

2022 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

Midwives, Mija, Întregalde, Bitterbrush: Documenting dictatorship, immigration, poverty ...

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This is the second in a series of articles on films from the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 21-May 1) that were made available to the WSWS for streaming online. The first part was posted April 26.

Midwives

“In 2016, the Myanmar military began a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Muslims. Tens of thousands of Rohingya were killed—close to one million fled the country. Those who remain in Myanmar are one of the most persecuted minorities, according to the United Nations.”

This title introduces the documentary *Midwives* from Myanmar director Snow Hnin El Hlaing. The film treats the relationship between Buddhist midwife Hla and Muslim midwife apprentice Nyo Nyo. Hla owns a clinic that ministers health care to the Rohingya, the Muslim ethnic minority that have lived in Myanmar for generations. Nyo Nyo trains under her, assisting with translation and other crucial duties for her community.

The generally intense, at times tender and at times cantankerous relationship between the two was recorded by the director over the course of five years. The pair defy the ethnic divisions deliberately fomented by the government, with Hla risking her safety to help Muslim patients. The film takes place in western coastal Rakhine State.

Hla tells the camera: “Muslims in the village aren’t allowed to travel. They can’t go to the city. So, my clinic is the only one they can access. Without us where would they be?”

Throughout the film, tanks menace the population and anti-Muslim demonstrations are frequent. Nyo Nyo

describes the military attacks on the Rohingya: “Soldiers burned down homes, raped women and killed Muslims. All the villagers fled to the paddy fields. We built makeshift tents and hid. We were too frightened to stay in the village ... Children born in the fields were called ‘Children of Desperate Times.’ There was no midwife and no medication.”

Not allowed to be educated in government schools, Muslim children are shown in the documentary studying under the most poverty-stricken conditions.

A foreign newscast asserts that General Min Aung Hlaing, head of the Armed Forces, “should be standing in the docket of the International Criminal Court answering the charge of genocide. He talks of ‘foreign interference’ and Muslims in Rakhine State being ‘illegal immigrants.’” The fascistic general has declared that “there is no such thing as a Rohingya race.”

Hla’s clinic is forced to close temporarily, and she is made to sign papers declaring she will no longer treat Muslims. Meanwhile, Nyo Nyo struggles to build her own clinic. The television news reports on the February 1, 2021 military seizure of power, during which the junta imposed a state of emergency and arrested top leaders of the bourgeois National League for Democracy, including Aung San Suu Kyi. The filmmakers capture demonstrators chanting: “Throw out the junta. Our cause! Release the detained leaders! Strike! Strike!”

Midwives’ post-credits paint a disastrous picture: “Since the military coup over 1300 unarmed protestors, including 50 children have been killed. An additional

11,120 have been imprisoned and arrest warrants have been issued for 1964 others. Close to one million Muslim Rohingya remain exiled in refugee camps outside of Myanmar.”

The pandemic has had a profound impact on the economy. By a UN estimate, almost half the country’s population now lives in poverty. The World Food Program estimates that by October 2021, the cost of a basic food basket was almost a third higher than in the month prior to the coup. Fuel prices have jumped by more than 70 percent. UNICEF estimated recently that 25 percent of the population needed humanitarian aid, including five million children.

Mija

In *Mija*, Doris Muñoz is the first US-born member of her undocumented family. As the rest await green cards, the 26-year-old feels the weight of familial responsibility. This grips her most acutely when she travels to and from Mexico during the pandemic to see her brother, Jose, who was deported six years earlier. Images of the border wall hover in the distance.

The warm documentary by Mexican-American filmmaker Isabel Castro highlights Doris’ talents and her challenges as breadwinner when she lands a six-figure job managing Latinix pop star Cuco, who makes music for “browns who felt unseen and unheard.” His biggest fan base is Mexico City. But the impact of COVID, and other burdens end the relationship. (“Odd to have it all while simultaneously you feel like you’re falling apart”). The “Rapture” and her family being deported are her major stresses.

Feeling that she has inherited her family’s dreams, but also their fears, the wily protagonist seeks fresh talent to manage. She uses social media to find Jacks Haupt, an adorable Latinix singer from Texas, whose immigrant mother is mortified by her daughter’s career choice. Doris competently maneuvers the gifted teenager into the entertainment business. An eventual tearful reunion of the Muñoz family testifies to the horrific immigration policies of the American government.

Întregalde

Romanian director Radu Muntean’s *Întregalde* is a fiction film about humanitarian aid workers. Set in and around the Transylvanian town that it’s named after, the film shows Maria (Maria Popistasu), Ilinca (Ilona Brezoianu) and Dan (Alex Bogdan) traveling to deliver

bags of provisions to some of the poorest of the poor.

An encounter with an old man on the road proves life-threatening. What stands out in the film is the tremendous kindness toward those to whom a dysfunctional, ravaged society has been the least kind.

Bitterbrush

The documentary *Bitterbrush* by director Emile Mahdavian follows two young female hired farmhands, Hollyn Patterson and Colie Moline, in the mountainous West. The veterans have been riding the range together for five years, their latest venture a four-month stint to herd cattle.

Although cultural depth is provided by Bach on the soundtrack, there is little to the film except the proficiency of its subjects in wrangling and branding cattle, riding horses and breaking in colts. A dramatic blip occurs when Hollyn becomes pregnant and ponders how that will change her life. Colie envisions being her own boss. A lot of political and ideological hay, hinting at “female empowerment,” is being made here out of something pretty modest in scope.

To be continued



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