

Sydney Film Festival 2011—Part 1: Social complexity versus the trivial

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This is the first in a series of articles on the recent Sydney film festival.

This year's Sydney film festival, which screened 161 titles, including more than 30 documentaries, saw record ticket sales and many sold-out sessions. Not so long ago, the festival was in a dire financial state, with media commentators warning of imminent collapse. Fortunately these predictions were not fulfilled—for now, better marketing and increased state government funding have alleviated the event's immediate financial problems.

Making an assessment of the Sydney event, like any other film festival, is difficult—there's only so much that can be watched and digested during the 12-day event. While there were some exceptions, the majority of competition features that I saw disappointed or made little impression.

The Tree of Life, which was selected for the official competition, contained some arresting imagery; the scenes of 1950s Texas are alluring and memorable. But director Terence Malick's ponderous ruminations on the origins of the universe, the meaning of life and other weighty issues are deeply confused. Notwithstanding the movie's closing 'optimistic' dreamlike reunion, this is a gloomy and philosophically demoralised work (see WSWs review).

Malick's flawed, but cinematically ambitious, effort stood in stark contrast to many other festival features that generally focused on the inconsequential, the quirky or the bizarre, while failing to explore their subject matter in any real depth.

There were important exceptions. *Even the Rain* directed by Icíar Bollaín, reviewed by WSWs at last year's Toronto Film Festival, Iranian writer-director Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation*, and a couple of other features were intelligent and affecting.

Urban Iran

The festival's main competition prize was won by *A Separation*. Competition movies are selected on the basis that they demonstrate "emotional power and resonance; are cutting-edge, courageous; and go beyond the usual treatment of the subject matter."

Farhadi's feature, his fifth, ably met these criteria. Produced for only \$300,000, the emotional and socially complex drama deals with the marriage breakdown of a lower middle class secular couple in Tehran—Nader (Peyman Moaadi) and Simin (Leila Hatami).

The urbane and relatively affluent couple—Nader is a bank worker and Simin a teacher—have been married for 14 years, but their relationship has come to an end. Simin wants to leave Iran and take Termeh (Sarina Farhadi), their 11-year-old daughter, with her to another country and a "better future." Nader stubbornly refuses to give his permission and Simin decides that she has no option but to file for divorce.

Family tensions are complicated by Nader's elderly father, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease and requires constant care. On Simin's suggestion, Nader hires a young woman—Razieh (Sareh Bayat)—to look after the old man. Unlike Nader and Simin, she lives in a poor part of the city and is religious. Her husband has lost his job and the couple is deeply in debt. Unbeknownst to Nader, Razieh is also four months pregnant.

A few days after hiring Razieh, Nader returns home to discover that she has left his father alone in the house. The old man has collapsed and is rushed to hospital. Nader sacks Razieh, accuses her of theft, and during an altercation with her outside his flat she falls on the stairs. She is later admitted to hospital where she has a miscarriage. Razieh's husband files manslaughter charges against Nader, precipitating a series of increasingly tense legal hearings adjudicated by an Islamic cleric, as well as personal clashes outside the court.

This is an engaging work, with strong performances by the entire cast. It sensitively explores the various legal and

moral dilemmas in urban Iran and touches on issues that resonate universally. Director Farhadi skillfully ensures that the viewer is able to understand and sympathise with the complex questions confronting all the movie's principal characters and which continue until the movie's closing titles.

Farhadi said in a recent interview that he wanted his film to provoke questions. The confrontation between the two families was “not good versus bad,” he said. “They are simply two clashing visions of good. And that is where, in my opinion, modern tragedy resides. Conflict sparks between two positive entities, and what I hope is that the viewer will not know whose victory to wish for.”

The fact that Farhadi has dramatised a conflict between a secular and slightly more affluent family and a religious, more oppressed, layer is an interesting and important development.

While class issues largely have been ignored by Iranian directors during the past two decades, or at least in the features screened at western film festivals, class tensions are clearly building up inside Iran. The Islamic regime has begun implementing major social spending cuts and austerity measures, including the elimination of subsidies to food, fuel and water. The US-backed bourgeois opposition Green Movement, likewise, offers no way forward for the working class and is fundamentally antagonistic to its social interests. An eruption of social struggles by Iranian working people and the poor, independently of these political agencies, will help cultivate the ground, sooner or later, for a new resurgence in Iranian cinema.

Whimsical and surreal, but slight

The Future, by American writer-director and performance artist Miranda July, is also about a disintegrating relationship. This whimsical and at times surreal work—it includes a talking cat and a self-propelled yellow t-shirt—is set in Los Angeles.

Mid-30s couple Sophie (Miranda July) and Jason (Hamish Linklater) are growing apart. Frustrated with the increasing emptiness of their lives but unable to make a clear decision about what to do, they decide to adopt Paw Paw, an injured cat, agreeing to pick it up from the abandoned animal shelter 30 days later. Nervous about their “commitment” to the animal, they begin to worry about their own relationship and “the future” and tell themselves they have to achieve something. At one point, Sophie explains to Jason that she wanted to “understand politics” but had stopped following

the news, lost track of things and didn't have the time to catch up with what was going on.

Sophie cancels their broadband connection, which effectively ends Jason's job as a part-time online computer technician. He joins an environmental group and starts selling trees door to door in the local suburbs. Jason pessimistically explains to one resident that the environment is a catastrophe—like a building that has just been hit by a wrecking ball—and about to collapse.

Sophie, an unqualified dance instructor for children, decides to leave her job and pledges to post a series of dance moves on YouTube—one a day for the next 28 days. She fails to develop a single routine and drifts into an affair with a small businessman. Jason and Sophie's relationship disintegrates, and both forget their agreement to pick up the cat, which is euthanised by the authorities.

July is a talented and imaginative filmmaker, but the cultivated quirkiness in *The Future*—unlike *You Me and Everyone We Know*, her 2005 first feature—is rather too cute and confected. This becomes tedious and ultimately mystifies the issues confronting the movie's two protagonists.

Aimless couples like Sophie and Jason are obviously not an aberration, but their passivity and the movie's self-involvement are at odds with growing numbers of a generation not just frustrated with their lives, but increasingly impelled to try and understand their social and political circumstances. July's film has the air of lagging considerably and complacently behind.

The strengths and weaknesses of other competition features, including *Amador*, *Target*, *Toomelah* and *Norwegian Wood*, will be explored in later articles. Further reviews will examine the latest version of Emily Bronte's classic *Jane Eyre*, directed by Cary Fukunaga; *The Arbor*, about the tragic life of Yorkshire writer Andrea Dunbar; *Post Mortem*, written and directed by Pablo Larraín and set during the 1973 military coup in Chile; and *Le Quattro Volte*, an intriguing non-fiction work about contemporary southern Italian village life. The coverage will also include a comment on Danish-German director Douglas Sirk (1897-1987) and five of his Hollywood melodramas.

To be continued



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