

Toronto International Film Festival 2021: Part 2

Working class life, contemporary problems: *The Box* from Mexico, Clio Barnard's *Ali & Ava*, Laurent Cantet's *Arthur Rambo* and more

David Walsh
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This is the second in a series of articles devoted to the 2021 Toronto International Film Festival (September 9-18). The first part was posted September 21.

As part of a general trend, the Toronto film festival and other such events have become officially mesmerized in recent years by identity politics.

Social inequality, accelerated and amplified by a horrific pandemic, dominates every corner of the globe and a handful of conglomerates and billionaires relentlessly strengthens its grip on economic life. However, to a certain comfortably off, aspiring social layer, the question of questions involves race and gender. In effect, de facto quotas along these lines have increasingly been established.

The Toronto festival has launched various initiatives aimed, it asserts, at promoting “diversity, equity, and inclusion in film.” “Share Her Journey,” begun in 2017, is a “campaign and commitment to address gender parity and championing women in front of and behind the camera.” Festival organizers envision it as part of a “global movement ... dedicated to building frameworks, empowering creators, and forging paths for women to succeed as storytellers who help shape our cultural landscape.”

This year the festival announced “Every Story,” a fund “to support and celebrate film’s under-represented voices and audiences.” It is intended to create opportunities for “equity-seeking creators.” A press release explained that 76 “of this year’s Festival selections were either created or co-created by cisgender or transgender women, or non-binary or two-spirit filmmakers. Seventy-five percent of Industry Conference speakers identify as Black, Indigenous, or a person of colour. This is the beginning of a journey to highlight the stories that may have previously been untold and address the reasons for their erasure.” We cannot be the only ones to find this type of language insufferable.

One of the “three primary pillars” of this program, along with “celebrating diverse storytellers and audiences; and creating opportunities for creators who are Black, Indigenous, people of colour,” is said to be “challenging the status quo.”

The establishment of racial and gender goals does nothing to challenge the status quo. The film festival itself is very much part of the status quo, its officialdom enmeshed in that wing of the Ontario and Canadian establishment that promotes identity politics, racial, ethnic and gender divisions, as part of its strategy for remaining in power.

The great barrier making it possible for some “stories” to be “told” while others go “untold” remains, above all, social class. The lives and

problems of the vast majority of laboring, suffering humanity arouse little interest in leading industry circles, and nothing about the various film festival initiatives will alter—or are intended to alter—that situation.

Filmmakers worldwide feel these pressures as well. Some respond to the present crisis of society in a narrow, self-centered manner, and thus disqualify themselves from the ranks of serious artistic figures. There are more than enough identity politics-obsessed films to go around, if one seeks them out. Other writers and directors look beyond their noses at the general state of society and consider the dilemmas of those whose conditions are far worse, and in some cases tragically worse, than their own.

We can only mention here briefly a number of films that were, to one degree or another, more interesting and substantial. About some we will probably have need to write in greater detail in the future.

In *The Box* (directed by Venezuelan-born Lorenzo Vigas) from Mexico, a teenager, Hatzin (Hatzín Navarrete), travels north to the state of Chihuahua to collect the remains of his father, who died in a mining accident. On the street, Hatzin spots a man he believes to be his supposedly deceased father and begins to dog the latter’s tracks. Eventually, Mario (Hernán Mendoza), who claims the boy is mistaken, hires the persistent Hatzin as his assistant.

Mario works for the management of various *maquiladoras* and other factories recruiting workers from villages and towns. In every location, Mario’s other helper recites the same spiel, something like this: “We’re at war ... we’re at war with the fucking Chinese.” Chinese women and girls, he tells the crowd, have “tiny hands. ... What happens if they’re faster than us? We lose our jobs. Are we going to let them take our jobs?” Mario and his crew deliver busloads of desperate workers to the gates of giant plants.

Hatzin discovers that Mario is cheating the workers in various ways. One girl, Laura Morales, speaks up. She complains that the factory is making her and the rest work 14 hours instead of the promised 12. Laura confronts Hatzin with the fact that the workers were actually charged for their bus trip to the factory, again, contrary to what was promised them. Mario shouts at her for “riling people up.” Then, Laura “goes missing.” Her mother, who comes looking for the girl, is threatened with a note: “If you go back to the police, we’ll kill the rest of your family.” At first an enthusiastic and adept apprentice, Hatzin develops a conscience.

