Iraqi director Oday Rasheed brings new film to SF

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Sure, there have been numerous documentaries about the war in Iraq that have provided stateside audiences with a glimpse of life in a war-torn country. But how often are we given the chance to see an artful drama from Iraq, a film in which the war is a backdrop instead of the central concern? The San Francisco Film Society’s screening of Oday Rasheed’s sophomore film "Qarantina" is a rare opportunity to do just this.

They are bringing Rasheed to San Francisco as part of their Artist in Residence program. The April 3rd screening of his new film is part of two weeks of activities during which the filmmaker will visit classrooms, take part in discussions, and network with local filmmakers.

"Qarantina" is a beautifully crafted film about an impassive hit man preparing for the end and the troubled family that lives in the quarters below him. Seamlessly combining realist exteriors with exquisitely stylized interiors that accentuate the teeming emotions of the characters, he gets at the difficulties of being a woman in Iraqi society.

The power of devout patriarch, Salih, is challenged by his daughter Meriam, who refuses to speak or eat after having suffered a trauma that slowly comes to light and by his second wife Kerima, who is a rational and audacious woman who calls him on his abusiveness and fatuousness, as well as his preteen son, Muhaned, who defies his orders. This is a dark film, with penetrating pauses in which the perilousness of Salih or the Hit Man can be felt. Yet there is an acute, redeeming light that emanates from Kerima and Muhaned as they bustle and struggle to keep their family afloat.

"Qarantina" plays 7:00 Tuesday, April 3 at San Francisco Film Society Cinema. Visit http://www.sffs.org/Education/Artist-in-Residence.aspx for more information.
A promising introduction

**EDGE:** First of all, I want to say that you have constructed a beautiful film. In the US, we have screened numerous documentaries about the war, but I dare say that for many of us, "Qarantina" is/will be our first encounter with an Iraqi drama—a promising introduction for sure.

**Oday:** Thank you for the way that you took the film. I agree with you that there are more documentaries being made in Iraq because during the time of a crisis, it’s much easier to make a documentary than a feature film. I also believe that during a crisis, documentaries are essential, but there is a new generation of filmmakers in Iraq that want to show the crisis that’s happened/happening in a feature film.

**EDGE:** The war is present as a backdrop. Presumably, one could not make a true-to-life film in Baghdad without the presence of the war, yet this is a personal story, primarily about life in one domestic compound. When you were conceiving the film, to what extent were you conscious of presenting a vision of the Iraqi capital that moves beyond the barrage of war imagery that the West receives? Perhaps thoughts concerning foreign audience perception didn’t figure in at all, but what would you like foreign audiences to take from this film?

**Oday:** The war has been a daily life matter for Iraqis; it is a normal occurrence like anything else in Iraqi people’s lives. Unfortunately, I think that for the next few decades, we won’t be able to talk about anything in Iraq without having the war present as an element in this environment. I believe that we live two kinds of wars: the classic war - airplanes, tanks, soldiers, etc. and a second kind of war, which is the ignorance inside Iraqi society. The Iraqi people are in denial about what is happening. What I tried to do in "Qarantina" was to show just that. The world knows that there is a war in Iraq, but does the world know about the second type of war?

I’m an honest artist, and when I’m working on a piece of art—film, painting, or short story, I don’t think about whom I’m making the art project for. I’m trying to talk to the human, in general. Unfortunately, I’m the “son of wars,” and this puts me in a category that sometimes makes me feel uncomfortable: artist presenter of a crisis. I trust and learn from the whole audience of my film, even those people who are against the content of my film. Even the perspective of those people is important in order to understand the core of humanity.

Women’s rights addressed

**EDGE:** You have mentioned that when the film screened at the National Theatre in Baghdad the audience was mostly comprised of artists and intellectuals. If you had to speculate, what aspects of the film would be most resonant to a popular Iraqi audience? Which aspects would be most contentious?

**Oday:** Because of this second kind of war, because of the crisis of education, such that illiteracy is more than 48% in Iraq, and because religion is the easiest way to feel safe and provide answers, I think that addressing religion in this film is contentious. The second topic that is argued is women’s rights issues and the portrayal of women in such a society. The majority of Iraqi men don’t believe in basic women’s rights. So when they see this on screen, it makes them uncomfortable.
Because they want to see themselves winning on screen, watching the movie is like a drug that leads the audience nowhere. I do believe that they need to acknowledge this problem and then to face it.

**EDGE:** You have said that you began with a character- the Hit Man- then developed a story around him. Though I am definitely interested in what drives him, and particularly in what he feels for Kerima, I would say that most of the ripe-for-discussion drama stems from the relations within the ordinary family that lives below him. Can you say something about the origins of the other characters and the conflicts, such as the father/daughter relationship?

**Oday:** Ziad Turkey, the DP for my first feature, "Underexposure," made a photo exhibition about displaced families after the war in 2003. I felt very close to the experience that he went through while taking photos of those families. I knew at that time that there’s a new kind of society that’s rising, so I kept writing notes and met many members of those families. I think that they lived in the worst conditions possible for a human. Later on, the militia or Al Qaida had controlled the majority of those families, depending on which neighborhood they were from. The common figure in all of the families I met was "the father," who was providing his family nothing and asking them to do everything. There were a bunch of stories in different families - the father/daughter story, the father/wife story, the father/son story- all from different families. I put these different fathers in one figure, which I understand is intense, but they were all one figure for me. The paradox for me was that those fathers were behaving like they were controlling everything, but after a slight look at them, it was clear that they controlled nothing. This is especially vivid when you put them next to a center of power, like the Hit Man in the film. To portray this father figure, I needed to show the way that the father figure sees things, which is what you saw in the film.

