

The 59th Berlinale—Part 2

A few healthy shoots

By Stefan Steinberg
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Many of the films featured in the main competition section of the Berlinale were devoted to purely personal or familial problems separated from any broader social and historical context, with quite limited results. Nevertheless, a small number of movies were able to integrate pressing social themes into a convincing and moving narrative. There was a sense that some filmmakers had grasped that modern-day society confronts huge problems urgently requiring new solutions based on the solidarity of masses of humanity.

London River

Amongst the best films at the festival was *London River* by the French director Rachid Bouchareb (*Days of Glory*, 2006; *Little Senegal*, 2000), who also wrote the screenplay.

The film deals with the aftermath of the July 2005 London bomb attacks. In the opening scene of the film we encounter Elizabeth Sommers (very well-played by British actress Brenda Blethyn) attending church on the island of Guernsey. Elizabeth is a conservative woman who runs a small farm and still mourns for her husband, a British serviceman who died in the Falklands War. Having abruptly lost contact with her daughter, a young student in London, the concerned mother travels to the capital city to track her down.

At the same time in France, the elderly African father Ousmane also sets out for London in search of his missing son. The tall, austere Ousmane (played with great dignity by Sotigui Kouyate) works as a forester in France and is a practising Muslim with long dreadlocks.

Physically and in terms of origin and culture, Ousmane and Elizabeth are worlds apart, but in London they share a related fate—the search for their missing children in the wake of the 2005 bombings. Their search coincidentally brings the pair together. Amongst the most effective scenes in the film are those that depict Elizabeth's initial lack of comprehension and rejection of Ousmane and the culture he represents.

Fuelled by the media propaganda after the London bombing, which sought to vilify broad sections of the Muslim community, Elizabeth reacts in knee-jerk fashion and concludes there must be a link between the disappearance of her daughter and the appearance of what she regards as the strange and menacing figure of Ousmane. Her sense of

alienation in the capital is heightened by the presence of a large Arab community in the section of London (Haringey/Finsbury Park) where she temporarily resides. On her island of Guernsey, Africans or Arabs are a rarity—more likely to be wealthy tax exiles than ordinary citizens.

In panic, Elizabeth identifies Ousmane as a suspect to the police, who, in the overheated atmosphere after the bombings, burst into his lodgings, arrest and interrogate him. Able to establish his innocence, Ousmane is allowed to go free, and the remainder of the film deals essentially with the process whereby the pair get to know one another, with Elizabeth realising she has far more in common with Ousmane than she initially thought.

Some elements of the story strain belief. Ousmane's only European language is French. Elizabeth speaks French as an inhabitant of Guernsey, and Ousmane is set free so quickly because his interrogating police officer is a Muslim who also speaks French. The rapidity with which Ousmane and Elizabeth coincidentally cross paths is also highly unlikely in a major city like London.

But based on powerful performances by Blethyn and Kouyate, the film, shot on a low budget in the space of just over two weeks, effectively and movingly demonstrates how barriers fall as the two reach out and console one another when the tragic situation finally becomes clear.

Nothing can make up for such a loss, but Elizabeth, in particular, has undertaken an important journey in which she eventually concedes to Ousmane that "our lives are not so different." Bouchareb's plea for human solidarity irrespective of race, religion, culture and background is entirely relevant at a time when the political and media campaign aimed at deliberately tarring the Muslim community with the brush of terrorism is continuing apace.

Two films by Hans-Christian Schmid

The German director Hans-Christian Schmid presented two new films at the Berlinale, a documentary—*The Wondrous World of Laundry*—and his new feature film, *Storm*. Two of Schmid's earlier films, *Distant Lights* (2003) and *Requiem* (2006), were amongst the highlights at previous Berlin festivals. His two contributions this year were very different in

form and content, and only partly successful.

Schmid's documentary *The Wondrous World of Laundry* deals in microcosm with economic and social relations between the two neighbours Germany and Poland. The director had already dealt perceptively with the problems arising from the introduction of the "free market" economy for the inhabitants of the German-Polish border town of Frankfurt-Oder in his film *Distant Lights*.

