

Toronto International Film Festival 2013—Part 5

A filmmaker sees and does something important

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This is the fifth 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, Part 3 September 27 and Part 4 September 30.

Sometimes a film surprises you.

Franco-Senegalese director Dyana Gaye's *Under the Starry Sky* takes place in three cities simultaneously, over the course of one winter.

Twenty-two-year-old Sophie arrives in Turin in the north of Italy. She's come from Senegal in West Africa, looking for her husband, Abdoulaye. He, however, after living with another woman in Turin for some time, has made his way illegally to New York City, where he looks to survive in bleak conditions. Abdoulaye's one contact in America, Sophie's aunt, is meanwhile on her way to Africa—after emigrating decades before—with her son, Thierno, who is visiting the continent for the first time.

The film takes place in the course of these characters following and displacing one another, and attempting to find a new life in the process. Gaye says her film is "for me the opportunity to pay tribute to what we all are: people in transition."

Sophie confronts a painful situation in Turin. She first finds herself in the household of the woman who lived with her husband, not knowing anyone else in the city, not knowing the language, without papers. When she takes a room in the residence of an Italian woman who works with immigrants, and already has a Ukrainian tenant, she begins to make sense of a new country.

In cold, relatively friendless New York, Abdoulaye finds out at work that his cousin and traveling partner has been cheating him, taking a share of his pay. "My own cousin rips me off." "I get a share because I arranged the trip." Abdoulaye walks off angrily into the city streets.

In Senegal, Thierno gets a taste of African life. His mother has returned for the funeral of her former husband, who has a second wife and family in Dakar. Thierno is fascinated, a little overwhelmed perhaps by the new sights and sounds and smells. One of his female cousins is obsessed with America; getting there is all she can think about.

The director says the characters, like many of their fellow countrymen and countrywomen in Senegal, are "torn between Africa and the West, past and future, dream and reality, one's ancestral culture and the longing for personal freedom." She explains that her purpose is not to draw up a balance-sheet of the pros and cons of immigration, but to draw closer "to destinies often reduced to nothing more than footnotes and statistics."

There are interesting and truthful sequences in *Under the Starry Sky*. But one moment, which comes as something of a surprise, makes it rise above many other films on the same subject.

After breaking with his cousin, Abdoulaye is forced to spend his first night on New York's streets. A white man sits down next to him on the frozen sidewalk. Eventually, he explains, "I'm from Louisiana. I lost everything, including my wife, in Hurricane Katrina." He was in the

construction business, now he's homeless. "Do you have a wife?," the southerner asks Abdoulaye. "Yes," the latter replies, which is perhaps only half true.

The brief scene is deeply affecting. All of a sudden, the film rises above parochial and narrow concerns. It becomes about the fate of the dispossessed everywhere. The filmmaker has seen something about the world that must reflect a wider recognition building up: the reality of the global economy, on the one hand, with its leveling tendencies, and the worthlessness of a national or insular outlook, on the other.

Later, Sophie's life takes an intriguing turn. Having found work and learned a little Italian, she gets to know Vadim, the attractive Ukrainian roommate, a bit more. He explains he is not going back to his native country; the situation there "is hard." He then invites her to go away on a short trip with him. A married woman, or one who still considers herself to be married, she's a little insulted at first. In the last scene, however, Sophie and Vadim are on the train together, on their way to Genoa.

In a small way, it's a very hopeful moment: people face great difficulties because of the present social and economic set-up, but they are astonishingly adaptable and creative, and endlessly capable of caring for one another.

Rags and Tatters from Egypt

Directed by Egyptian Ahmad Abdalla, *Rags and Tatters* follows an unnamed man who takes part in a major jailbreak in the last days of the Mubarak regime in February 2011. He makes his way, along with a friend wounded by a police gunshot, to a hut in the middle of a wasteland. On a cell phone, he has video of the police violence, which he intends to distribute somehow, so no one will forget "what really happened."

The film follows the man over the course of several days as he attempts to find medical help for his comrade, re-establish contact with his family and avoid both the police and the brutal chief of a neighborhood watch group who has it in for him.

Abdalla (*Heliopolis*, 2009; *Microphone*, 2010), according to his comments, wanted to show audiences what different neighborhoods in Cairo, home to different religious groups and social layers, looked like. In that, he enjoys a certain amount of success. The scenes of people living among heaps of garbage or with only the most elementary necessities of life bring home the horrendous poverty and social inequality that fueled the eventual overthrow of the US-backed Mubarak.

The filmmaker is obviously especially concerned by the sectarian violence between Muslims and Copts, Egypt's Christians. The wounded

friend turns out to be a Copt, and an important sequence takes place in a Coptic neighborhood.

