

# *Twin Flower*, about the refugee crisis, from Italy—and *Midnight Family*, about poverty and health care, from Mexico

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## *Twin Flower*

On the Mediterranean island of Sardinia, a region of Italy, two adolescents—one an African refugee—find themselves in painful straits in Italian filmmaker Laura Luchetti’s valuable *Twin Flower*.

The movie, which screened at the 2018 Toronto film festival, will be available December 24 from distributor Film Movement on DVD and through digital retailers.

As *Twin Flower* opens, a local teenage girl, Anna (Anastasiya Bogach), is frantically running away from a menacing pursuer, Manfredi (Aniello Arena), in the rural landscape. A flashback reveals that the man is a migrant trafficker.

Meanwhile, Basim (Kallil Kone), a young refugee from Ivory Coast in West Africa, is begging for money and help from a supermarket’s clientele (“I need work”). After being chased away from the store, he helps Anna fend off two harassers on a motorcycle. Both on the run, the pair team up, and Basim convinces Anna that he will protect her. As their bond deepens, they become like twin flowers on a single stem.

It comes to light that Anna’s beloved father has been forced to make a living by working for Manfredi. In a flashback, Anna objects: “It’s not a job, it’s shit. Manfredi’s shit.” Furthermore, Manfredi becomes obsessed with Anna, and has a violent confrontation with her father. In the course of the terrible ordeal, Anna becomes mute. The trafficker then begins to relentlessly pursue the object of his animalistic desire—he is the basest of human specimens.

Basim clutches a map that he hopes will guide the duo to Northern Europe. His optimism is striking, for

he is an illegal immigrant, with neither money nor means of winning any reaction from the authorities except enmity. Anna finds temporary work for a florist and Basim is reduced to selling himself for sex.

Along the route of their perilous journey, Basim and Anna meet the social outcast and male prostitute Stella (Fausto Verginelli) and the old, semi-lecherous florist who would like nothing more than to have Anna stay with him. Manfredi is tracking Anna like prey. When the inevitable encounter takes place, the immediate danger is averted, but Basim and Anna face an uncertain future in a hostile world.

*Twin Flower* is sensitively done. It is honest and compassionate. Luchetti—who has directed short films, music videos, documentaries, theater productions and one previous feature film (*Hayfever*, 2010)—explained: “I wanted to tell the story of a desperate and pure love between two people who are different in many ways, but share the same destiny: they are both running away from something, they have both lost their innocence.”

She went on: “When we shot the film, Kallil Kone, who plays Basim, had arrived just a couple of months earlier from Libya on a boat. He escaped on foot from Ivory Coast to reach Libya, where he embarked on one of those illegal boats that often never make it to their destination. He had a dream, he wanted to make it to Italy. I was looking at him during his audition, he has a gift. A look in his eyes that speaks of the horrors he went through, and, at the same time, shows the innocence of a regular kid his age.”

The writer-director further noted that meeting Kone had a strong influence on *Twin Flower*. A number of its elements originated with incidents that actually happened to the African youth. Luchetti observed that

finding the right actor to play her protagonist had been a “very long and emotional journey. I met hundreds of kids from refugee camps in Rome and in Sardinia. They all had the same pain in their eyes, they all escaped from their countries risking their lives, they all had the same hope. They all arrived on a boat. Kallil represents a memorable story to tell...”

Luchetti also said that Anastasiya Bogach, her Anna, “is tiny with an enormous temperament. She is, as Kallil, at her very first acting experience. She too arrived in Italy from abroad when she was four years old. In a small van, from Ukraine. She has survivor’s skills. She is a small wild animal. She brings truth to her character.

“All my actors are ‘real.’ I started from reality to write the film.”

Elsewhere Luchetti expressed her concern about the “millions of kids” like Basim and Anna around the world “who don’t have a voice.” It is to her credit that she has attempted to give them one.

## ***Midnight Family***

Director Luke Lorentzen’s *Midnight Family*, now playing in movie theaters in several US cities, opens with an intertitle explaining that the government of Mexico City operates only 45 public ambulances for a population of 9 million.

This appalling reality is the subject of the documentary that focuses on the Ochoa family, one of many who eke out a meager existence as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) driving their own private ambulances.

The competition in this field is cutthroat, as multiple contenders chaotically race, often neck and neck, to the scene of a medical emergency. To stack the odds in their favor, the Ochoas use a public address system to help clear traffic as they maniacally drive to their destinations.

Juan Ochoa, 17, plays a leading role in the family’s paramedic business, cleaning and replenishing supplies for a vehicle that often doubles as a place to sleep. The Ochoas appear highly skilled in dealing with trauma, but keeping the ambulance on the road depends more

on bribing police than maintaining proper certification.

*Midnight Family* implies that the Ochoas and other private paramedics attempt to convince their patients to be transported to private hospitals—where the latter will have to pay—because it is the only means the family members have of being compensated for their efforts, which are considerable.

In one brief scene, a hospital receptionist can be seen slipping money to the Ochoas. Most of their human cargo are too poor to pay, and the Ochoas themselves are barely keeping their heads above water. It is a painful balancing act between properly handling emergency care and earning a living.

In one voiceover, a grieving mother accuses the Ochoas of causing the death of her daughter because they bypassed a public hospital for a far-away private one. The 3,800 pesos the Ochoas charge for emergency transport is approximately \$US200.

Mexico, with the 10th largest population in the world and beset with explosive social contradictions, is a country boiling with discontent. Unfortunately, Lorentzen’s *Midnight Family* suffers from a certain passivity, and it lacks any social or historical context, the products apparently of what the director calls “observational” filmmaking.



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