This time Schmid has shot a documentary that concentrates on social conditions on the Polish side of the border. Every day a fleet of lorries transports dirty linen from some of Berlin's finest hotels 70 kilometres across eastern Germany to the small Polish town of Gryfino. After the laundering is finished, the clean linen is then transported back across the border for delivery to the Berlin hotels. The costs of the operation of shipping linen from one country to another and back again—involving considerable man-hours, transport and fuel expenses—is justified on the basis of the cheap wages paid to the Polish workers.

The film features some footage of the internal workings of a number of Berlin's "noblest" hotels, where guests can book suites costing thousands of euros per night, and contrasts such luxury with the very humble lives of the poorly paid laundry workers and their families in Poland.

Schmid and his Polish cameraman invested a great deal of time in winning the trust of a handful of the Polish workers employed at the laundry, and the director admits that one of the reasons workers were initially reluctant to appear in his film was that the time involved in the project would cut into their work time and earnings.

Schmid concentrates on the everyday life and considerable problems confronting two Polish families struggling to raise their children on miserable incomes. Five years after the entry of Poland into the European Union, *The Wondrous World of Laundry* makes clear that many Polish workers are still far removed from the land of milk and honey promised by politicians.

When confronted with the fact that his company is exploiting the Polish workers, the managing director of the laundry, Mr. Weiseman, justifies his business practice by stressing his "global" obligations. "I don't do business in Poland, but in Europe," he retorts.

Schmid has undertaken a more ambitious project with his second film at the festival—the political thriller *Storm*. The film deals with the workings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) set up by the United Nations in 1993.

Storm concentrates on the dilemma confronting Hannah, a prosecutor at the ICTY, who is leading a trial against a commander of the former Yugoslav national army accused of killing members of Bosnia's Muslim minority. Hannah is presented as an idealistic, but nevertheless hard-nosed woman, determined to bring the accused commander to book in the face

of intense political pressure for a speedy end to the case.

Hannah's struggle for justice is paralleled by the moral dilemma of Mira, the Bosnian woman and victim of the Serbian commander. After years of silence and under pressure from Hannah, Mira finally agrees to testify in court and achieve a cathartic "closure" of her painful past.

Schmid has evidently drawn from a number of different cases actually conducted by the ICTY as the basis for his screenplay, which treats such issues as the rape of Bosnian women by Serb soldiers and the intimidation of witnesses by gangster elements in the former Yugoslavia. A number of characters and elements in his film fail to convince—a young Muslim who commits suicide; his sister who is fluent in the Bosnian, German and English languages; and Serbs portrayed exclusively as war criminals, gangsters or shady businessmen.

Storm ends with a victory for the bureaucratic powers in the United Nations (who want quick results) and in the European Union (who demand an outcome corresponding to their own plans for the region). As a result, the commander, condemned by the testimony of Mira, is allowed to go free. Political expediency has won the day.

In the final analysis, however, Schmid's film provides a cover for the activities of the ICTY, which was never an independent judicial body. From its inception the court was a thoroughly compromised institution set up to facilitate the division of the former Yugoslavia into political units serving the interests of the US and European great powers.

The political motivations of the tribunal have been blatant from the start, including its somewhat belated attempts to create an appearance of even-handedness. The political agenda of the court has been revealed in a series of high-profile trials, most notably the notorious case of the former Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milošević.

In interviews with the press following the screening of his film, Schmid made clear that he has no objections to the remit of the ICTY (its chief prosecutor, Serge Brammertz, was due to attend the premiere of the film), but objects merely to the time pressures imposed on the court, which is due to wind up its activities in 2010.

Despite the undoubted good intentions of the director, *Storm*—in common with the previous Berlinale Prize winner *Grbavica* by Jasmila Zbanic—demonstrates the limitations of approaching the events during the past two decades in the Balkans from merely a moral standpoint.

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