

Amin: A worker far from home

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Directed by Philippe Faucon; scripted by Faucon, Yasmina Nini-Faucon, Moustapha Kharmoudi (based on an original idea of Yasmina Nini-Faucon)

Veteran French filmmaker Philippe Faucon's latest film, *Amin* (2018), now available for the first time in North America from Film Movement, is a subdued, thoughtful look at the state of migrant workers who break their backs in the metropolitan countries to feed their families in their native lands.

Written by Faucon, Yasmina Nini-Faucon and Moustapha Kharmoudi (based on an original idea of Yasmina Nini-Faucon), the movie is a meticulous look at the lives and challenges of these vast numbers of economic exiles forced to be separated, often for years or even decades at a time, from their families, friends and culture.

Amin revolves around the titular character, a Senegalese immigrant (Moustapha Mbengue), living and working construction jobs in a Paris suburb. Amin slaves away for low wages by day, and sleeps in cramped quarters by night. Nine long years of this routine have taken their toll. "We live like donkeys," says one worker, about lives that seem to have little meaning other than to send money home.

A few times a year Amin is able to visit his wife Aïcha (Mareme N'Diaye) and three children back in Senegal. His family's survival depends on the remittances they receive from an absentee husband and father. Aïcha and the children suffer the pain of separation and want nothing more than to live with Amin in France. But, says Amin, "France is in crisis. We could not make it there. ... Many Senegalese are looking for work." He also advises his son against illusions in a risky exodus to a wealthier country, even though he is keenly aware the boy has no future under the present conditions in Senegal.

In France, Amin's Moroccan co-worker Abdelaziz (Nouredine Benallouche) is torn between his French

daughters and his family back home. One of his daughters pushes him to do something about his exploitative employment, reminding him he has no retirement. He ultimately suffers a tragic fate. Another migrant, Sabri (Jalal Quarriwa), picks up a French-Algerian prostitute out of loneliness and isolation.

While working for a divorcee, Gabrielle (Emmanuelle Devos), at odds with her resentful ex-husband, Amin begins a relationship with the fractured, middle-class Frenchwoman. It is less about passion than a mutual need for human contact. Their union ends as uneventfully as it begins.

Amin, like many other migrants, lives a life largely alienated from the society to which he contributes his labor. Faucon's film takes its time and without artificial fireworks preoccupies itself with people who generally slip below society's radar screen. In a dignified manner, *Amin* polemicizes for recognizing the value and substance in human beings who are undervalued or even discarded by contemporary society. Gabrielle's teenage daughter, for one, tends to view Amin disdainfully.

All the performances are moving, authentic, and candid and spring from the artistic depths. The sequences in profoundly impoverished Senegal are colorful and intimate, while those in France are dreary and generally impersonal.

In a 2007 interview with Faucon for *Dans la vie* (*Two Ladies*), during the Toronto film festival, we noted that "sincerity, honesty, the truth of everyday life are very difficult to achieve in cinema." Faucon replied that those "who make the decisions think people want to see things above the ordinary, the everyday, that people don't go to the cinema to see everyday life. So, films treat people who don't live like the majority of humanity. They believe this is what the public demands, but this isn't what the public demands."

The director went on: "They don't give people

anything else, and don't give to other material the possibility of having a place on the screens. The big films are distributed in 800 copies, this does not leave any room for anything else."

Faucon, born in Morocco, has shown a particular sensitivity to the conditions of immigrants in France, as well as to relationships between immigrants and non-immigrants, Muslims and Jews. His valuable filmography includes most recently *Fatima* (2015), a serene polemic against anti-Muslim hysteria, and *La Désintégration* (2012), which centers on three young Muslim men who live on a council estate in a French suburb. In *Dans la vie* (2007), a Muslim woman memorably cares for an invalid Jewish woman; *La trahison* (2005) concerns the Algerian struggle for independence against French colonialism; and *Samia* (2000) focuses on a French-Algerian family living in the outskirts of Marseille.

Faucon is one of the honest, independent filmmakers currently working.

As for the Amins of this world, the coronavirus pandemic has seriously worsened their circumstances.

"In the world's most fragile and conflicted countries," observes the International Association of Accountants & Auditors, "political unrest and economic instability can leave entire populations dependent on remittances." Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in a typical year, more than 270 million migrants living and working abroad would send cash transfers, or remittances, to their home countries. In 2019, migrants sent a record \$554 billion home, more than the sum of all investment made by foreign companies in such developing countries and over triple the amount of aid governments provide.

But the pandemic has meant, according to an October report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, that the number of visas and residence permits issued in the first half of 2020 fell by 46 percent from 2019. The forced return of many migrants to their home countries means they are no longer able to earn crucial income for their families.

A World Bank communication points out: "The adverse effects of the crisis in terms of loss of jobs and earnings, and exposure to and infection with COVID-19, have been disproportionately high for migrants, especially those in informal sectors and lower-skilled jobs. Having jobs has not shielded migrant

workers from income losses during the crisis. Anecdotal reports suggest that migrants, especially those living in dormitories or camps, are particularly vulnerable to the risk of infection from the COVID-19 virus."

Amin is a clear-eyed picture of the conditions of workers from poorer countries, many of whose people have to travel thousands of miles at great physical and emotional cost, merely to eke out a subsistence existence.



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