

Sydney Film Festival 2012—Part 4: Two love stories and a couple of class-conscious dramas from Korea and Brazil

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent Sydney Film Festival. See parts 1, 2 and 3.

Amour, written and directed by Michael Haneke, and *Tabu*, by Portuguese director Miguel Gomes, are different takes on the subject of love but with varied levels of emotional reward.

Tabu is a historical tale of love and crime in two parts, moving between contemporary Lisbon and 50 years earlier to Mount Tabu in Mozambique during the last years of Portuguese colonial rule.

In Lisbon the wealthy and eccentric Aurora (Laura Soveral), who is the centre of the story, leads a mundane and fairly miserable life with Santa (Isabel Muñoz Cardoso), her Cape Verdean maid, and her religious neighbour Pilar (Teresa Madruga). The two women unsuccessfully attempt to wean the elderly Aurora, whose health is deteriorating, from a destructive gambling habit. On her death bed, Aurora recounts the only time she truly lived and loved, back in the 1960s when she met a playboy and adventurer on her husband's colonial estate.

The film moves into flashback with Aurora's love story told in a silent, classical and at times beautiful black-and-white style, an approach that subtly intensifies Aurora's secret romance. Her brief but nostalgic narration fills in the necessary factual gaps, shedding some light on why her married life in the colony left her unfulfilled.

Gomes's feature—his third—has some genuine chemistry and recreates something of the emotional intensity generated by the young lovers who are played by Ana Moreira and Carloto Cotta. The slow pace in which their ill-fated romance unravels complements the striking, black and white imagery of colonial Africa.

However, Gomes's portrait of the present-day Aurora and her sad life are far less moving. Her soulless existence and gambling problems in Lisbon are obviously related to her broken heart fifty years ago but in the present-day context the two lovers' story is strangely unaffffecting. One is hard pressed to sympathise with either of them, even when they are finally reunited in Lisbon at her deathbed.

Unlike her young, love-struck self in the 1960s, present-day Aurora exhibits few endearing characteristics. A clearer sense of the social and historical, not just personal, causes for her unhappiness and unsympathetic disposition is needed. Aurora's pining for the old colonial years and a broken heart from half a century ago is just not enough.

Austrian director Michael Haneke's films are generally known for their bleak and cold emotional atmosphere (*The Piano Teacher* [2001] and *Cache* [2005]). His latest feature *Amour*, about an elderly married couple, is a deeply moving work. As the director told the *New York Times* in May this year, the film flowed from his belief that it was "a task of dramatic art to confront us with things that in the entertainment industry are usually swept under the rug."

In contrast to *Tabu's* exotic African locations, Haneke's setting—the Parisian flat of the old couple—is deceptively simple but effectively draws us into the couples' close and complex relationship.

George (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Anne (Emmanuelle Riva) are retired music teachers in their 80s, still enjoying an occasional concert outing. One day Anne has a brief blackout, later discovered to be a stroke, forcing the couple to make some serious adjustments to their daily routine. Anne develops dementia and her increasing reliance on her elderly husband severely strains their relationship.

The arrival of Eva (Isabelle Huppert), their self-absorbed daughter and also a musician, only exacerbates the already difficult situation. She no longer lives in France and attempts to put her parents in a home, which they determinedly resist. Anne's dementia progressively worsens and the film's most moving, embarrassing and even comic scenes are also terrifying as the loving couple struggle with dignity against the inevitable. When that moment arrives, the only thing left for George is an act of mercy.

Director Haneke portrays Anne's deterioration with real humanity and veteran actors Trintignant and Riva are truly

endearing in their roles. This is a sensitive and confronting work and one that leaves a lasting emotional impact. It deservedly won the Palme d'Or at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

Class tensions in Korea and Brazil

Debut features, *The King of Pigs* and *Neighbouring Sounds* attempt to examine some of the class tensions in Korea and Brazil. While both films have some obvious weaknesses they are interesting efforts.

Korean animation feature *The King of Pigs* is about schoolyard bullying by wealthier students against their poorer classmates and was inspired by director Yuen Sang-Ho's own childhood experiences. The decision to use animation was an attempt by the young filmmaker to give a freer expression to the terrible psychological impact of this ongoing practice and the film certainly has some challenging and violent moments.

The film centres on two former high school classmates, Kyung-min, a bankrupt businessman and Jong-suk, a failed novelist and freelance journalist, who reunite after 15 years. Their adult lives are catastrophic. Kyung-min has just killed his wife and Jong-suk has beaten up his girlfriend. The story they share, via flashbacks, is one of systematic and brutal victimisation at school by the "dogs", or children from wealthy families.

Both Kyung-min and Jong-suk, along with the majority of their classmates who come from deeply oppressed families, are categorised as "pigs" and metaphorically serve as food for the "dogs". This social hierarchy is so entrenched that even the teachers look the other way during the bullying sessions; this brutality is replicated outside the school in relations between employers and workers.

Yuen's characterisations of the working class and poorer school youth have some depth, but the wealthy young students are demonised and one-dimensional. This undermines the film's overall impact and implies that the bullying is a product of "bad people", not the entire social order.

Rather than the direct approach taken in *King of the Pigs*, Kleber Mendonça Filho's *Neighbouring Sounds* relies more on the atmospherics of street sounds (hence the title) to reveal something of the class issues animating its story.

Neighbouring Sounds is a slow-moving and eclectic look into the petty anxieties of a group of insular and fearful residents in an upper middle-class district dominated by security gates, high walls and surveillance cameras in the historic Brazilian city of Recife.

While the director skillfully blends the sounds of the street—traffic, kids kicking ball, barking dogs, music emanating from lounge rooms—to provide a flavour of the district, the film meanders from one frustrated householder to the next.

The area is mainly owned by Francisco (W.J. Solha), a wealthy local patriarch. Dinho (Yuri Holanda), one of his grandsons is a petty thief, for no apparent reason; the other, João (Gustavo Jahn), is a realtor, building upon his grandfather's achievements. A sexually frustrated mother of two desperately tries to silence a barking dog, which disrupts her marijuana-smoking sessions and other activities. A neighbourhood committee meeting presents video evidence of their elderly night watchman sleeping on the job. They respond to this "scandal" by hiring a rather shady security firm.

The residents appear to have plenty of time on their hands and one way to engage their minds is to look for problems where none exist. Or, if they do, they're successfully exploited by the security operators offering "expert" services.

Neighbouring Sounds hints at the fact that the residents are sensitive to and fearful of the growing disparity between rich and poor. Housekeepers and maids are the only representatives of the "other" residents of the city where the overwhelming majority live in poverty.

Disappointingly, Filho fails to explore this important issue or the social and psychological underpinnings of the aimless relationship between João and Sofia (Irma Brown), his middle-class girlfriend, a central element in the film. *Neighbouring Sounds* is a humane and occasionally interesting look at middle class layers in Recife. The director's aims are set too low and the film never rises above a meditation on petty concerns going nowhere.

To be continued



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