

Toronto International Film Festival 2018: Part 2

Capernaum, Screwdriver, Rosie, The Public and Black 47: Socially critical films from the Middle East, Ireland and the US

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This is the second in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 6-16). The first article was posted September 28.

We live in a world where a few dozen individuals have the same wealth as the bottom half of the population; where tens of millions have been driven out of their homes by bloody, neocolonial wars; where daily life for a considerable portion of humanity is increasingly intolerable.

Film writers and directors live in this world too. There must be those who reject upper-middle class triviality and self-involvement.

Capernaum

Depicting almost unimaginable levels of poverty and blight in Lebanon, filmmaker Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum* tells the story of Zain (Zain Al Rafeea), a wily, aggressive 12-year-old boy living with his family in Beirut.

When his hard-pressed parents sell his beloved 11-year-old sister, Sahar (Cedra Izam), in marriage to their landlord's son, Zain runs away. At an amusement park, the boy meets an undocumented Ethiopian refugee, Rahil (Yordanos Shiferaw)—illegally in Lebanon—and her infant son, Yonas (Boluwatife Treasure Bankole, in real life, a baby girl).

Rahil feeds a starving Zain in her squalid corrugated tin shack. To prevent Rahil from losing her job, Zain agrees to look after Yonas. But when—unbeknownst to Zain—Rahil is picked up by the authorities, he must take desperate measures to keep himself and Yonas alive. Exhausting every other option, he eventually delivers the child to a human trafficker, Aspro (Alaa Chouchniye), who deceitfully promises Zain that Yonas will be given to a rich couple.

Zain ends up getting arrested. Encouraged by a television exposé on child poverty, he files a lawsuit against his parents for having given birth to him.

Capernaum is a difficult movie to watch. The levels of economic hardship, want and degradation are extreme. Labaki's camera is unflinching. Introducing the film at the Toronto festival, she told the audience the situation in Lebanon was actually far worse.

During the question-and-answer session, Labaki explained that in the four years it took to make the film, she went to many refugee camps, difficult neighborhoods and juvenile jail courts. She asked the children, "Are you happy to be alive?" Heartbreakingly, most answered, "No."

The filmmaker asserted that "Zain is suing a whole society, a whole system. Everybody in the film is playing themselves, their real-life circumstances. The film's title in French means 'chaos.' It was originally a village in Palestine signifying 'hell.' I wanted to speak about children's rights, immigrants' rights and the insanity of having papers to exist."

Screwdriver

After his release from an Israeli prison, a Palestinian man finds life emotionally tormenting and isolating in Palestinian director Bassam Jarbawi's *Screwdriver* (*Mafak*).

Elegantly filmed and convincingly performed, *Screwdriver* opens in 1992 at the Al-Amari Refugee Camp in Palestine. Within the parameters of the rubble-strewn camp, two eight-year-olds, Ziad and Ramzi, become friends. Ten years later, Ramzi is shot dead in a crossfire. When Ziad and his mates retaliate against what they believe is an Israeli settler, Ziad is captured by Israeli forces, tortured and imprisoned for 15 hellish years.

In Ramallah, the freeing of Ziad (Ziad Bakri, a member of the famed Palestinian acting family) is celebrated with much fanfare. But suffering from the effects of his long-term incarceration, Ziad still feels caged and mentally abused. Though no longer in a cell, he is a prisoner of the Occupation and "freedom" is a meaningless concept.

According to the director's statement: Ziad "reacts to his confinement with surges of panic and rage, losing control until the line between reality and fantasy is dangerously and permanently blurred. Solitary prisoners' reliance on fantasy as a technique for survival captured my attention, and largely influenced the story of *Screwdriver* (*Mafak*) ... This stagnant ever waiting hopelessness pervades the Palestinian psyche. The result is an inability to define self without occupier, to organize and feel life without restriction ... *Screwdriver* (*Mafak*) is set in the specifics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, however, it can provide for a universal narrative of torture, confinement, and the battle with one's own image and reflection."

