Asaad Abdul Majeed plays a hitman in "Qarantina".

"Qarantina" is about a ruthless hit man in Baghdad who lives in the same house as a dysfunctional family. Violence is everywhere beyond their windows, symbolized by the overhead sounds of wartime helicopters, but it's the household's personal demons that are especially troubling in Oday Rasheed's riveting new drama, which screens in San Francisco today (Tuesday, April 3), as part of the San Francisco Film Society's Artist in Residence Program. Rasheed appears on stage for an interview as well.

"Qarantina" is one of the first Iraqi feature films made on location in the country, which continues to struggle with the aftereffects of the U.S.-led war that killed hundreds of thousands of people, displaced millions, and created a climate of sectarian distrust. Through "Qarantina"'s characters -- including the family's young daughter, Meriam (who is pregnant); her strong-willed step mom, Kerima; and Kerima's religious husband, Salih -- Rasheed asks a question that he says is crucial for Iraqis to hear: What responsibility do they have for the breakdown of the country's social infrastructure? "Qarantina" screened once in Iraq and will screen around the country in the year ahead.
"I'm telling the Iraqi people, 'What you are seeing here is part of your reality.' They don't want to see it. They want to blame the occupation for everything that's happening," Rasheed says in a phone interview from New York, where Quarantina screened as part of Global Lens 2012, a traveling series supported by the San Francisco-based Global Film Initiative. "I'm saying, 'Wait a minute. It's happening in our society with or without occupation, so let's talk about this. This is very important.'"

Rasheed also wrote the script for Quarantina, which shows how a segment of Iraqi men use religion to justify misogyny. In one of its most poignant scenes, Kerima laments her life stuck between her abusive husband and the hit man, who is her clandestine lover.

"I want to live," she cries. "I want to work. I want a friend. I don't even have one friend."

Quarantina's many quiet scenes, where characters talk or contemplate their lives in rooms and foyers, shock those who know Baghdad. The Iraqi capital has a constant drone of sound -- from military vehicles, generators, traffic, people -- that can be overwhelming. To adequately dilute the background noise that occurred during Quarantina's filming, sound technicians needed four months of post-production. Rasheed says he was "obsessed" with getting these noiseless moments into Quarantina because "this quiet makes you think more. You go more into the characters. You forget you're in Baghdad."

This "forgetting" is what Rasheed wants. The characters in Quarantina, he says, are people who live on a precipice that could be anywhere. Rasheed's first film, 2005's Underexposure, was also made in Baghdad and is about a film crew trying to make a movie in the midst of war. Tom Tykwer (Run Lola Run) co-produced Underexposure. After living in Germany for three years during the Iraq War's most violent years, Rasheed returned to his homeland in 2008. With almost no money to start with, he convinced Iraq's Ministry of Culture to help fund Quarantina without script approval -- an unprecedented development in a country where government interference is expected.

Rasheed dedicates the film to his uncle, Al No'mani, the Iraqi actor who appeared in such U.S. films as Three Kings. It was No'mani who, when Rasheed was just a boy, gave him an 8mm projector and invited him onto movie sets in Iraq.

"He was," says Rasheed, "a big figure in my life." Now it's Rasheed's turn to represent his country on the bigger international stage.

Quarantina 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.

For more events in San Francisco this week and beyond, check out our calendar section. Follow us on Twitter at @ExhibitionistSF and like us on Facebook.