

Epoch Times

TIFF Introduces the World to the Real Iran and Iraq

Films break through prejudice with human stories of oppression



TORONTO—Iran and Iraq are countries Canadians know mainly through headlines about the regimes and despots who have run them and used nationalism and theocracy as tools of control.

But behind the wars and politics that dominate the news lie oppression and heartache.

This is where the power of film and the true potential of the Toronto International Film Festival reveal itself. Beyond the barrage of celebrities and red carpet photo-ops are moving and insightful films playing out one after another on dozens of theatre screens in downtown Toronto.

These are the movies that don't have the splash of stars that light up flashbulbs, but do imbue their viewers with a heartfelt understanding of people a world away—people like the tens of thousands of Iraqis and Iranians who immigrated to Canada.

Iran and Iraq share an oddly similar history. Both were wounded by colonialism; Iran lost territory as Russia and Britain grew their empires, and Iraq was subjugated to various forms of British influence and control.

The result was that both countries were soured to the West and its form of modernization. Both saw Marxists become politically powerful, both saw revolutions against their old monarchies, and both became totalitarian states where critics and political opponents were tortured and executed.

It's a dramatic and turbulent history, perfect material for capable filmmakers like Sepideh Farsi, director of "Red Rose," an Iranian drama that includes real footage from the 2009 Green Revolution, and Samir, director of "Iraqi Odyssey," a documentary that follows the disparate lives of a middle-class Iraqi family.

'Red Rose'

"Red Rose" is a drama, a political love story of sorts, with strong similarities to George Orwell's "1984." Set largely in a middle-aged man's apartment, the film takes place during the 2009 protests when young Iranians took to the streets to protest the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The man's quiet life is interrupted when a group of young people fleeing police run up the stairs of his building and burst through his door seeking refuge. Rather than turn them into the black-clad and helmeted men who come searching, he lets them hide and eventually sparks a friendship with one of the women, Sara. She returns to his home daily, sometimes sporting bruises from the day's protest, sometimes using his computer to upload footage of police brutality and the protests.

It's a tale that reveals the common experience of dictatorship in Iran today and erases the notion that the average Iranian is complicit in the crimes and nuclear ambitions of the regime. These are a people under constant threat, we are told, with hopes held dearly and in sharp contrast to the narrow hypocrisy of Iran's violent theocracy.

'Iraqi Odyssey'

"Iraqi Odyssey," meanwhile, is a documentary of one extraordinary Iraqi family—the director's—whose tale is all the more remarkable because it is so common.

Director Samir traces his family back to his grandfather, and unravels a few individual tales within the recent history of Iraq. At 162 minutes, it's long enough for two films, yet not nearly long enough to look at more than a handful of his family members.

They were an educated and liberal bunch, as was common in Iraq some 60 years ago when the country looked about to become modernized along the lines of western Europe or North America.

But the wounds from Britain's colonial influence made it hard for Iraqis to look for inspiration from the people they most resented, and so many, including Samir's aunt and uncles, turned to communism, not really understanding anything of Marxism except that it somehow equated to freedom and better lives for average people.

It was a delusion the country would pay for as Soviet influence soon gave way to Saddam Hussein's Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party and its systematic imprisonment and execution of political opponents.

Both "Red Rose" and "Iraqi Odyssey" are tales of suffering rooted in the hopes of average people.

They are the hopes of Canadians as well. Canada stands alone in the world for its incredible diversity and its welcoming attitude toward immigrants. It's a point of pride that can only grow deeper with films like these.



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