**EDGE:** Kerima is a very compelling character. She is a strong female who claims her agency in a very male-dominated domain where she serves two men separately. Through both your portrayal of her and of Meriam, you demonstrate a strong sympathy for women. Can you say something about the inspiration for her character and the contrast between her and Fadhila, who is a very religious and traditional woman?

**Oday:** In real life, I met such a woman in one of the displaced families, and she was willing to change her reality. She hated her husband, who was a "father" type I mentioned earlier. It was clear that she was ready to find love. But Kerima, for me, is much bigger than this. To be more precise, Kerima’s actions in the film mean a lot to me because we see the inner revolution inside of her. She stands against all of what society expects of her and moves forward to save herself and to save the people that she loves in her family. This is a kind of inner wish inside of me, as a writer and director, that all of the women in Iraq have these feelings. I think that she is extremely honest about her feelings and fears. She’s very strong because she faces herself and confesses her mistakes to herself, which will definitely lead her to make fewer mistakes in the future. She steps out of the form that society has created for women, while Fadhila makes a living by supporting this form. I believe that any society wants to advance itself, and I believe that women are essential figures in this movement. This is what we are missing in Iraq, especially now.

**A Western fixation**

**EDGE:** Also, though I wouldn’t want to dwell on the headscarf issue because it has become something of a fixation in the West, I do find it noteworthy that the first dialogue spoken is the head of the lower household, Salih’s, command to his wife to put on her headscarf. Subsequently, when he makes an issue out of his silent, brooding daughter, Meriam, not wearing hers, Kerima reprimands him for his misplaced concern. Shouldn’t he be more concerned that she isn’t eating or communicating with anyone? And after that is a very touching shot in which Meriam’s younger brother, Muhaned, wraps the scarf around her head then kisses her softly on the head. Can you say something about the
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inspiration for these moments?

**Oday:** Especially because these are the first lines that the father says in the film, I make an announcement about what kind of man he is and what he really cares about. If I go back to the 80’s and early 90’s in Iraq, especially in Bagdad, a woman with a scarf was an exception. Now, it’s the other way around. For me, it’s not a religious sign; it’s a social sign that the man in my society is pushing the woman into the form that we talked about. It’s a sign of control and repression, and by a woman responding to this, it’s a sign of submission. Dramatically, for me, that was the best way to reveal the characters.

**EDGE:** You have said that, though the content of the film drew a mixed response (offending Islamic party members by showing a devout man who commits a considerable sin and by some who felt that the societal critique was too much too soon), the film’s technical accomplishment was applauded all around.

I also want to commend you on your visual sense. You accomplish what I think the best filmmakers excel at, which is capturing the magic of the mundane. Whether it is a spider web near a character’s head, dust blown in the wind, curtains fluttering in the wind, or the way the city forms a backdrop on the other side of a fence that a character rests beside, you bring poetry to the environment.

Also, there is a beautiful scene in which Kerima gives a nocturnal speech to the Hit Man, lamenting her position caught between two men and expected not to voice what is on her mind. It is very forthright and quite feminist without being heavy-handed. The way she is visualized, bearing her soul in the dark, is also rapturous; I feel like the best of content and style come together in this moment.

Can you say something about the visualization process? When you decided on the location how did you go about utilizing it to convey this story? How much detail of environment did the script contain, and how much of it arose as you were in production?

**Oday:** I’m a painter and a photographer, besides being a filmmaker, and I believe that aesthetics is what cinema is all about. But still, when you are telling the story in films, the filmmaker forgets this. I also believe that cinema has all of the elements that a good poem is looking for. I do believe what Godard said that cinema is 24 images of truth per second, but what kind of image? This is what I’m looking for as an artist. How does a red curtain express the feelings of the character next to it? How can a dusty wind express the feelings of a confused child? And how can this be done without being abstract? For me, this is the big challenge in filmmaking and I do believe that the cinematic language is still in its early stages. There is much to be discovered through it. Lucky me, I worked with cinematographer, Osama Rasheed, and this was his first feature. He came from a very strong photography background, so when I designed the shots, he added exactly what I was missing, which is how natural light can add a poetic dimension to the story.

The script contained all of the details of the environment. Of course, things changed in the movie, but the main details are in the script.

**EDGE:** Lastly, can you say something about your expectations for the San Francisco Film Society’s Artist in Residence program? What kind of exchange do you hope to have with participants? Will it be your first time in San Francisco?

**Oday:** I’ve been to California before, but I’ve never been to SF. Everybody is telling me that I’m coming to a great city, and I look forward to exploring the city of Ferlinghetti. I feel honored that the prestigious SF Film Society chose me for this program, and I am really thankful to the Global Film Initiative for supporting my film. I believe that this will help me to communicate with the right people in the film industry in SF.

"Qarantina" screens (and Oday Rasheed is interviewed by journalist Terry McCarthy) at 7 p.m. today (Tuesday, April 3) at San Francisco Film Society | New People Cinema, 1746 Post (at Webster), S.F. Admission is $9-11.

To find out more about Oday Rasheed’s San Francisco residency, visit this website.