

Toronto International Film Festival 2019: Part 2

Love Child, Hearts and Bones, Atlantics: A Ghost Love Story—Some of the social traumas of our time

By Joanne Laurier
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This is the second in a series of articles devoted to the recent 2019 Toronto International Film Festival (September 5-15). The first part was posted September 11.

In different ways, filmmakers are trying to come to terms with certain harsh realities. The traumatic fate of refugees and displaced persons and the cruelty or indifference of the authorities have clearly shocked many artists.

Love Child

“I’m not sure if, tomorrow, I’ll be dead or alive,” Sahand, a desperate man in Tehran, says to the camera. Danish filmmaker Eva Mulvad’s documentary *Love Child* explores the refugee crisis from a somewhat unusual angle.

Sahand, Leila and their young son Mani are fleeing Iran. “Love child” Mani is the product of Sahand and Leila’s adulterous relationship, for which the pair could be punished or ostracized. They arrive in Istanbul with their possessions squeezed into a small suitcase. Family and friends know nothing of their whereabouts. Tearfully phoning her mother from a Turkish airport, Leila cannot disclose the fact her family will never return.

For seven years, Mulvad and her team follow Sahand, Leila and Mani as they struggle to obtain documents and permission to resettle in the West. The trio gets caught in the massive wave of refugees and the clogged, bureaucratic UN system. Every communication from the agency brings the possibility of rejection of their asylum application. When their applications are finally approved, US President Donald Trump closes the border to seven Muslim countries.

Gracefully and artistically constructed, Mulvad’s film is an intimate, complicated portrait of a family harassed by the Iranian, Turkish and UN authorities, as well as by inhuman European and American immigration policies.

At a certain point in the film, one simply wants to shout at the screen: Whatever the personal weaknesses or foibles of the characters involved, why can’t the governments simply let

them lead their lives!

In the movie’s production notes, Mulvad states: “I wanted to create a story which makes understandable the kind of living conditions so many deal with when exiled: You are a stranger, a faceless system determines your fate, you meet with ups and downs, but you constantly feel vulnerable, because you are without the basic rights so many of us take for granted. The right to live under the protection of the health, school or legal system of a nation, a guarantee that you can build your life on presumably stable ground.

“The refugee crisis is one of the biggest tragedies of our time, both to the people out there on miserable boats, walking the roads of Europe, meeting a fence in a desert or held back in inhuman camps by barbed wire. ...

“Documentaries have the quality that they can take us beyond the headlines, because you spend time and get to know the characters. These stories can be a vaccination against generalisations; they can show us what are the consequences of politics.”

Hearts and Bones

Australian director Ben Lawrence’s fiction feature, *Hearts and Bones*, opens with a shattering sequence in war-ravaged Iraq. Acclaimed Sydney-based photojournalist Dan Fisher (Hugo Weaving) is traveling with a guide through the Iraqi countryside when they come across a murdered couple in a car. As Dan photographs the horrific scene, a young girl appears and, in a frightened state, runs away, only to get blown up by a land mine.

Back in Sydney, Dan, who suffers from acute post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), is confronted with the news that partner Josie (Hayley McElhinney) is pregnant, despite the couple’s decision after the death of their first child not to risk Josie’s health with another pregnancy.

Furthermore, a reluctant Dan is being pushed to agree to an exhibition of his work. At this point, a South Sudanese refugee,

Sebastian (Andrew Luri), approaches Dan, asking him not to show the Sudanese photos in the exhibition. They include shocking images from a massacre 15 years ago in Sebastian's hometown of Maridi, during which he lost his first wife, two sons and a daughter.

The refugee's second wife Anishka (Bolude Watson) knows nothing about her husband's bleak past. Eventually, Dan discovers in the photos what Sebastian is desperately trying to hide, threatening to unravel their developing friendship and the latter's marriage.

War zones traumatize the survivors, both the Sudanese victim and the witness to war crimes, the photographer. The acting is superb. Weaving in particular gives the movie its edge and depth. As all the characters are appealing, the spectator might be excused for hoping for a soft landing. While the movie's ending turns out to be too neatly packaged and contrived, *Hearts and Bones* is still in many ways an affecting and well-made work.

Andrew Luri, who was born in South Sudan and came to Australia via Cairo, explains that the film is "about letting people understand the problems that others are facing. ... I'm sure the Australian public does not understand all the problems that some people have so it will give them a chance to learn about and understand all these stories. And this is just a portion of it. There are some stories which are not told about, and people don't know, so this is a window, or a vision, to let other people understand or know."

Atlantics: A Ghost Love Story

An eerie, haunting film, Mati Diop's *Atlantics: A Ghost Love Story* deals fantastically with Senegalese youth lost at sea as they undertake lengthy, dangerous trips to Europe for economic reasons.

An ultra-modern, malevolent tower looms over Dakar. The movie opens with Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), a Sudanese youth working on a construction site. The young man and his co-workers have not been paid in three months. They confront the manager, without success. "Families depend on us!"

Souleiman is in love with Ada (Mama Sané), who is being pushed to marry the rich Omar, a cold, callous louse ("Hold onto Omar, times are tough," says her mother). To earn a living, Souleiman takes off in a boat to Spain, more than a thousand nautical miles away, never to return...in his present form.

Strange things begin to occur. The marriage bed in Omar's house catches fire the night of his wedding to Ada. The investigating police officer is plagued by a sudden illness. The entire police force is under the influence of the businessman who did not pay his workers. (The rich man "has done a lot for us," the detective's superior reminds him.)

It turns out that Souleiman and the others have come back. They are inhabiting the bodies of the town's young women, taunting the employer about their unpaid wages. In one of the

most memorable scenes, the possessed women force the offending capitalist to dig graves for the drowned.

In the film's production notes, director Diop elaborates: "In 2012, several months after the Arab Spring, riots shook Dakar, a citizens' uprising took place in Senegal, propelled by the movement 'Y'en a marre' [Fed Up]. Most of the young Senegalese wanted to oust [President] Abdoulaye Wade and impose his resignation. This citizen awakening marked me because symbolically it reminded us that Senegalese youth had not entirely disappeared. ... For me, somehow, there were not the dead at sea on the one hand and young people marching on the other. The living were carrying the dead within them, who had taken something of us with them when they went. ...

"I felt that a very ghostly atmosphere reigned in Dakar and it became impossible for me to contemplate the ocean without thinking of all these young people who had drowned."

The film is moving and memorable.

Son-Mother

Iranian director Mahnaz Mohammadi's *Son-Mother* is a feminist-influenced movie that exposes some of the conditions facing Iranian women, while directing its ire principally against the male population.

Leila (Raha Khodayari) is a widowed mother of two. She works in a factory in economic trouble because of foreign sanctions, whose striking male employees are after her job. They claim she should not be employed because, since she is being pursued by Kazem, the factory bus driver, she is no longer the head of a household.

Kazem will marry Leila, but she must send her adolescent son Amir (Mahan Nasiri) away, because he can't live in the same household as Kazem's unmarried daughter from a previous marriage. To save her family from destitution, Leila marries her suitor and Amir is sent to a school where he must pretend to be deaf and dumb. His temporary stay stretches on and on.

The male characters in *Son-Mother*, including the factory workers, are pathologically selfish and backward. A pedophile is even thrown into the mix.

Mahnaz Mohammadi has been arrested several times by the Iranian authorities for her political dissidence, which is thoroughly reactionary. But what perspective does she offer as an alternative? Iranian society needs to be radically altered, but altered by whom and on the basis of whose social needs and interests?

To be continued

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