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John Waters, an ebullient presence at the 53rd San Francisco International, arrives for the premiere of Joshua Grannell's **All About Evil** at the Castro Saturday night.

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The [Red Vic](#) presents a filmed production of Puccini's popular opera featuring the San Francisco Opera Orchestra and Chorus.



## Global Lens

**By Michael Fox**

The state of foreign-film distribution is mighty precarious these days, for all sorts of reasons. The paucity of international superstar directors a la Bergman and Fellini and reduced coverage in daily newspapers — they couldn't be related, could they? — have contributed to the decline in public awareness and box office. It's not a leap to suggest that those same factors have helped drive the nationwide explosion in film festivals in recent years. Fests, and touring programs such as the currently unspooling Global Lens series, cannily promote themselves as community events deserving of media attention. As such, they can attract press coverage that would never accrue to an individual film from Burkina Faso or Brazil by an unknown director with unknown actors. Forgive me for taking a marketing angle, for the great thing about the films in the Global Lens collection, as well as most of the movies in any festival worth its 501©3 status, is the way they value authentic cultural expression above commerce.

Most of the eight features (and one program of shorts) in the third season of the [Global Lens](#) series — organized by the Global Film Initiative, a New York-based nonprofit — come from countries whose national cinemas are either undeveloped or out of favor. An exception is Iranian writer-director Kambozia Partovi's "Border Café," a compact yet marvelously rich story that compares favorably with the smart, unsentimental movies that established Iran's stellar reputation among film buffs the world over. After her husband's death, a young mother refuses to follow tradition and marry her brother-in-law. Instead, she reopens her husband's restaurant. Partovi avoids branding people as heroines or villains, preferring to show his characters' behavior as consistent with, and reflective of, the constrained society in which they live. To that end, he offers an oblique but unmistakable criticism of cops and judges as agents serving the status quo and the ruling party, rather than the people. Meanwhile, setting the restaurant an hour from the Turkish border on a highway favored by truckers, serves to remind us of the countless refugees and lost souls we never hear about.

The cautionary Chinese fable "Stolen Life" is a substantially less inspiring feminist saga. Zhou Kun ('Suzhou River') plays an introverted college freshman who falls for the first guy she meets — a delivery man — on her initial day on campus. Thrilled with the attention, and the sense that for the first time in her life she exists, Yanni abandons her opportunities to be with him. Director Li Shaohong relies a bit too much on Yanni's narration, and her techniques for wringing pathos from the young woman's predicament may seem blunt and unsophisticated to eyes accustomed to the nuances of American indies. By the time Yanni "matures" from her travails into an anonymous big-city shopgirl, "Stolen Life" seems less a warning about predatory men than an indictment of China's embrace of every-woman-for-herself capitalism.

The politics are front and center in "The Night of Truth," a vibrant yet fatalistic plea for peace from Burkina Faso filmmaker Fanta Régina Nacro. In an imaginary country, after years of horrific war, the ruling and rebel tribes have agreed to a truce. A palpable air of mistrust, fueled by grudges, nightmares, guilt, and superstition, hangs over the president's reconciliatory meeting with the rebel leader. What makes "The Night of Truth" so refreshing, and so painful, is the female director's insistence that the women are as culpable as the men in this tragedy. Most chillingly, Nacro depicts how easily fears and prejudices are passed on to the children, insidiously laying the groundwork for the next war.

The connection between governmental abuse and personal violence provides the backdrop for Brazilian director Lucia Murat's breathtakingly ambitious "Almost Brothers." This stunningly kinetic film, which played the 2005 San Francisco International Film Festival, follows two childhood friends to adulthood. Miguel, the son of a middle-class white academic, survives being a political prisoner in the '70s to become a government official in the present. Jorge grew up in the favela, the son of a black musician. He was jailed in the '70s on a theft conviction, and he's in prison today, running his gang operation from behind bars.

"Almost Brothers" teems with energy, not to mention racial and class tension. It single-handedly demolishes any and all stereotypes that one might harbor of films from the developing world, i.e., that they're either earnest, boring exposés or humorless exercises in gritty neo-neorealism. The other wild card in the Global Lens deck is Teddy Mattered's irreverent "Max and Mona," a comedy from South Africa about the misadventures of a honest country boy in the fast-talking, fast-moving world of Johannesburg. The agent of Max's undoing is his Uncle Norman, a scam artist and womanizer who

turns the lad's precious inherited gift of crying at funerals into his very own meal ticket. "Max and Mona" is the most commercial film in the lineup, in the sense that it grafts the structure of broad Western comedies onto African traditions. (There's even a romantic subplot involving Max, although it dissolves instead of developing.)

So, in point of fact, "Max and Mona," is not so "wild" after all. It represents a tonal shift from the rest of the program, to be sure, but at the same time it's disappointingly conventional. No real harm, I suppose, except that I esteem the Global Film Initiative, like other international touring shows that have preceded it, for its mission to provide what we can't get otherwise. That means spotlighting countries that rarely make our front pages, points of view hardly ever glimpsed on U.S. television and cinematic styles and approaches that disdain commercial hooks. You could say without exaggeration that the organization champions indigenous filmmaking, at a time when Hollywood flicks threaten the viability of nearly every national cinema. It's just a little program, but its aims could not be more commendable.

[Global Lens](#) 2006 continues through Oct. 4 at the San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut St.. The series also plays today through Oct. 4 at the [Smith Rafael Film Center](#) in San Rafael, and today and tomorrow at the Mexican Heritage Plaza, 1700 Alum Rock Ave. in San Jose.

09.21.2006

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