

Toronto International Film Festival 2008—Part 4

Some urgency about the state of the world

By Joanne Laurier
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This is the fourth of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 4-13).

In 2005, 12-year-old Ahmed Khatib, who lived in Jenin, a cramped Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank, was shot dead by an Israeli patrol while playing with a toy gun. Within 12 hours of Ahmed's death, his grief-stricken father, Ismael, agreed to donate his son's organs to Israeli children in need.

The aftermath of this remarkable decision is recorded in the Israeli/German documentary *The Heart of Jenin* by Leon Geller and Marcus Vetter. The gift of the murdered boy's organs came just three years after the Israeli Defense Forces had demolished much of Jenin in a bloody offensive that killed scores of innocent civilians; eyewitnesses reported that IDF bulldozers leveled homes while families were still inside.

Because Palestinian hospitals are lacking in basic facilities, the dying Ahmed was taken to an Israeli hospital in Haifa. Prompted by a Christian nurse, Raymond, Ismael and his wife agreed to donate their son's organs, but initially hesitated about giving away the heart. Eventually they decided that Ahmed's heart should also save a life.

Video footage in the documentary shows that at the time of the boy's funeral, clenched-fisted demonstrators were vowing that each Palestinian death would be revenged with 100 Israeli lives.

Geller and Vetter chronicle Ismael's expedition two years later to meet the children whose lives were saved by Ahmed's donation. Ismael is a compelling figure who explains that he took up arms during the first Intifada and was jailed by the Israelis. He lost two small businesses during the second Intifada when he decided to lay down weapons and concentrate on his family. He now runs a center for 200 kids financed by a city in Italy.

He speaks forthrightly: "We resist with education.... My act [of organ donation] confused the Israelis.... Ahmed was born between two Intifadas. He never saw a good day in his life.... How can there be peace with all these walls and checkpoints?"

Traveling throughout Israel, Ismael meets three recipients of his son's organs. Samah, a lovely Druze girl in northern Israel presents Ismael with backpacks for children in the Jenin center. Mohammed is a gregarious Bedouin boy living in the Negev desert, whose family, despite his father being an electrician, survives without that amenity. Menuha is the toddler girl of an Orthodox Jewish family from Jerusalem. Although five organs were donated, one recipient died and the family of another declined to be interviewed.

While Ismael sees the young beneficiaries not as Arabs or Jews, Menuha's parents, the Levinsons, evince a deep anti-Arab bias. Yaakov Levinson says that he would have preferred a Jewish donor for his daughter and remarks that he would never allow his children to

mix with Arabs for fear of a "bad influence." During the tense meeting with Ismael, Yaakov asks why the Palestinian does not emigrate to London or Turkey, to which Ismael responds by asking him the same question. It is not surprising to learn that Yaakov's parents were Americans, as US-born Zionists are some of the most right-wing settler elements in Israel.

Even though the Levinsons soften in the course of the encounter, Ismael is shaken. He says that Menuha, whose name means peace, is being raised to hate Arabs.

The documentary ends with Jenin children singing the words, "who will wipe our tears away?"

Ismael is the heart and soul of the film. He is a resister against the occupation who, like much of the Palestinian population, is unclear as to what to do next, given the failure of isolated military operations. And, like much of the Palestinian population, he does not see the Jewish people as the enemy. Then there are those like the Levinsons who have been poisoned by the toxic ideology of a repressive state. *The Heart of Jenin* hints that even such people can be humanized.

Laila's Birthday (Eid Milad Laila), a Palestinian film by Rashid Masharawi, uses a measure of absurdist comedy to dramatize the fact that life is irrational in the Occupied Territories.

It is the birthday morning of seven-year-old Laila, Abu Laila's only child. His wife asks him to come home on time with a present and a cake, a simple request if one is not living in the chaos of a military occupation. Abu Laila (Mohamed Bakri) served as a judge in another country, but he has been forced to become a taxi driver while waiting for the Palestinian bureaucracy to work through his papers.

His response to the mayhem is to enforce discipline in his cab—no cigarettes or weapons, no rides to checkpoints, and everyone must obey the law and wear seatbelts. He is the hemmed-in opposite to an out-of-control reality, where no good deed goes unpunished. When his cab almost kills a man, Abu Laila is admonished by the near victim: "Run me over, do me a favor and free me from this life." After a black comedy of errors, he is able to arrive home in top form.

With *Laila's Birthday*, the filmmaker's intent was to show "the confusion that shapes Palestinian life at this moment. After more than half a century of Israeli occupation, resisting for freedom, negotiating for peace and hoping for progress, we have only moved backwards. The result is more frustration, more carelessness, and the inability to deal with the small details of our precious life."

The film has an interesting way of dramatizing this regression: a respectable, educated Palestinian tries to keep his suit from getting crumpled and maintain his cool while everything around him is disintegrating. He always insists that people be law-abiding even as they are being overwhelmed in a hellish war zone. Is the film critical

of or even mocking Abu Laila? It's not entirely clear. It's a little unsavory when he grabs a microphone from a police van and starts inveighing against the passers-by for their lack of discipline and responsibility. He also starts cursing at the Israeli occupiers.