The production notes explain that Jarbawi was a child during the First Intifada (the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, lasting from 1987 to 1991). As a teenager, from 2000-2002, he photographed the Al-Amari Refugee Camp in Ramallah during the Second Intifada.

The movie makes mention of the fact that one-fifth of all Palestinians have at one time been detained. At the end of June 2018, according to the

Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, there were 5,667 Palestinian security detainees and prisoners being held in Israel Prison Service facilities, including 316 from the Gaza Strip.

During the film's question-and-answer period at the festival, Jarbawi stated that the Israeli authorities had no knowledge of the film. Furthermore, "when I go through a checkpoint, I'm going from one Palestinian town to another. It's a power struggle and a humanitarian crisis."

Rosie

Irish filmmaker Paddy Breathnach's movie *Rosie* dramatizes the family homeless epidemic in Ireland, one of the worst in Europe, with a story about a working class family in Dublin that becomes homeless when their landlord sells their rental house.

Soaring rents and low housing stock has seen Ireland's family homelessness increase by a staggering 24 percent since July 2017.

Spanning a 36-hour period, the film features Rosie (Sarah Greene), John Paul (Moe Dunford) and their four young children struggling to find permanent accommodations after being thrown onto the streets. Homeless shelters are full, relatives hard-pressed and government agencies inept and overwhelmed. With the family's belongings crammed into their compact car, John Paul goes to work in a restaurant while Rosie drives the kids to school, fearful that their condition will be exposed.

In the quest for a roof over her head, Rosie crosses swords with her mother (Pom Boyd), who demands more than Rosie is willing to give to lodge her family. Now, only a car shields them from the cold and damp. The situation is untenable.

According to Focus Ireland, "the overwhelming number of families becoming homeless had their last stable home in the private rented sector, and the crisis in this sector is the immediate cause of their homelessness—landlords selling up or being repossessed, shortage of properties to rent, scarcity of properties accepting rent supplement, and high rents."

Like that of *Rosie* and John Paul, most of the families "becoming homeless have never experienced homelessness before and never thought this could happen to them. Thousands more families are struggling on very low incomes or social welfare and many are falling into serious housing difficulties as rents continue to rise."

Rosie is affecting, but too narrow in relation to the dimensions of the problem and the overall situation in Ireland.

Emilio Estevez's *The Public*

The Public is another film preoccupied with the problem of homelessness. Written and directed by veteran actor and director Emilio Estevez, the movie is thoughtful and heart-felt.

Libraries are community and cultural resources and should, according to Estevez, be a sanctuary and safe haven for the homeless.

According to the American Library Association, libraries promote "equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America ... Therefore it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies."

It is this sentiment that informs Estevez's movie.

In Cincinnati, every morning the public library opens its door to a waiting group of homeless men and women who avail themselves of computers and books, even performing their ablutions in the library's bathrooms. The giant posters of Frederick Douglass and Percy Shelley adorning its walls are a reminder of the great literary and historical battlers of the past.

Estevez plays Stuart Goodson, the chief librarian destined to lose his job because of his empathy for the library's homeless patrons. His co-worker Myra (Jena Malone) is sweet, but more concerned about the environment than she is about these human outcasts.

During a frigid cold front, Cincinnati's emergency shelters are filled to capacity and several homeless people die in the streets. On a particularly bitter night, some 100 homeless people refuse to leave the library at closing time, barricading themselves on the third floor. At first resistant, Stuart eventually joins the occupation.

Police set up a "war room" in the library, manned by their expert negotiator, Detective Ramstead (Alec Baldwin), whose drug-addicted son has gone missing and is undoubtedly homeless. A crude and careerist public prosecutor (Christian Slater) wants to take a "law and order" hard line, while the library administrator (Jeffrey Wright) works to avoid a confrontation.

The media joins the fray, with a reporter (Gabrielle Union) on hand to lie about and distort the situation and blackguard Stuart and the occupiers, who are led by the sly and sharp Jackson (Michael K. Williams). When the SWAT team arrives, the protesters find a provocative, innovative way to forestall police violence and a potential bloodbath.

