

15th Tokyo Filmex—Part 1

The Prince and A Few Cubic Meters of Love: Two films about Iran and Afghanistan

By John Watanabe
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This is the first article on this year's Tokyo Filmex, an international film festival, held November 22-30.

While there were a number of valuable films shown at the 15th annual Tokyo Filmex this year, this reviewer felt *The Prince*, directed by Mahmoud Behraznia, was the most serious and successful. An Iranian-German co-production, the work is a “docu-fiction” about the life journey of Jalil Nazari, an Afghan refugee in Iran, who subsequently applied for asylum in Germany.

As a 17-year-old, Jalil flees Afghanistan on foot in 1997, apparently for fear of being forcibly mobilized by the Taliban. An illegal immigrant in Iran, he finds himself forced into various low-wage jobs. However, Jalil's luck changes when he is selected to star in an Iranian film, *Djomeh* (2000), directed by Hassan Yektapanah, which the WSWS commented on at the time.

Director Behraznia, who was born in Tehran but was by then living in Germany, also appeared in *Djomeh* as an actor. During the shooting, he befriended Jalil. When the latter was invited to the Filmfest Hamburg for a screening of *Djomeh* and eventually decided not to return to Iran but apply for asylum in Germany, Behraznia helped the youth and started filming his experiences.

Behraznia was active as an actor in several Iranian films, and has also directed documentaries for German television, most notably *Close-up Kiarostami* (1999), about the famed Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, and *Heaven's Pass* (2001), about Jalil's immigration issues.

In *The Prince*, his feature directorial debut, Behraznia presents Jalil's story from the shooting of *Djomeh* to

the latter's arrival in Germany and up to the present day. Jalil himself narrates much of the film, which covers the most recent 13 years or so of his life.

Jalil recounts that he initially had the illusion Germany was a sort of “paradise”—presumably the source of the title of Behraznia's 2001 documentary—which “after only three [or] four days turned out to be hell.” Jalil's experience in the Chemnitz asylum center “eroded our souls.”

“We are civilized people,” he exclaims, but at the center, human beings were downgraded to an almost “zoological existence.” A warden of the Chemnitz center openly displays his prejudice and animosity toward the inmates, telling the camera that “eighty percent of them are pigs,” who are unruly and will “never adapt” to the demands of working life in Germany. Other Germans are more accepting.

Jalil's efforts at integrating into German society in the face of considerable obstacles seem genuine and often endearing—such as his being selected the most popular “Italian” in town, on account of his working as a pizza maker at a popular eatery. The film's most moving, effective and enlightening parts, however, occur during his trips back to Afghanistan.

After finally obtaining a German passport, Jalil is only able to see his family again in 2010. After 13 years of separation, the reunion is moving. So are shots of Afghanistan destroyed by seemingly unending war and carnage. The insights into social consciousness that *The Prince* offers, via chat with a Kabul taxi driver and Jalil's family members, feel genuine and reflect widespread hatred of the foreign occupation. The customs and traditions relating to marriage, revealed through the process of Jalil's wedding, point to the

deeper clan and economic relationships.

At one point, the film suggests that some aspects of Afghan society—such as educational possibilities for girls—have improved since the US-led overthrow of the fundamentalist Taliban regime, which may well be the case. However, as a whole, *The Prince* is not remotely sympathetic toward or apologetic for the present puppet regime, nor its foreign masters; quite the contrary. Likewise, during the post-screening talk in Tokyo, Behraznia showed his anger at the never-ending imperialist intrigues in the region, which he traced back at least to the 1953 CIA coup in his country of origin, Iran.

In its subject matter, *The Prince* is exceptional. It looks forthrightly at the experiences of a victim of imperialist violence abroad and brutal anti-immigrant policies at home. Such people, otherwise, go almost entirely unrepresented in contemporary film. But more than anything else, Behraznia's work is also unusual for the *manner* in which it treats the subject, i.e. with seriousness, deep feelings, honesty and sensitivity. We definitely need more films like this.

A Few Cubic Meters of Love

Another film at Filmex dealt with the question of Afghan refugees and illegal workers in Iran from a different angle and, in my view, far less successfully. *A Few Cubic Meters of Love*, from Jamshid Mahmoudi, another first feature, centers on the forbidden love between a young Iranian worker, Saber (Saed Soheili), and Marona (Hasiba Ebrahimi), the daughter of an Afghan illegally employed at a metal scrap yard on the outskirts of Tehran.

Realizing they cannot count on understanding or support from those around them, the couple surreptitiously meets in a shipping container—hence the title. With various legal and cultural obstacles to their relations, their love ends tragically.

Shot at a real scrap yard and made with many non-professional performers, *A Few Cubic Meters of Love* has a realistic feel to it, on a superficial level. However, it lacks dramatic weight and leaves one, for the most part, emotionally disconnected.

Not only is the story too focused on the two protagonists, the characters themselves are not developed. We are asked, more or less, to take for granted the level of their commitment and its firmness,

neither of which is dramatically established. While one can certainly empathize with youthful infatuation and burning desire to stay together—and Soheili and Ebrahimi make a decent effort to represent these emotions—if that is the whole dramatic backbone of a film, an artistic breakthrough can hardly be expected.

Marona's father is apparently a former Afghan soldier, but precisely why the family is in exile is never addressed. When he abruptly decides to return to Afghanistan rather than continue suffering humiliations in Iran, this seems odd for someone who presumably did not have any choice to begin with. None of this is explored.

Director Mahmoudi's statement in the festival catalog offers some clues to the reasons behind the limited outlook of the film. He writes: "The long and destructive Soviet occupation of Afghanistan drove many Afghans into exile. They sought asylum mainly in Iran and Pakistan. Though these refugees lost possessions, freedom and social rank during their exile, they never lost their dignity. My family and I found refuge in Iran some time ago [in the mid-1980s] and I spent my childhood and adolescence there. ... I've tried to recount the painful coexistence of our two peoples over three decades through this tale of impossible love."

Do the filmmaker and his family perhaps hope to regain those "lost possessions, freedom and social rank"? Does this involve some sort of support for or connection with the present regime in Kabul? One doesn't know, but the fact that *A Few Cubic Meters of Love* was selected as the official Afghan candidate for the best foreign language film at the 2015 Academy Awards only deepens one's suspicions. The generally well-heeled audience that votes on the Oscars will find nothing in Mahmoudi's film that would ruffle anyone's feathers, and plenty to make them feel good about themselves.

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