

## Toronto International Film Festival 2013—Part 4

# The drama of life in Britain, the Middle East, India, Poland and Bosnia...

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*This is the fourth of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 5-15). Part 1 was posted September 20, Part 2 September 23 and Part 3 September 27.*

“No one has ever seen the world without personally sensing and feeling it,” a Marxist critic once wrote, who went on to say that finding the world, in the truest, deepest sense, requires immense, persistent and complex rational activity. How many contemporary filmmakers are capable of that? Not enough, but some make an attempt.

The Toronto film festival screened a number of dramas that presented aspects of social life in an honest and compassionate manner. Some tackled World War II and its aftermath, while others immersed themselves in current issues. As an aggregate, they offered pictures of a society that cannot solve, or even seriously address, its problems. From the 1940s onward, war, oppression and poverty continue into the present day.

*The Selfish Giant*, the second feature from British filmmaker Clio Barnard, is a wrenching tale of survival on a run-down housing estate in Bradford, West Yorkshire. The title comes from one of Oscar Wilde’s stories for children (1888), about the consequences of selfishness and private property.

Arbor (Conner Chapman) and Swifty (Shaun Thomas) are teenage boys whose friendship is born out of dire circumstances. The pint-sized Arbor is a destructive, sharp-witted dynamo, while Swifty, something of a horse whisperer, is so named ironically. Stolen copper cable from a railway line eventually ends up in the boys’ possession, and they embark on a dangerous relationship with the “selfish giant,” Kitten (Sean Gilder), the owner of a scrap metal yard. Kitten will also co-opt Swifty into an illicit horseracing operation.

After the boys are excluded from school for bad behavior, scavenging—and stealing—scrap metal becomes their full-time endeavor. Arbor and Swifty use their ill-gotten gains to help their respective households, both of which teeter on the brink of the social abyss. For his part, Kitten is all too happy to encourage their junk collecting, which ends tragically.

With great empathy for her characters, Barnard locates her movie in a bleak, postindustrial landscape, where the possibility of a decent future has long since disappeared. Working in the British social realist tradition, she shines a light on a world where the trade unions and political parties that once claimed to represent the working class are now entirely absent. People have been left to fend for themselves, but this also means they no longer have any allegiance to those organizations. This state of affairs leaves the filmmaker with not much of a perspective perhaps except a belief in people’s innate decency. Not a small thing.

In Arbor, Barnard has created a character whose energy could power a small city. And, against all odds, the mothers of both boys are incredible wellsprings of affection. Even in the hardboiled Kitten there is a reserve of

humanity.

In an interview, the director explained: “This economy is declining and there are not many opportunities for these boys and I guess I find that upsetting. The ‘selfish giant’ of my film is a selfish ideology. I liked Glenda Jackson’s speech [in the House of Commons after the death of Margaret Thatcher] when she said that under Thatcher selfishness and greed had become virtues. The film is about what got lost. And what we need to value and hold on to. It’s a fable about that as much as about an intimate and loving friendship and about loss.”

## Rani Massalha’s *Giraffada*, including an interview with the director

Rani Massalha’s *Giraffada* is set in Palestine on the border of the West Bank, near the wall separating the area from Israeli settlements.

Yacine (Saleh Bakri) is veterinarian at the Qalqilya Zoo, the only remaining animal park in the Palestinian territories. A young widower, he lives for his ten-year old son, Ziad (Ahmed Bayatra), who is infatuated with the zoo’s giraffes, a male and a female. Operating on a shoestring and passionate about keeping the park going, Yacine is in continual conflict with the corrupt and uncaring local Palestinian authorities.

During an Israeli air strike, the male giraffe is wounded and dies. His pregnant female partner is so traumatized that she stops eating. Her survival and the distraught Ziad’s well-being are at risk. Yacine can find another male giraffe at the well-funded Ramat Gan safari park in Tel Aviv, situated on 250 acres, in contrast to the Palestinian zoo’s 4.9 acres.

With the cooperation of his friend and Israeli counterpart at the safari park, Yacine does the unthinkable. He attempts a very perilous operation to evade checkpoints and bring a “kidnapped” giraffe to the Palestinian zoo.

Inspired by a true story, the film plays on the cage-like conditions for Palestinians behind the Separation Wall to draw an ironic connection between zoo animals and the residents of the truncated Palestinian West Bank—using the majesty of giraffes.

It is an amazing sight when the giraffe and its quasi-abductors finally march across rough terrain, avoiding checkpoints and Israeli soldiers—a striking and innovative way of commenting on the harsh realities of Palestinian existence.

During a question-and-answer session at one of the festival’s screenings of his movie, Massalha spoke about the difficulties of filming in the Palestinian territories. He also mentioned that the Israeli soldiers seen manning checkpoints were opposed to the occupation.

The WSWs spoke to the director in Toronto during the festival.

WSWS: Can you tell us something about your life and artistic background?

Rani Massalha: I was born in France to an Egyptian mother and Palestinian father. I was brought up in the atmosphere of Palestinian politics in Paris in the 1980s. My inspiration growing up was the great poet Mahmoud Darwish [1941-2008]. My interest in cinema developed a little later in life. When I was 16 or 18, I tried to figure out how Palestinians were making films and thought about doing it, but the number of actors, directors and so forth was very limited. I've been passionate about cinema ever since.

When I started working on this film, I was not involved in cinema. I was working for a bank in London. I hated my job. I hated going to the City. It was terrible, but I had to make a living. Then I saw this story, which popped up on my computer screen when I was looking for news about the Middle East. I saw 'Israeli-Palestinian conflict produces one more victim,' and I clicked on the link and saw that a giraffe died. I wanted to tell that story to the world. The incident happened at the end of 2001, beginning of 2002.

