

Toronto International Film Festival 2008—Part 2

Social drama

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This is the second of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 4-13). Part 1 was published September 18.

A deeply felt humanism characterized many of the films seen by this reviewer at the Toronto festival. For the most part, such films exhibited insight and sensitivity about how people operate in their daily lives in distressing social circumstances. Not much was taken lightly, even in comedies. The plight of immigrants or the native-born in some of the poorest—and richest—of lands was often rendered with care.

Many filmmakers and actors traveled long distances to Toronto to speak with audiences after screenings of their films. They answered questions about their artistic processes and clarified ambiguities in the narratives. But mostly, they affirmed a commitment to shed light on that which should not be and needs to change. Some described years of laboring under harsh and even dangerous conditions with little in the way of resources.

Without exception, however, the works, even those of some beauty and intelligence, fell short or, in some extreme cases, fell apart. While artistic intuition and sensibility are important in treating human difficulty and suffering, having some understanding of the root causes of the suffering is ultimately at least equally important. And not simply for the sake of intellectual coherence, but for the artistry as well.

The aesthetic quality of a film is not simply a function of the individual's ability to arrange or decorate in a pleasing manner, it is also a matter of the depth and truth of the impulse at work. Serious attitudes toward the problem, the source of the problem and at least the possibility of a solution are all vital. It is easier to feel and convey sympathy, frankly, than to understand why people are suffering and what might be done about it. As a rule, film writers and directors are still entangled and often overcome by the complexities of the reality they are trying to tackle. As we are at pains to reiterate, this is an objective, and temporary, state of affairs.

These were three of the better films.

Class differentiation in an immigrant Muslim community in France is imaginatively portrayed by Algerian-born, French director Rabah Ameur-Zaimeche in his film, *Adhen (Dernier maquis)*.

In the outskirts of Paris, “Mao,” a Muslim boss, owns a company that repairs pallets and trucks. Images of stacked, bright

red wooden skids catch the eye in the film's opening sequence. Grinding, monotonous noises coming from somewhere in the dreary truck yard function as a soundtrack. Two workers, Titi and Haji, talk about what it takes to become an imam. The former is a recent convert to Islam.

To prove his dedication to his new religion, Titi performs self-circumcision in his apartment. In the background is a “Free Palestine” poster. He injures himself and is hospitalized, expecting that because it was an act in the service of Allah, Mao will sign forms verifying it was a workplace accident. In fact, most of Mao's Arab and African employees are Muslim and believe in his benevolence, particularly when he opens a mosque for them.

Appreciative of the opportunity to be devout, they soon learn that their boss, who appoints the imam, has more worldly motives. Mao makes it mandatory to attend the mosque. He hopes that providing a place to worship will divert attention from the reality of reduced wages and withheld bonuses. Further, he gets his imam to spy on militant workers.

The workers get wise and ask the imam if he's the boss's man. “We don't want to be manipulated ... Mao is a crook.” A worker appeals to Mao to compensate his employees for their loyalty and the difficult working conditions, but is snubbed and lectured about ‘surplus value.’

When Mao lays off two mechanics, claiming he is going to outsource the truck repair shop, there is talk of starting a union. The mechanics blockade the workplace. A conflict emerges between those who want to shut down production and those who side with their boss. ‘He gives you a mosque but won't let you unionize ... He treats you like slaves,’ say the members of one group to the other before a punch-up.

In an interview, the director explains that the pallets are a symbol of the “archaic elements in any system of production.” He asserts that his characters, as foreign workers, “constitute an important component of the proletariat today, but they are often unknown and excluded from the democratic process ... What interests me is to show that controversy today in France, in an industrial area around Paris, among workers and with an employer who likes to proselytize; and what that triggers in their relationships and their aspirations.”

Adhen is a fairly sharp-eyed view of how class, in the end, trumps religion. In the film's beginning, Mao (well played by the director) appears to be just ‘one of the guys’ in his mid-size enterprise. He knows each of his employees personally and attends

the mosque with them. In the course of operating a business, however, Mao shows a different side.

A conversation between Mao and one of the African workers is telling. The latter presents compelling reasons why the workers should be better paid, but Mao cuts to the chase—his financial bottom line. As his employees resist layoffs and wage cuts, Mao resorts not to prayer but to physical violence. That the imam is a company man who assists Mao is a perceptive element in the film.

Linha de Passe, by Brazilian directors Walter Salles (*The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Central Station*) and Daniela Thomas, follows a pregnant mother raising four sons in the slums of São Paulo, a city of some 20 million inhabitants.