The Box is not flawless, at times a little drab, but Vigas places his finger squarely on a vital matter.

Clio Barnard from the UK has directed several interesting films, including *The Selfish Giant* (2013). Set in Bradford, West Yorkshire, *Ali & Ava* “is a love story based on people” Barnard “got to know through making her previous films.” Ali (Adeel Akhtar) is a British-Pakistani working class landlord obsessed with hip hop and prone to dancing energetically on the roof of his car. Ava (Claire Rushbrook) is an Irish-born teacher and single mother of five, living on a tough housing estate. The film documents their developing relationship, which encounters a number of obstacles, including family members and their different tastes in music.

“It started with the characters of Ali and Ava, and a question,” says Barnard. “What would happen if you took melodrama as a genre and applied it to a social-realist version of Bradford that’s based on real people? It’s an opportunity to think about what it means to be part of a community. There’s a lot of kindness, generosity and support in Bradford and I wanted to see that writ large on the big screen.” *Ali & Ava* is a generous, warmhearted work.

As though he were responding to some of the issues raised above, Akhtar, a wonderful performer, explains that *Ali & Ava* has at its center “the idea of giving a space and a voice to people or a type of person that is ordinarily overlooked and not really seen. And allowing those people to have a very intimate connection with each other.”

The Odd-Job Men (Neus Ballús) follows a trio of plumbers over the course of a week in Barcelona—Pep (Pep Sarrà), about to retire, Valero (Valero Escolar), his long-time co-worker, and Mohamed (Mohamed Mellali), a Moroccan immigrant on a week-long trial at the small firm. From the start, the loquacious and opinionated Valero takes exception to almost everything Mohamed does, and apparently harbors resentment against him as a North African immigrant.

The drama, centering on Mohamed’s efforts to make the job permanent, in the face of Valero’s constant carping and opposition, is a relatively low-key affair, but has an authentic quality. The director explains that her father was a plumber and the film presumably benefits from some of his experiences.

At one point, Mohamed explains in a voice-over, “These days, money is all that matters. Those who have most, want it all.”

Compartment No. 6 (Finnish director Juho Kuosmanen) is a slight work, but it has certain charms. On the way to Murmansk in the Arctic Circle to see the Kanozero Petroglyphs, a middle class Finnish graduate student, Laura (Seidi Haarla), finds herself trapped in a train compartment with a rough-and-tumble, young Russian guy, Ljoha (Yuriy Borisov), reporting for work at a mine in the region. Ljoha is a patriot, “Russia is a great country ... We beat the Nazis ... we went to the moon.” He polishes off a bottle of vodka with dispatch.

The pair find out something about each other during the course of the trip. Ljoha makes a valiant effort to enable Laura to reach the 10,000-year-old rock art, officially impossible during wintertime. The director explains that the film is about “roles that keep people disconnected.” The two performers do well.

Unclenching the Fists, directed by Kira Kovalenko, is set in Mizur, a former mining town in North Ossetia, a Russian republic in the North Caucasus. A girl, along with her two brothers, attempts to break away from a well-intentioned, but authoritarian father.

The film’s production notes comment that the film’s title “is a reference to Marco Bellocchio’s debut, *Fists in the Pocket* (1965) ... Kira Kovalenko also mentions earlier Italian neorealist films, such as the work of Vittorio de Sica, among her favorites.” Kovalenko jokingly refers to her film as belonging to the school of “Caucasian neorealism.” In fact, the drama becomes somewhat overwrought and murky, but the bleak social and psychological conditions are unforgettable.

Drunken Birds (Serbian-Canadian director Ivan Grbovic) concerns itself with seasonal migrant laborers working in rural Quebec. Willy

(Jorge Antonio Guerrero), a Mexican drug-cartel worker, fell in love with his boss’s wife, Marlena (Yoshira Escárrega). Each takes a different escape route, but both end up in Canada. Various dramas—some more convincing than others—play themselves out, among the workers and within the family of the farm’s owners.

Grbovic’s film, along with Nanni Moretti’s *Three Floors* (an otherwise uninspiring film about three middle-class families), is mostly notable for criticizing in passing the #MeToo contention that “all women should be believed.”