Somewhat light-hearted in its tone, *The Public* is clearly a labor of love for its extraordinary cast. But while Estevez presents a rational outcome to the crisis in his movie, how such situations actually end in America is not so pleasant. Estevez hints at this in his portrayal of the politicians and police who want to resolve the homeless occupation by arrests, guns and cracking skulls. The director also makes a pointed comment about the role of the media who have no compunction about inventing a narrative for their own various dirty purposes, whatever the human cost.

Meanwhile, as Estevez's movie shows, it is ordinary people who are the true allies of the homeless.

In a *Hollywood Reporter* interview about *The Public*, Estevez claimed that he saw an article in 2007 in the *LA Times* about "how libraries have become de facto homeless shelters and how librarians were no longer doing the work of librarians. These guys were now first responders, and that's gone to a whole other level just in the last 10 years. Librarians are now trained to carry Narcan [a medication used to block the effects of opioids] because there are so many overdoses in urban libraries.

"Sadly, it's more relevant now than when I started on this in 2007. The homelessness crisis has been with us for some time, but it does seem that there are more people falling through the cracks. It's an issue that is especially pressing with the new tax cuts and with Social Security and Medicare on the chopping block."

At the Toronto film festival question-and-answer session, several of *The Public*'s cast members spoke convincingly about their commitment to exposing the ever-growing problem of homelessness. Estevez credited his father, actor Martin Sheen, as his inspiration for the new film. Sheen has been arrested some 68 times for protesting against homelessness, nuclear proliferation and other social ills.

Estevez: "The core issue is homelessness. Close to 1 billion people—15 percent of the world's population live in slums. Five hundred fifty thousand Americans and 230,000 Canadians have been homeless at some point this year."

Christian Slater talked about the veterans who have post-traumatic stress disorder, adding, "If we can bail out Wall Street, we can deal with the homeless." Alec Baldwin noted that "homelessness is really back in New York City ... One missed rent payment and you're out on the streets."

Michael K. Williams added: “Drug addiction, mental issues, joblessness, working homeless. How did people get there? I was becoming desensitized to people laying on concrete on the street.”

Tellingly, however, Estevez explained that the film’s ending was going to be darker under George W. Bush, but as *The Public* was finished under the Obama administration, its ending became more hopeful. This left-liberal perspective does account for some of the film’s slightly softened focus.

Black 47

Irish writer-director Lance Daly’s *Black 47* is set during the Great Famine that ravaged Ireland in the late 1840s (the title refers to 1847, a particularly devastating and deadly year).

Australian actor James Frecheville plays an Irish deserter from the British army, Martin Denny, who returns to his homeland to discover that his mother has died of starvation and his brother was hanged by the British.

Witnessing the horrors afflicting the population, Denny, a highly skilled killing machine, embarks on a mission to avenge his family. In response, the British occupiers send a posse to kill Denny, led by Hannah (Hugo Weaving), one of Denny’s disgraced former army comrades. The convoy also includes the cruel, resolute English officer, Pope (Freddie Fox), as well as a young private, Hobson (Barry Keoghan), who becomes deeply affected by the suffering of the Irish people. Along the way, the trio pick up a devious local translator, Conneely (Stephen Rea)—“Maybe people would place more value on beauty if they could eat it.”

The landscape is a mass of blight, disease and starvation, with the British army doing its best to impose a death sentence on the population. A showdown between Denny and his trackers culminates on the property of Lord Kilmichael (Jim Broadbent), who is hoarding large quantities of grain to ship to England, even as famished throngs bang on the gates of his lavish estate.

Black 47 is a well-executed film, though it tends to divide the world into “good guys” and “bad guys,” like a stereotypical cowboy movie or a mere revenge thriller.

According to BBC History: “Altogether, about a million people in Ireland are reliably estimated to have died of starvation and epidemic disease between 1846 and 1851, and some two million emigrated in a period of a little more than a decade (1845-55). Comparison with other modern and contemporary famines establishes beyond any doubt that the Irish famine of the late 1840s, which killed nearly one-eighth of the entire population, was proportionally much more destructive of human life than the vast majority of famines in modern times.”

To be continued



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