Cleuza (Sandra Corveloni) tries to keep her brood intact with a firm hand, but their lives are precarious, always teetering on the edge. Much depends on the income she earns cleaning house for a middle class woman, who is fond of Cleuza. But as the latter's pregnancy progresses, her employer acts as if she's doing her a favor by letting her go.

São Paulo, as a newscast blurts out, is a place where 100,000 young people, including college graduates, line up for garbage collection jobs.

Cleuza's son Dario, a talented soccer player, has a shot at being picked up by a minor league team, his last chance for a career in the sport. Now 18, he is considered too old for the highly competitive junior leagues. But even the minors require that he have money to bribe his way onto the team.

The oldest, Denis, is a handsome lothario who races around the city as a motorcycle courier. Always in need of extra cash, his foray into crime is a disaster. On the other hand, a third brother, Dinho, tries to avoid all temptations of the flesh by becoming a Christian fundamentalist. He wears a suit, works in a gas station and represses himself sexually until his faith is tested and he implodes, nearly committing a homicide in the process.

The youngest, the pre-teen Reginaldo, unlike his half-brothers, is black. He is obsessed with finding his absent father, who he believes is a bus driver and spends long hours riding city buses, missing school and worrying his mother when he doesn't come home.

Dario's story is the film's core. The filmmakers explain that soccer is one of "the few means to transcend the social barriers in Brazil. There is no place for romanticism here: every year two million kids, aged 15 to 17, try to make the cut in second and third division teams. Only a few thousand make it. At age 18, the age of our character Dario, the tryouts are over and so is the dream."

Salles and Thomas have done a fine job trying to show that not all Brazilian poor youth become criminals, like the more sensationalizing Brazilian films do (including the silly *Once Upon a Time in Rio*, screened at the festival). According to the directors, "the vast majority refuses to follow this path. They are rarely the subject of films. This thematic unbalance has shaped a biased impression of our reality."

This commendably animates their project, but may also explain why the film is perhaps a bit formulaic, with Dario, Denis, Dinho and even the young Reginaldo each representing possible escape routes from poverty. As the filmmakers say, "we did not avoid the contemplation of violence in our society. The characters in *Linha*

de Passe engage this question in different ways." Nonetheless, *Linha de Passe* was one of the better films at the festival.

French director François Dupeyron's *Aide-toi, le ciel t'aidera* (*With a Little Help From Myself*) takes up the story of an African immigrant family living in the projects outside Paris. Sonia, who is married with four children, is especially under siege the day of her daughter's wedding.

Her oldest son Victor gets arrested for drugs, her second daughter announces that she's pregnant and her youngest son is a particular worry when he flirts with death on the roof of the housing complex. Worst of all, her husband, a much older man, has gambled away the money for the rental of the wedding hall, as well as the savings towards the purchase of a laundromat. With each new problem, Sonia mutters defiantly, "We'll find a solution."

When her husband drops dead of a heart attack, Sonia is determined not to spoil the wedding festivities so she hides the body in the apartment of her 80-year-old white neighbor Robert who is only too willing to oblige. ("For years I didn't have any company.") Robert convinces Sonia to bury her husband in the basement and tell people he took off to Africa, allowing her to get his pension. Sonia falls for the logic of the argument.

The unsinkable matriarch earns a living tending the elderly. Her most difficult patient, dubbed 'resident evil,' makes remarks like, "If you weren't black, you could have been my daughter."

Meanwhile, Robert tries to use Sonia's secret to break his isolation. He longs to touch her body after a lifetime of being "scared of flesh." Bewitched by the woman, he feels alive for the first—and last—time.

Aide-toi, le ciel t'aidera has strands of black comedy in the interplay of immigrants and the elderly, both socially marginalized groups. The director explains that he was impacted by the deaths of 14,000 seniors in the 2003 heat wave in France. "I went on the Internet," says Dupeyron, "and saw horrific pictures which I had forgotten, Prime Minister Raffarin on vacation in his black Polo shirt, trying to sound reassuring ... The shocked ambulance driver saying 'This is very serious!'"

Sonia and Robert are engaging and lively, as is their relationship. The scenes meant to represent "the community"—the wedding party, the hair salon—are a trifle simplistic and perhaps a little condescending. For the most part, characters seem too willing to accept their lives in the suburbs, hardly expressing anger or even a desire for change. Still, the film has a good deal of heart and ingenuity.

To be continued



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