

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT



'Timbuktu' is a powerful melodrama about a community in northern Mali under jihadist occupation.

Window into Oppression

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The men always carry guns, even into the local mosque. They have brought jihad to a Muslim community. The local imam quietly but firmly pushes back: the mosque is a place for quiet prayer; their shouting and their guns are not allowed. Though they leave, they don't listen to reason. They have brought jihad, and they are now the arbiters of reason. In another scene, the imam, who has obviously been fielding complaints from the local population, attempts to reason with one of the leaders. Where is leniency? Love? Forgiveness? Why demand gloves without explaining their purpose? Is not jihad meant to happen inwardly? His words bounce off their target.

As in all wars, women's suffering is particularly acute. Many of the rules are directed at them specifically. A fishmonger is arrested after she complains about being required to wear gloves while handling, washing, and scaling fish. Another woman gets 40 lashes for singing and another 40 because she was in the same room as the male musician who accompanied her. The enforcers of female purity make a practice of forcing marriage on the women they find particularly appealing. Attempts at protest are easily rebuffed, even when the imam tries to assist. She has no reason to complain, they are told; the husband is "perfect" in the eyes of Allah.

The film is inspired by events that actually occurred in a city in

Mali in 2012. Western reports focused on the jihadists' destruction of ancient manuscripts, which is of course terrible. But Sissako's focus is more local, more particular. He depicts the effects of religious zealotry on ordinary people with ordinary concerns. His film also offers a rare opportunity for Western audiences to sit with the experiences of Africans as told by Africans, rather than a story of a Westerner against a backdrop of Africans. It is a window into life and cultural richness that has been going for centuries, while we in the West defined Africans by ourselves. (The contrast brings to mind the comic depiction of missionaries in "The Book of Mormon," in which after a short time in Uganda, the young missionaries buoyantly sing that "We are Africa.")

Sissako's quiet focus on specific scenes of ordinary life portrays the brutality of fundamentalism with clarity far more devastating than polemics. It also offers a window into oppression that extends beyond the effects of jihad. Over and over he depicts the human spirit refusing to be crushed. The soldiers hear music one night and set to work to identify the offending house. "They are singing praises to Allah," one reports to their superiors. "Shall I arrest them?" The woman who is whipped for singing turns her crying into a song. A group of boys pantomime a soccer game, kicking an imaginary ball and running imaginary victory laps after scoring an

imaginary goal, and then pretend to be doing calisthenics when two armed soldiers ride by on a motorbike.

Sissako's film is filled with such devastating images, and glows with the rich beauty of its desert setting. Though he is less concerned with plot, there is a small story at its center of a couple and the daughter and adopted son on whom they dote. They live in an open tent, their love for each other apparent from small moments of gesture and conversation. Their neighbors have left in the wake of the jihad, and the wife is worried for their safety. I know you are afraid, her husband observes. But it will be alright, he reassures her. Humiliations must come to an end.

Humiliations do come to an end for the couple, but not in the hopeful way he suggests. Sissako's poetic film is full of beauty, but does not spare us the devastation. For him, beauty and hope is contained in quiet acts of rebellion and in good people insisting on their own truth and goodness, in the face of bullies who insist that they are the ones who define truth and goodness.

See this lovely film on the big screen if you can. It's playing in Portland at the Living Room Theaters.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer.

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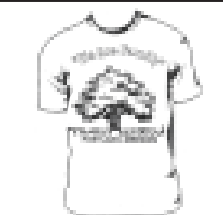


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