

Two films, and the limits of mere sympathy: *The Girl and Dragon Girls*

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The Girl, written and directed by David Riker; *Dragon Girls*, directed by Inigo Westmeier, written by Westmeier and Benjamin Quabeck

A compulsion to look humanity in the face, warts and all, is a vital artistic impulse that can lead to works of refreshing clarity. The lens through which the artist views life, fashioned by his or her own complex social development, can either bring into focus or irreparably blur that visage.

American David Riker and Belgian-born, German-educated Inigo Westmeier are two filmmakers who clearly possess a sympathy for the downtrodden. Their childlike curiosity about individuals struggling against the odds can occasionally deliver penetrating glimpses of the resilience and generosity of ordinary people stuck in unbearable situations. Not surprisingly, children play a central role in each of their films, and it is clear that both directors delight in their company.

Nevertheless, this narrow focus on the individual poses an artistic limitation. Without immersing oneself into the wider social currents that course around the individual and help shape his or her destiny, the artist relegates himself to sketching rough outlines from the shallows. *The Girl* is American director David Riker's second time at the helm, after directing the 1998 film *La Ciudad* (The City), a series of short vignettes of Latin American workers in New York. He also co-wrote the screenplays for the dystopic science fiction film *Sleep Dealer* and the recent investigative documentary *Dirty Wars*.

In his latest film, Riker tells the story of Ashley, a single mother in southern Texas, played by Australian actress Abbie Cornish. Trapped in a minimum-wage retail job and going home to a dilapidated trailer park, Ashley's life is representative of the social conditions faced by tens of millions of working class Americans.

Due to a history of substance abuse, Ashley has had her young son Georgie taken away to a foster home, which she often drives by and stares at wistfully. During one of these trips, she glimpses Georgie playing on the front lawn and rushes in to embrace him, which embroils her in further

difficulties.

Riker establishes Ashley as a woman embittered by life. Cornish (*Stop-Loss*, 2008), who has played a number of hardboiled characters, fits the mold quite well.

Ashley's father Tommy (Will Patton) comes knocking one day to share some good news. A truck driver who has been absent from Ashley's life, he is suddenly flush with cash, which he hopes to squander across the Mexican border with his daughter at his side. It is during this trip that Ashley discovers the source of his new-found wealth. He has turned to smuggling undocumented Mexican workers across the border.

Ashley toys with the idea of following in his footsteps, which could give her the financial leverage to regain custody of Georgie. She crosses into a Mexican border town, where the main plaza teems with itinerants from all over Central and South America.

Tragedy strikes when Ashley ferries her first batch of migrants across the river. A woman is swept away by the current and leaves behind her young daughter Rosa (Maritza Santiago Hernandez). Guilt-stricken, Ashley undertakes a journey into the Mexican interior to reunite Rosa with her grandmother.

This expedition, comprising the latter half of the film, suffers from Riker's questionable decision to idealize rural Mexican life. What else is one to make of Ashley's entrance into Rosa's home village, set in a pristine corner of the Mexican highlands? Or the picture-perfect dwelling of Rosa's grandmother, who consoles Ashley by sagely offering that "it was the river who took my daughter, not you." There is no suggestion as to the conditions Rosa's mother was fleeing.

In a video about the film's production, Riker makes the following comment: "The central myth of the border—that hope exists in the north—was inadequate. It's not that there's more hope in the north, or that the south was filled with despair. The hope is inside, in the person crossing the border.

"Suddenly it dawned on me. Why not write a story that

turns the myth of the border upside down? An Anglo woman, trapped in the quicksand of her South Texas life, crosses the border, against the very current of the migrant stream. Why can't she discover a new sense of hope, new journeys, and new possibilities, in her journey south?"

But this is surely 'inadequate' too. It is not a 'myth' that living standards are higher in the US, where life is not exactly paradise for any working person, than in Mexico. America is an imperialist power that has accumulated considerable wealth, a portion of which even trickles down occasionally to the impoverished immigrant worker. Why else would so many still cross the border? It is not a slight to the Mexican people to acknowledge the terrible poverty, which is none of their fault, that afflicts so many in that oppressed country—it is part of global capitalist reality. These things are not done away with by liberal wishful thinking.

Dragon Girls

In *Dragon Girls*, documentary filmmaker Inigo Westmeier follows the lives of three young girls studying at the Tagou Martial Arts School in Zhengzhou, China, the largest such school in the country, boasting more than 35,000 students.

The film opens with a breathtaking aerial view of an early morning exercise routine. Hundreds of young boys and girls engage in a perfectly-synchronized wushu kung fu pattern, their shining red uniforms popping against the dull grey stone of the courtyard. The documentary is filmed with a high-contrast cinematic grain, drawing attention both to the monotony of the beaten surroundings and the recurrent flash of colour of young bodies in constant motion.

Many of the students hail from poor rural families, such as nine-year-old Xin Chenyi, who like many of her peers boards at the school for most of the year. She is favoured to rank highly at the year-end inter-school competitions. Thirteen-year-old Chen Xi is a veteran of the school, portrayed as a hard-working, but undistinguished martial artist. Huang Luolan, in the same year as Chen, is a former runaway from the school who was forced to re-enroll by her parents.

In spite of their disparate abilities, several concrete realities bind the girls together. Exhausting six-day weeks at Tagou begin at the crack of dawn and continue until well past sunset. By mid-day, the girls are bruised and often bloodied from sparring, and they are afforded only three showers per week. Contact with the outside world is limited to the occasional phone call home or a trip to a nearby temple.

The girls subsist by wringing what joy they can out of sisterhood. In the presence of the adult instructors, they maintain a stiff façade, but in their absence, the children come out to play. Late-night dance sessions with flashlights, laundry trips turned into water fights, and shenanigans around the bleachers are all unmistakable and universal marks of childhood.

The limited character of the girls' contact with their families emphasizes their isolation. Sometimes an abbreviated phone call every few days is all Xin can hope for, and even then, her father is so swamped with his small fruit-peddling business that it is all he can do to encourage her to take home the gold at year's end.

Chen, like millions of other Chinese youth, lives with her aged grandmother during vacation, while her parents eke out a living as migrant workers. Huang's father runs a small Shanghai butcher shop, and believes (or hopes) that his daughter will benefit from the iron discipline of the martial arts school.

Opportunities to tell a more complete story are missed. In truly heart-wrenching moments, the girls express the sorrow of growing up without parents and far from home. However, such candour is rarely demanded of their family members.

The responses of school administration figures and Shaolin monks are contrived and not probed. As a giant private school, Tagou is one of the region's more profitable enterprises. Several years ago, the adjacent temple, with which the school is affiliated, launched a reality-show contest to find a new "martial arts film star." Needless to say, of the tens of thousands of children at Tagou, only a handful will rise to prominence, while thousands more will be relegated to lives as film extras, in the security forces, or worse.

None of this makes its way into Westmeier's film. Many of the girls' platitudes, recited with conviction but no doubt gleaned from their instructors and the school handbook, are simply taken at face value. Some deeper excavation is required to expose the real conditions.

Riker and Westmeier make honest efforts, and while commendable under present circumstances, these must still be paired with greater audacity and insight to create lasting chronicles of human resiliency.



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