Abdalla's film has a rambling, semi-documentary feel to it, for better or worse, with very little dialogue. It has revealing and honest moments, and certain startling images. However, as a whole, *Rags and Tatters* leaves one with the sense that the director is without much of a perspective on the situation and rather demoralized. After a public screening in Toronto, Abdalla asserted that the Egyptian military, then in the process of carrying out a bloodbath, was a "contradictory" phenomenon. Not very promising.

Finding Vivian Maier

The subject of *Finding Vivian Maier* is a fascinating one, which has aroused a great deal of public interest in recent years. When this documentary, co-directed by Charlie Siskel and John Maloof, makes its way into the movie theaters we will probably have more to say about it.

The story in brief is this: in 2007 Maloof, engaged in writing a book about his Chicago neighborhood, bought a box full of negatives. He was struck by the images and began to investigate the woman who took them, Vivian Maier. More than 100,000 photographs packed away in storage lockers and such eventually came to light, along with Super 8 film footage. (See <http://www.vivianmaier.com/>)

Maier (1926-2009) has come to be recognized as a remarkable artist, specializing in what is condescendingly referred to as "street photography." Someone in the film notes that "she identified with the poor." Certainly she took many photos of the marginalized, sometimes the down and out.

Maier worked as a nanny for upper middle class families (including, at one point, for talk show host Phil Donahue) for several decades. Various members of the families for whom she worked are interviewed in the film.

The big question, which has aroused the public's natural curiosity, is why did she never show her photographs? The filmmakers do not offer an answer, other than that she seemed to have suffered from some psychological trauma that set her off from other people. Maier, at times, used an alias and was known to tell people "I'm sort of a spy" and "I'm the mystery woman."

Aside from personal difficulties, is it possible that historical and social influences also played a role in Maier's seclusion and artistic self-suppression? One obviously has no idea, but it is at least suggestive that someone with her apparent social perceptiveness and sensitivity began to take photos in the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War and anti-communist hysteria, and chose to keep them hidden.

Marcel Ophüls' *Ain't Misbehavin'* and a film about Fellini

Marcel Ophüls (born 1927), most famously the director of *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969), about the extent of French collaboration with the Nazis during World War II, has made a memoir, *Ain't Misbehavin'* (the French title is *Un Voyageur*).

Ophüls, the son of legendary German-Jewish film director Max Ophüls (*Liebelei*, *La Signora Di Tutti*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Caught*, *La Ronde*, *Le Plaisir*, *The Earrings of Madame de ...* and others), was born in Frankfurt. Growing up, he says, he enjoyed a "privileged childhood;" his father was "like the king of the world."

His family left Germany after Hitler came to power. Ultimately, they ended up in Hollywood, where Max Ophüls languished until a longtime

admirer, writer-director Preston Sturges, found him work. After the war, Ophüls returned to Europe and made films in France, dying in 1957.

Marcel Ophüls has many compelling (and sometimes amusing) stories to tell about his father's adventures and his own in the film world, as well as his efforts to expose the horrors of fascism. In addition to *The Sorrow and the Pity*, he directed *The Memory of Justice* (1973-76), about the Nuremberg Trials, and *Hôtel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie* (1988).

Ophüls has known many remarkable personalities, from Sturges and Bertolt Brecht in Hollywood of the 1940s ("Brecht liked me"), and somewhat later Otto Preminger, to Jeanne Moreau, François Truffaut and others from the French New Wave in the 1960s. Documentarian Frederick Wiseman and Greek-born director Costa-Gavras also make appearances.

Ophüls comes across as a literate, sensitive and compassionate individual. But his general leftism and humanism, like that of so many others in the European middle-class left, proved entirely inadequate in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. One is saddened but not astonished to discover that he lined up with imperialism's "humanitarian intervention" in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and traveled to Sarajevo to film *The Troubles We've Seen* (1994), his documentary about war correspondents at work

How Strange to be Named Federico: Scola narrates Fellini is an odd film directed by Ettore Scola, the Italian director, perhaps best known for *We All Loved Each Other So Much* (1974), *A Special Day* (1977) and *That Night in Varennes* (1982).

The best part of Scola's new film about his friend Fellini, who died in 1993, is his dramatizing of the period in Fellini's life when he worked on the biweekly humor magazine, *Marc'Aurelio*, between 1939 and 1942, which Scola also joined as a very young man.

As a whole, the film doesn't tell the spectator very much about Fellini, or even Scola for that matter, although, in regard to the latter, it seems to be wanting to.

To be continued



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