

99 Homes' director Ramin Bahrani: "The villain is the system"

Joanne Laurier
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Ramin Bahrani's 99 Homes, in many ways a remarkable work, is opening in New York City on September 25 and nationwide October 9. The following comment on the film was originally posted as part of coverage of the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival.

In *99 Homes*, Iranian-American writer-director Ramin Bahrani (*Man Push Cart*, 2005; *Chop Shop*, 2007; *Goodbye Solo*, 2008) has created a compelling work that puts flesh and blood on the foreclosure epidemic.

Set in 2010, the movie opens in a blood-spattered bathroom in an Orlando, Florida, home where a man has killed himself rather than undergo eviction. Viewing the carnage while sucking on an electronic cigarette, real estate agent and developer Rick Carver (beautifully played by Michael Shannon) is annoyed that the death will delay his resale plans for the dwelling.

As a foreclosure shark, Carver, with local police in tow, shows no mercy as he carries out innumerable dispossessions on every segment of the population—young families who are victims of the recession, the elderly who believe they are safe from homelessness because they have signed up for schemes such as reverse mortgages, even the well-to-do. Some of the movie's strongest scenes depict the plight—and subsequent wrath—of people from a range of social milieus being pushed over the edge. Vampire-like, Carver feeds from a seemingly bottomless pool of social misery.

One of Carver's victims is an underemployed construction worker, Dennis Nash (Andrew Garfield), a single dad living in his family home with his son and his mother (Laura Dern), a hairdresser. He has been futilely fighting eviction through a corrupt legal system

that favors the Carvers of the world.

When his family is forced to move to a fleabag motel, Nash, in his desperation, begins working for Carver's eviction assembly line, which also involves a variety of grifts, like stealing air conditioners from foreclosed properties and billing the government for their replacement with other stolen units. Carver tells him, "When you work for me, you're mine." And, speaking of the failing housing industry, "They build homes—I own homes."

Bahrani effectively and systematically portrays the awful things people will do, betraying themselves and others, faced with impossible economic conditions. Nash is transformed into someone unrecognizable, at least for a time.

Carver is a human being too, and Bahrani does not treat his situation without sympathy, or at least understanding. The real estate agent tells Nash that his father was a roofer, and that he also used to be in the business of building houses until it became an economic liability. The system is rigged, Carver explains; it only bails out "the winners." Indeed, America is now a country "of the winners, by the winners and for the winners."

In the end, Carver is only a bit player succeeding or failing at the whim of his overlords: giant real estate conglomerates, who do not pick off people one at a time, but, like 500-pound bombs, wipe out entire communities.

Bahrani's film is well done, despite a few narrative flaws or shortcuts in its final portion. Shannon, Garfield and Dern perform with commitment, contributing to the movie's cohesive and appropriately angry tone. It is a work pointed in the right direction.

At a September 2014 Toronto film festival press conference for *99 Homes*, Bahrani made conspicuous

reference to the grotesque fact (cited numerous times by the WSWS) that the 85 richest people in the world have the same wealth as the bottom 3.5 billion. Lead actor Shannon noted approvingly that the director had a “social conscience” and “bravely observes what’s going on.” As for himself, the actor explained, “I don’t care about real estate, [but] I did care about what was happening to these people.” Dern pointedly added that “perhaps we should bail out those who are damaged” and presumably not simply the banks. Finally, responding to a question about Rick Carver’s villainous role in the film, Bahrani commented that “the villain is the system.”



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