I quit my job, I changed my life, changed my friends. I moved to the Middle East and tried to understand what was happening. It was a complicated process making this film. My first feature in Arabic...with children...with a giraffe...in the Palestinian territories...so there was no end of difficulties. Animals, babies and cars!

It is very rare to shoot in the occupied territories themselves. But it's very important to make a film there. People are very excited to see people from all over the world. They were so happy to be treated seriously, not just as terrorists on the other side of the wall. It was a great experience; it changed me enormously. Along with the rest of the people who were involved.

This is a fictional film, it was inspired by the events, but I changed important details. I created a story around the original event. The Qalqilya Zoo is a small zoo, a few acres, run by Dr. Sami Khadr, a remarkable man, who does everything. Children there get to see the animals. It is one chance to get away from their lives, the hardships, the military. They are not even able to get to see the sea, which is only 13 kilometers [8 miles] away. It is a painful situation, I can't understand it.

The giraffe died in an air raid. It panicked and hit its head, and died. It became a metaphor and I created a film. The giraffe is the tallest animal, it looks at humanity from above. I was so astonished by the Israeli wall; it's so tall. It's much bigger than the Berlin Wall. I wanted people to understand that even the giraffe is not as tall as this wall.

A giraffe is a beautiful animal, and very definitely a character in the film. We shot it in every condition, in various emotions, from various angles. A giraffe is very difficult to keep in the frame; it's very large.

WSWS: What is the situation in the territories at present?

RM: The situation is disastrous. People have lost belief in anything. The occupation has "broken the bones" of anyone who wanted to resist in any other way than violence. There's a "pacific" intifada at present. People want to be free, they want to have lives. You have checkpoints everywhere, corruption. I want to be optimistic, but...it's very frustrating.

The situation is bad. People are not starving. But it's still a prison. You can't see your friends without waiting four hours at a checkpoint. The region is smaller than Paris and its suburbs.

It's very difficult to get permission to see your cousin in the next town. Why? Why? I get overwhelmed.

I'm freer, I have a French passport. I feel so bad for my friends there. I can leave, they can't. They don't want to leave. If they leave, they feel they can't come back. If you're a Palestinian resident of Jerusalem, for example, and you stay away for more than six months, the Israelis can deny you the right to stay. This is by law. I'm not inventing this.

WSWS: What is the relationship between art and that painful social situation?

RM: Art is a great vector through which to spread an understanding, a subjective understanding, of the situation that exists among human beings. Art is a means of political expression, especially for the Palestinians. Art is a powerful way of talking about the human condition. It facilitates understanding between human beings. It produces a lot of emotion, seeing a film or a painting.

Art is my life, it's something very strong.

### ***Qissa, from India***

A film by Indian director Anup Singh: *Qissa*. In 1947, in post-colonial India, partition forces Umber Singh (Irrfan Khan), a Sikh, to flee ethnic cleansing in his village. Determined to have a son after three daughters, Umber "remakes" his youngest daughter, Kanwar (Tillotama Shome), into a male. An unhappy outcome is inevitable.

An artful, layered film, *Qissa* seeks to show, without sensationalizing, how tradition, economic distress and homelessness make Indian families see their daughters as a burden and threat to family honor. However, the brutal partition of the Indian subcontinent is the film's scaffolding.

Director Singh states: "In the more than 60 years of Indian independence, the old wound continues to bleed, and the bloodshed continues even today. In 1947, when the British colonialists tore India into two nations, creating Pakistan as the other, creating two communities out of one, and two homelands, it led to the killing of unnumbered people and millions more were made refugees.

"One of the attempts of *Qissa* is to try to understand this fatal violence; to look into the inner consciousness of such a refugee like Umber, not different from my grandfather. To try and see how the violation of one's home, identity, and nationhood could unleash within such a refugee a raging violence not only against so-called 'enemies' but against the self and one's own family." Hauntingly, beautifully, *Qissa* largely succeeds in this task.

Well-known Polish-born, Paris-based director Pawel Pawlikowski (*My Summer of Love*, 2004) takes up anti-Semitism in Poland in his stark, black-and-white-film, *Ida*, set in 1962. Anna (Agata Trzebuchowska) is about to take vows and join the order of nuns who raised her from infancy. Mother superior urges her to get acquainted with her mother's sister, her sole surviving relative. Anna learns from her hard-drinking, promiscuous aunt Wanda (Agata Kulesza) that she was born Ida Lebenstein, a Jew.

Wanda's excesses are the product of her mental torment at having lost her sister, Anna's mother, to an unknown fate, as well as her crimes as a harsh Stalinist prosecutor.

When Wanda and Anna travel to Piaski, a little village where Anna's grandparents and parents lived, they discover the gruesome end that befell Anna's parents and brother as Jews during the war. Wanda commits suicide, after which Anna tries to walk in her shoes, engaging in sex, cigarettes and liquor, before she dons her novice's habit and takes another path. *Ida*'s bleakness seems to express Pawlikowski's bitterness about both life under the former Stalinist regime and, by implication at least, the past and present-day nightmare of capitalist Poland.

The remarkable *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* by Bosnian filmmaker Danis Tanovi? was reviewed by the WSWS as part of its coverage of the 63rd Berlin Film Festival in February 2013.

The film follows a Roma "iron picker" (a man who collects scrap metal) in a small Bosnian village as he attempts to obtain medical treatment for his wife whose life is threatened by a miscarriage. His desperate efforts under cold and miserable conditions speak to the terrible plight of an oppressed minority, and to the wretched facts of life facing millions in Central and Eastern Europe in particular.

Tanovi?'s film is one of the most troubling, humane works of the year.  
*To be continued*



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