Perhaps this ambiguous attitude toward the central character helps accounts for the fact that *Laila's Birthday* is not an especially bold work.

Of course, one has to take into account the enormous objective difficulties confronting Palestinian filmmakers. According to the director, "[T]his has led to frustration and boredom not only from the occupation, but also from ourselves being always alert and having to cope with the occupation, resistance and leading our daily lives."

Masharawi was born in the Shati refugee camp in Gaza Strip in 1962. As a self-taught filmmaker, he continued to make and produce movies in the Occupied Territories. In 1996, Masharawi founded the Cinema Production and Distribution Center (CPC) in Ramallah to organize workshops for young Palestinian filmmakers. The CPC initiated the Mobile Cinema, which brings screenings to refugee camps.

From Turkey, *Pandora's Box*, by director Yesim Ustaoglu (*Journey to the Sun*), is the story of middle-aged siblings in Istanbul forced to confront their alienated lives when their mother goes missing. Two sisters, Nesrin and Güzin, and a brother, Mehmet—previously estranged—come together to find their mother who has disappeared from her home in a mountainous region on the Black Sea.

In the course of this effort, a Pandora's box of psychological issues is opened: Nesrin's controlling personality, Güzin's lack of self-esteem and depression and Mehmet's irresponsibility, to name a few. They are a self-centered lot, oblivious to those closest to them. Nesrin's son and husband suffer as a result, as does the abandoned mother, Nusret.

The trio's unhappy lives are contrasted to those of a more cohesive rural community they pass through on their way to their mother's house. The car trip is perhaps the most effective sequence in the film. The actors all perform well, and the painfulness of the relations seems authentic.

Eventually, Nusret is found lying unconscious in the forest and brought back to Istanbul where she is diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She is difficult and unpredictable. But at those moments when her mind is clear, Nusret is perceptive about the family dynamic. Nonetheless, her children have her institutionalized.

Nesrin's son, Murat, in desperate rebellion against his parents, comes to his grandmother's rescue and leads her back to her mountain home. They form a bond, silently responding to the raw beauty of the landscape. Here, Murat helps his grandmother lead and perhaps conclude her life as she chooses.

The inner and outer worlds of the protagonists are well dramatized. Of all the characters, however, Nesrin with her upper middle class and invasive tension is the most developed.

What is weak about *Pandora's Box*, however, is that in its critique of an isolating, urban setting, it seems to long for a simpler, less complicated time and place. How helpful is that?

Set in 1978 in Santiago, Chile, during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, *Tony Manero*, co-written and directed by Chilean filmmaker Pablo Larrain, follows the psychotic exploits of Raúl, a man in his fifties obsessed with impersonating John Travolta's character in *Saturday Night Fever*.

Bludgeoning to death all those he deems an obstacle, Raúl is meant to be a stand-in for Pinochet. But, it might be pointed out, an

impoverished, disoriented man bent on living in the image of an American cinema icon is not the equivalent of a CIA-backed dictator ruling at the behest of the US and Chilean ruling classes.

The source of all troubles, according to Larrain, is that Chile "operates according to cultural parameters that have been imported from an alien culture"—i.e., from the USA. This is way off. Chile's principal problem is not cultural imperialism, but political and economic imperialism. The director believes that "Raúl's actions are also the actions of the system which taught him to base his expectations in everything that is alien to us." If only Raúl—and Chile—were not in the clutches of Hollywood! Larrain is young and has tried to tackle big issues with originality. But his approach to the Pinochet period falls far short.

Sugar is the latest film from the American writer-director duo of Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck (*Half Nelson*). Every US Major League Baseball team has an "academy" in the Dominican Republic, a seemingly inexhaustible source of talent. But not all the young boys who start developing their skills at an early age make it to the big time—and away from poverty.

Some, like 20-year-old "Sugar" Santos, get close, but the pressures take their toll. *Sugar* is a bittersweet commentary about the cutthroat path to the American leagues for Dominican ballplayers. It should be added that a lover of the game would probably be better able to appreciate the film.

"Whose fault is it if life doesn't go your way?" is the tagline for Austrian director Götz Spielmann's *Revanche* (*Revenge*). Two disparate couples are fatefully brought together after a bank robbery. Tamara, a Ukrainian prostitute and her boyfriend Alex, who works for her boss, attempt to escape the brothel. Alex has a fool-proof plan.

Robert and Susanne have a brand-new house in an idyllic rural community, but they are childless. Robert is a cop who happens to encounter Tamara and Alex during the robbery get-away. Tamara is accidentally killed, but the masked Alex is not caught or identified.

Robert sinks into depression over the homicide. Although revenge is in Alex's heart, something else occurs in the course of his planning to destroy Robert. *Revanche* is a well-made but timeless (in the bad sense of the word) piece. Unfortunately, it focuses not, as the director boasts, "on a social context but on existential questions." It's also not encouraging that the police force is treated with unquestioning deference.

To be continued

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