Australian director Philip Noyce (*Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Quiet American*, 2002) has created a taut, well-constructed film, *Lakewood*, about a high school shooting in the US (although shot in North Bay, Ontario). Naomi Watts is the mother of a troubled teenager desperately trying to make her way to the locked-down school. Watts is thoroughly convincing and the suspense is genuine, but the film sheds no light whatsoever on the phenomenon of mass shootings.

French filmmaker Laurent Cantet has made a number of noteworthy and provocative films, including *Human Resources* (1999), *Time Out* (2001), *The Class* (2008) and *The Workshop* (2017). *Arthur Rambo*, although it raises more questions than it suggests answers for, is another.

The central figure, Karim D (Rabah Nait Oufella), of Maghreb descent, has written a book—based on his immigrant mother’s life and struggles—that takes literary Paris by storm. He also becomes a hero to young people. At the height of the acclaim, news reports emerge indicating that Karim D has been active on social media under the name “Arthur Rambo,” spitting out vicious anti-Semitic and homophobic messages. His world comes apart. His publishers cancel the further printing of his book, his friends turn their backs on him. His mother chastises him, “Here, we don’t think that way.”

Karim’s explanation is a weak one. The foul tweets were a “provocation,” a “crazy way to test the limits.” He agrees to a television interview, which will be widely followed. He asserts that “the more outrageous” his outpouring became, “the more it was followed.” Who did he write for? “The guys” in the neighborhood.

Later, Karim’s brother confusedly defends “Arthur Rambo” and his messages: “Arthur Rambo is us.” It is a reaction to “how the French treat us ... We don’t bow our heads.”

Such things are possible in the present circumstances. They speak, above all, to the bankruptcy and worthlessness of the French “left,” the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the “far left,” who have nothing to say to the immigrant youth, who are parties of bourgeois order, who have helped create a political vacuum in which social backwardness and disorientation breed.

As we noted recently, Polish filmmaking has discovered the new bourgeoisie that has come into being since the restoration of capitalism in 1989-91. Aga Woszczyńska’s *Silent Land* follows an attractive, wealthy Polish couple on vacation in Sardinia. Their rented house has a pool, but it is not functioning properly. Their landlord hires a young Arab man, probably undocumented, to fix the problem.

As we learn later, the young man falls into the pool, hitting his head and drowning. This takes place in full view of the couple, who do nothing, except to place a phone call to the landlord. The police question the husband and wife, who first lie about what they did. When closed circuit television footage reveals their inaction, a police official asks, “Why didn’t you help?” “It was hopeless.” “You waited in the house. ... You didn’t check to see if the man was dead ... Did you realize you could have saved him?” The tragic episode, understandably, strains the couple’s relationship. The husband defends himself to his wife—there was “nothing to be done ... He wasn’t even legal here.”

Woszczyńska told an interviewer that her film was “about the condition of European thirty-somethings, their emotional isolation, moral confusion, and disintegration of social norms and bonds. *Silent Land* is a film about

the collapse of a relationship, but on a wider scale it is about something more important, which concerns me, about the collapse of the system of values in contemporary Europe, the indifference to our current reality, and social lethargy.

“Ultimately, *Silent Land* is a tale about alienation not only from each other but also from the world. It’s about conformity and passivity, in which the need for safety and convenience is a strategy of survival.”

Flee (from Danish filmmaker Jonas Poher Rasmussen) is an animated film about a man, Amin Nawabi (a pseudonym), who fled Afghanistan as a child, in the 1990s. Amin’s family ended up in Moscow when the US-backed Mujahedeen guerillas took control after the departure of Soviet troops. His hair-raising account of his family’s attempts to make their way to Scandinavia with the aid of human smugglers is moving and disturbing.

Also disturbing is *Sundown*, Mexican director Michel Franco’s latest film, about a wealthy Briton, Neil Bennett (played by Tim Roth), on vacation in Acapulco, who breaks ties with his family and thoroughly abandons his old life, bit by bit. The film is ambiguous about Bennett’s motives. Is he disgusted with his family’s money, which comes from the slaughter of animals, his previously lavish lifestyle, his relatives? He signs away his interest in the family business without a hesitation. He descends the social scale. His alienated state takes on an intensely aggressive character. The film is interesting, well-told, but enigmatic. Is this the “sundown” of an entire social order? Perhaps that’s what’s meant, but that order is anything but accepting and passive about its passing away.

To be continued



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