

2018 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 4

Documentary about singer M.I.A. (“Use your art to say something!”) and Paul Schrader’s *First Reformed* (small-town preacher struggles with life and death)

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 4-17. The first part was posted April 18, the second part on April 20 and the third part on April 27.

Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.

Stephen Loveridge’s full-length documentary *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.* is about his long-time friend—Sri Lankan-British rapper and singer-songwriter Mathangi “Maya” Arulpragasam—better known as M.I.A. In today’s climate, the film is a breath of fresh air. The documentary, according to the film’s press notes, “is drawn from a cache of personal tapes shot by Maya Arulpragasam and her closest friends over the last 22 years,” and shows important moments in Maya’s development as an artist and human being.

Mathangi Arulpragasam was born in London in 1975 to Sri Lankan Tamil parents. When she was very young, her parents moved back to Sri Lanka. Her father, Arul Pragasam, was a Tamil activist who was a co-founder of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS), most of whose early membership later joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). M.I.A.’s childhood was spent in the midst of government repression and violence in Jaffna, in northern Sri Lanka. Her family went into hiding from the army. Eventually, her mother moved with her children to India and, in 1986, returned to London, where they lived in poverty.

Her social views have been shaped by these experiences. She has publicly criticized the Sri Lankan government’s repression of the Tamil population, supported the efforts of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, and

denounced police killings in the US.

As the film opens, Maya is interviewed on the set of one of her music videos, *Borders* (2016), a damning indictment of the refugee crisis produced by imperialist war in the Middle East. The video contains powerful images of refugees attempting to scale barbed wire fences and boatloads of asylum seekers.

“Many people wonder why you don’t just accept being a pop star and shut up?” Maya is asked in the opening scenes of the documentary. “Then I would probably just become a drug addict,” she responds, “people need to express the problems,” and later, “if you come from a struggle, how do you not talk about the struggle?”

The first part of *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.* includes footage of Maya with her brothers and sisters, and then a few interesting scenes with her father. Her siblings are noticeably angry with the latter—who they haven’t seen for years (“We thought he was our uncle!”). Maya comments, on the other hand, that she’s glad that he was “who he was and not a lawyer, a doctor, or a service station owner.”

Over the next ten years or so of her life, Maya embarks on a journey to learn about her own history and the history of Sri Lanka—with notable tenacity, she “wants to put the pieces together.” She buys a ticket to Sri Lanka to see her family she hasn’t seen since for 15 years to video their story. Maya discovers the violence perpetrated by the state, which spies on, arrests and kills political opponents.

She finds footage of young women who joined the Tamil Tigers shooting guns and training in the jungle. “That would have been me if I would have stayed,” she reflects. While Maya’s concerns and compassion are genuine, her examination of the civil war in Sri Lanka and its origins and

development is limited, in both the documentary and her song lyrics. What were the political stakes in the war? What is the path to real liberation for the masses in Sri Lanka and globally? These questions are beyond her ken.

Nonetheless, her anti-establishment stance is genuine. Loveridge's documentary highlights her frequent conflicts with the media and corporate-controlled arts and entertainment industry, including figures such as Lynn Hirschberg of the *New York Times*, who slights her in an interview and distorts her views. "Once again, F—— the *New York Times*," Maya angrily replies.

M.I.A. is even called a terrorist by some news outlets, while she is told to "leave politics alone" by Sri Lanka's foreign secretary and "stick to what she's good at, music"—something she is clearly unwilling to do.

The pressure does clearly wear on Maya, however. "I used to like America, but now they're chipping away at me." In February 2012 she creates some controversy during the Super Bowl. After seeing the way the National Football League officials treat the entertainers, in anger she decides to flip off the camera during the halftime show. Absurdly, the NFL sues her for \$16.6 million because her actions breach the league's reputation for "wholesomeness."

There is a candor that comes through in Maya's best work—the type of honesty and critical approach to some of the world's problems that is hazardous to the media, entertainment and political establishment. Maya has thus far been able to attain stardom and keep her bearings about her, she hasn't been broken by the fame and corruption she is surrounded by on a daily basis.

***First Reformed*, from Paul Schrader**

First Reformed, directed by Paul Schrader, is a dismal and confused film. It is the story of a former military chaplain turned preacher, Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke), who is assigned to a small church in New York, First Reformed. We find out that Toller left the military and was divorced from his wife after the death of their son in the Iraq War—Toller had encouraged his son to join the military and now feels responsible for his death.

In an obvious display of self-punishment, Toller spends his time nearly drinking himself to death. He also begins a journal, seeking to be "completely honest with himself," and intends to diligently write down his innermost thoughts with no alterations over the course of 12 months.

An attendee at his church, a young pregnant woman Mary (Amanda Seyfried), asks if Toller can speak with her husband Michael (Philip Ettinger). A radical environmentalist, Michael explains to Toller that he can't imagine bringing a child into a world that won't exist for much longer. He soon takes his own pessimism to heart in a

dramatic fashion.

Meanwhile, Toller (named, for some unknown reason, after the left-wing German expressionist playwright) learns that one of the world's top polluters is a businessman who has donated generously to First Reformed's 250-year anniversary event. As the church anniversary looms, Toller begins to develop feelings for Mary, continues to drink, research environmental pollution and put off anyone who attempts to help him.

Suffice it to say, everything ends disastrously.

The extreme route that Toller takes, all of which cannot be revealed here, is simply unbelievable. His character unravels and resorts to desperate measures while at the same time he appears to remain calm and collected, and feels somehow redeemed by his decision to commit a heinous act.

Hawke and Seyfried both seem to want to bring life to their characters at various points throughout the film, but the script consigns them to pessimism and various dead ends, leaving many scenes odd and stilted.

Schrader has been a minor, generally gloomy figure in American films for decades, as screenwriter of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull* and as a director of *Blue Collar*, *Hard Core*, *American Gigolo* and *Affliction*.

Now he's decided the world is coming to an end, which has probably not improved his mood. Schrader recently told an interviewer from *Variety*: "Anyone who is hopeful is simply not paying attention. There may have been a reason to be hopeful ten or 15 years ago, but we've played our hand now. We've indicated what our priorities are. Our priorities are our immediate comforts and not the existence of future generations. I don't think intelligent life will end with humans. There may even be moral life after humans. But we have more or less soiled our nest. The universe will be well rid of us."

One should not expect too much from this quarter.

To be continued

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