

49th Sydney Film Festival

Grappling with the plight of immigrants and asylum seekers

Richard Phillips
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The annual Sydney Film Festival, held from June 7 to 21, screened 150 movies from 34 different countries, providing much-needed access to films rarely screened in Australian cinemas or on local television networks. WSWs correspondents watched more than 30 of these, including several feature-length documentaries and some classic cinema from the archives. Below is the first of a series of articles and reviews that will be published in the coming weeks.

This year's festival exhibited a number of programming problems. As is the case elsewhere, Sydney organisers are battling increasing costs and growing commercial pressures. While admissions to the festival have increased marginally in the last couple of years and some sponsors have signed three-year funding agreements, the task of maintaining the two-week event in Australia's most expensive city is not easy.

One ongoing concern is the decision to screen commercial English-language productions already scheduled for local release and easily viewed by cinema patrons. This appears to be a short-term and expedient response to the festival's financial troubles, with organisers under pressure to select easily marketable movies, while neglecting more innovative and less commercial works.

This year, for example, the festival featured Terry Zwigoff's *Ghost World*, *Bend it Like Beckham* directed by Gurinder Chadha, and forthcoming Australian features, *Black and White* directed by Craig Lahiff and Robert Sutherland's *The Inside Story*. In fact, *Ghost World* was showing in Sydney and Melbourne movie houses within days of the festival's conclusion and *Bend it Like Beckham*, a clichéd comedy about an Anglo-Indian girl in London striving to become a soccer star, was released into 62 Australian cinemas two weeks later.

Some of the festival's programming choices are connected to the lack of groundbreaking new cinema internationally. Those selecting films cannot conjure up great work if it is not available, but some changes could have been made to encourage more thoughtful and artistically innovative filmmaking.

One persistent shortcoming is the small number of movies made by Asia filmmakers. Obviously not every film from the region is a masterpiece but more could be done to expose local audiences to a wider range of films from Asia, the source of some of the more reflective and experimental cinema over the last 15 years. It would also assist film directors from Asia, who often have to surmount repressive censorship laws, government interference and severe financial difficulties to practise their craft.

This year's festival screened only seven Asian movies. These included two from Japan (*Dark Water* and *The Happiness of the Katakuris*), three from South Korea (*Bad Guy*, *Take Care of My Cat* and *One Fine Spring Day*), one from mainland China (*Marriage Certificate*), two from Hong Kong (*July Rhapsody* and *Beijing Rocks*), one from Indonesia (*Whispering Sands*), and *War and Peace*, a feature-length documentary

from India. Only two Asian filmmakers attended the festival—an Indian director and an Indonesian producer.

Despite these deficiencies, the festival did screen some important works. *Bloody Sunday*, a dramatic reenactment of the cold-blooded killing of 14 unarmed civil rights demonstrators in Derry, Northern Ireland by the British Army in 1972, previously reviewed by the WSWs, was a significant inclusion in the festival. It was voted the most popular feature at festival screenings in the Dendy Cinema.

War and Peace, a documentary directed by Anand Patwardhan about the danger of nuclear war between India and Pakistan, was awarded the festival's International Critics Prize for Documentary. It won strong audience support, as did *A Wedding in Ramallah* by Sherine Samala, a sensitive documentary about the marriage of a Ramallah woman and a Palestinian worker exiled in the US. Both films will be reviewed in later articles. We will also examine *Baran* by Majid Majidi; *Bend it Like Beckham*, *Marriage Certificate* and *Whispering Sands*, as well as *My Voyage to Italy*, a Martin Scorsese documentary, *War Photographer*, on photojournalist James Nachtwey, and *Domestic Violence* by Frederick Wiseman.

This year's festival included an intriguing collection of features—*L'Afrance*, *Frontières (Borders)*, *Escape to Paradise*, and *Tar Angel (L'ange de goudron)*—dealing with the plight of immigrants and refugees from Senegal, Algeria and Kurdistan.

These constitute an important response to what is a mounting social tragedy. According to conservative figures more than 40 million people are trapped in refugee camps in third countries, facing political persecution at home or barred entry to better off nations. Internationally, governments have increasingly resorted to the scapegoating of asylum seekers as a means of diverting attention from the disastrous impact of their own social and economic policies.

It is significant that all of the films are sympathetic to refugees and immigrants, who arrive in an alien country, often with no money, to confront hostile officials and racist slurs. While not all the films were entirely successful, they point to some of the problems confronting masses of people whose lives have been turned upside down after fleeing political repression, war and famine. The best represent a sincere attempt to probe the lives, thoughts and hopes of people who are frequently vilified and treated as less than human.

Escape to Paradise, directed by Nino Jacusso, is the ironic title of a sincere but limited work about a Kurdish family attempting to gain political asylum in Switzerland. Having escaped political persecution in Turkey and made their way across the Swiss border, the Karadag family enters not a "paradise" but a nightmarish world of overcrowded refugee hostels and government bureaucrats.

The film graphically depicts life in the refugee hostel where the family

is sent after being fingerprinted, photographed and medically examined by Swiss authorities. The hostel is inhabited by distressed families and individuals from Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East—plagued by the fear of deportation and preyed on by blackmarketeers.

The Karadag family awaits interrogation by immigration officials who will process the asylum application and determine their future. As the weeks pass, Sehmuz, father of the family, is persuaded by another hostel inmate to embellish his political history and back it up with government documents—otherwise immigration officials will not give him refugee status. These documents can be purchased from forgers for a hefty price and Sehmuz is forced to pawn his daughter’s jewelry to pay for them.

