a few other musicians stay with Itzik and his family, where another local married couple happens to be dining. The Israeli wives can barely contain their resentment toward the Egyptians, and this, in turn, brings to the surface outstanding resentments toward their own husbands.

Both households are tense and the ensuing pregnant pauses and loaded glances are both painful and comical. These scenes, which constitute the movies' most fulfilling moments, are skillfully handled by Kolirin.

Here lies the movie's great strength, but what of its context? After all, it is set in Israel, established in 1948 through the ruthless expulsion of the native Palestinians on the basis of the Zionist perspective that Jews have a special historical right to their own nation. But contrary to Zionist claims of a safe and harmonious haven for the Jewish people, Israel functions as an aggressive garrison state, dominated by unrelenting conflict and deepening social inequality, and propped up by Washington to further its geo-political interests in the Middle East.

The Band's Visit is obviously not required to deal with these historical questions and, to its credit, it provides a strong sense of place—the town is a grim collection of ugly apartment blocks in the middle of the desert. Hardly the paradise promised by Israel's founding fathers. There are photographs of the Israeli military on the walls of the roadside café and reminiscences about the days when Israeli citizens would flock to screenings of Egyptian epic movies.

But how is this sense of place played out in the characters' minds, given that they are confronted with human beings from the "other side of the fence"? Director Kolirin remains on the surface, restricting everything to the immediate personal/emotional level.

Despite this, *The Band's Visit* has some delightfully humane moments and its fair share of comedy and dramatic tension. Above all, it highlights some important, albeit obvious, truths about the artificial and entirely reactionary political boundaries dividing ordinary people in the Middle East. Performances by its Arab and Israeli cast are subtle and engaging.

Australian farmer and Afghan refugee

Unfinished Sky is adapted from *The Polish Bride*, a popular 1998 Dutch film, and transposed by director Peter Duncan to a contemporary Australian outback setting and against the backdrop of the country's repressive immigration laws.

Duncan's movie slowly draw us into the lives of its characters—a local farmer and a desperate Afghan refugee—both ultimately victims of the immigration regime. John Woldring (William McInnes) is a grieving farmer who leads a reclusive life, six years after the suspicious death of his wife. One day a badly battered fugitive, Tahmeena (Monic Hendrickx), staggers onto his farm.

Tahmeena, it turns out, is an "illegal" Afghan refugee who has been forced into prostitution at a nearby hotel under the threat of

© World Socialist Web Site

being handed over to immigration authorities. John, begrudgingly at first, decides to shelter her on his farm. Both know, however, that this is, at best, only a temporary solution. Sooner or later her "owner" or the immigration department, which has the right to incarcerate so-called illegal immigrants and refugees indefinitely, will claim her.

This inescapable reality hangs over Tahmeena and John and draws the two together. John's tough exterior gradually dissipates and Tahmeena, who speaks no English, begins to shed some of the horrors from her past. John tries to help the woman locate her daughter, whom she lost somewhere on the journey between Afghanistan and Australia. The two eventually fall in love.

Director Duncan sensitively handles the couple's developing relationship, allowing it to emerge organically and honing in on the minutiae of their everyday life—items and events that are meaningful to both characters. But having intelligently dramatised their love affair, the movie suddenly and rather falsely changes tone as soon as it leaves the farm.

Beyond the rural tranquility is the ever-present danger of the thuggish local hotel owner (Billie Brown) and an overzealous local cop (David Field), and the movie evolves into a fairly conventional thriller with a violent denouement.

Duncan and his collaborators are no doubt concerned about Australia's appalling immigration system and the consequences of anti-immigrant populism, but the movie's ending, which appears to have been added for dramatic effect, undermines the real passion and sense of tragedy befalling John and Tahmeena.

Unfinished Sky is a marked improvement on Duncan's first feature, *Children of the Revolution* (1996), a pointless comedy starring Judy Davis as an Australian communist party leader who visits Russia in the 1950s, is seduced by Stalin and brings home his love child. His latest movie, however, also demonstrates that the Australian filmmaker, who also directed *A Little Bit Of Soul* (1998) and *Passion: The Story of Percy Grainger* (1999), tends to take the line of least resistance, settling for well-worn character and story-line clichés.

Jerusalema

Jerusalema is a based on real events in Soweto and Johannesburg over a 10-year period following the collapse of South Africa's racist Apartheid regime in the early 1990s. This is writer/director Ralph Ziman's second post-Apartheid feature, following Hearts and Minds (1995), and comes in the wake of *The Zookeeper* (2001), which is set in Sarajevo during the Bosnian civil war.

According to Ziman, his latest film arose from a desire to make a "harsh and realistic" crime movie about his home town, but one that reflected "the hopes and aspirations of its citizens".

The two-hour feature tells the story of Lucky Kunene (Rapulana Seiphemo), a poor schoolboy from Soweto. While Kunene is naively swept up in the political euphoria surrounding the election of the African National Congress (ANC), he soon learns that the abolition of Apartheid will not pay his university fees or feed his family, and he is gradually drawn into Soweto's criminal underworld.

Gang leader Nazareth (Jeffrey Sekele), a Russian-trained, ex-ANC guerilla, engages Kunene in carjackings, euphemistically described as "affirmative repossessions", and the young man's exploits become legendary. Each hijacking brings home a new luxury appliance or a fine piece of furniture and Kunene is drawn into more and more ambitious crimes.

After a dangerous stint as a taxi business owner, Kunene's motto becomes, "If you're going to steal... Steal big, and hope like hell you get away with it!" He moves into real estate and steals entire inner city Johannesburg apartment blocks via his "Hillbrow People's Housing Trust" scam.

Jerusalema has potential—it contains all the themes and characters needed for a suspenseful crime thriller, along with its historical setting. There's a visceral sense of the brutal street life and social decay in Johannesburg's once-thriving Hillbrow district, and Ziman's earlier experience making music videos and commercials is apparent in the movie's dynamic action sequences. All this, however, contributes little toward our understanding of the political climate that helped produce the so-called self-made entrepreneur/gangster Kunene.

Kunene's rise from a teenage hijacker to the "Hoodlum of Hillbrow" occurred under the ANC's "free market" regime. Under ANC leader Nelson Mandela, then Thabo Mbeki, South Africa was transformed into a corporate haven for the super-exploitation of the working class, producing one of the most socially unequal countries in the world, gripped by chronic crime, AIDS and other social problems. Nazareth, the ex-ANC militant-turned-gangster, is the only reference to this political reality. This is not good enough and ensures that the movie remains a rather superficial work.

The fact that Kunene is based on a real person does not help either. Ziman's attempts at uncovering the class divide in new South Africa, through the unlikely relationship between Kunene and a wealthy Jewish girl Leah Friedman (Shelly Meskin), is unconvincing, as is the movie's rather false ending.

Ziman told one interviewer that he wanted *Jerusalema* to show "the will of the entrepreneurial spirit to assert itself in the face of degradation and decay". But what is this supposed to mean? Kunene's evolution is simply yet another story about an ultimately tragic figure in the dog-eat-dog world of free market capitalism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site