Defined by Jacusso as a “real acting movie” because most of the actors are former refugees, *Escape to Paradise* has some intense moments. But the film’s authentic feel is undermined by a series of political compromises. In particular, the director makes a false and unconvincing distinction between the Swiss security forces and immigration officials, who are portrayed mainly as benevolent types without a trace of racism or animosity towards the refugees.

Without disclosing how the story unfolds, the film ends by implying that if refugees reject the blackmarketeers and tell Swiss officials the truth they stand a better chance of gaining permanent residence. While few will swallow this rather naïve message, Jacusso’s loss of nerve at this point weakened an otherwise thoughtful work.

These faults pale into insignificance compared to *Tar Angel (L’ange de goudron)*, a superficial and sensationalist Canadian film. Written and directed by Denis Chouinard, it centres on the life of the Kasmi family, recently arrived Algerian refugees in Montreal.

The Kasmi family is a week away from being granted Canadian citizenship when their 19-year-old son Hafid, who has been involved with a group of radical environmentalists and anarchists, breaks into an immigration office to delete computer files. Security cameras record the protest and the tape is broadcast on national television. His father Ahmed (Zinedine Soualem) is devastated and decides to track down his son. He locates Hafid’s girlfriend, Hughette (Catherine Trudeau), who is member of the political group and a part-time tattooist.

Soualem and Hiam Abbass (as his pregnant wife) put in strong performances but *Tar Angels* goes awry when Ahmed and tattooist Hughette begin a road-movie-style search through rural Quebec to find Hafid. The pair eventually finds the 19-year-old in the final planning stages of a dangerous scheme, involving high-speed snowmobiles, to stop a planeload of refugees from being deported from Canada. Ahmed and Hughette are unable to persuade Hafid to withdraw from the operation. He is captured and kicked to death by the security forces.

The film concludes with the Kasmi family and Hughette at Hafid’s grave. Ahmed, who prior to the cross-Quebec journey was hostile to Hafid’s renunciation of traditional Muslim values, is now reconciled to his son’s “ideals”. The main problem with *Tar Angel* is Chouinard’s outlandish adventure story, which simply avoids an examination of the real difficulties confronting the Kasmi family and others in similar circumstances.

L’Afrance, a first feature by Alain Gomis, is an interesting, and at times rambling, story about El Hadj Diop (Djolo Mbengue), a 26-year-old Senegalese student living in Paris. El Hadj is not a political refugee or asylum seeker and comes from a relatively comfortable Senegalese family. He is just about to complete his studies but is torn between returning to Senegal and marriage to his long suffering fiancée, or remaining in Paris and carving out a new life for himself.

El Hadj, like many young African intellectuals sent abroad for a higher education, is torn between a sense of duty to his country and cutting his ties and settling in France. Should he return home and use his knowledge to benefit Senegal or stay and enjoy life in Paris?

He cannot seem to make up his mind and is vaguely attracted by the

nationalism of Guinean dictator Sekou Touré and the Congo’s Patrice Lumumba and ruminates over their proclamations. He quarrels with some of his fellow students who are determined to remain in France and who joke about his concerns. “Is what they learn worth what they will forget?” he wonders.

At the same time, El Hadj becomes romantically involved with Myriam Bechet (Delphine Zingg), a French woman. This relationship is intense and unpredictable and he refuses to acknowledge it to his fellow students. Nevertheless, he begins to question his plans to return home.

This relatively comfortable world is turned upside down when, during a routine visit to the local immigration office, authorities discover that his visa is six days overdue. He is handcuffed, strip-searched and brutalised by French officials who throw him into jail. Released after several days he loses his bearings, falls out with Bechet, and seriously contemplates suicide. Eventually he reconciles with his French girlfriend, returns to Senegal, meets with his father and resolves to return to France and become a teacher.

L’Afrance touches on many complex issues and often fails to answer all the questions it raises. Nonetheless, it is an honest work, capturing the social pressures, racial bigotry and personal trauma confronting even the better-off layer of African immigrants in France. Mbengue, as El Hadj Diop, displays a remarkable degree of dramatic maturity and emotional range for his first film appearance.

Frontières is another first film. Mostefa Djadjam, an actor turned director, decided to make the film to counteract the constant demonisation of “illegal” African immigrants in the French media. This modest but effective film traces the gruelling passage of six men and one woman from Senegal to Africa’s Mediterranean coast, across Mauritania, Algeria and Morocco, in a desperate bid to enter Europe via Spain. Three of the travellers are heading for Spain; the rest want to enter France.

Their attempt to escape the poverty of West Africa for a better life in Europe is fraught with constant danger—the seven travellers are at the mercy of a range of competing criminal elements who organise their journey across several national borders and the Saharan desert. Hidden in containers, open trucks and other vehicles, the travellers are constantly asked to pay additional money by drivers and other shadowy figures. One of the refugees wryly comments, “Today’s slaves have to pay for their own transport”.

Starring Lou Dante, Clarisse Luambo, Ona Lu Yenke, Dioucounda Koma, Tadie Tuene, Meyong Békaté and Delvelin Matthews, *Frontières* is a polished work, with strong performances and striking cinematography. It convincingly dramatises the hopes and aspirations of the thousands of African refugees who risk life and limb in a desperate bid to enter Europe. More could be shown of the conditions that led them to undertake this journey but Djadjam’s first feature is an important start and a demonstration of what can be achieved when compassionate filmmakers turn their attention to critical social issues.



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