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Ibrahim Ahmed and Layla Walet Mohamed in 'Timbuktu,' the story of a small African community's experience of jihad.

LES FILMS DU WORSO - DUNE VISION

Window into Oppression

Human spirit refuses to be crushed in 'Timbuktu'

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

No film at this year's Portland International Film Festival left a mark on me as indelible as "Timbuktu." Gorgeous, poetic, pointed, and profound, this story of a small African community's experience of jihad manages to tell a political story without op-

lemics, to portray with depth and insight how its victims actually experience religious extremism, and, at the same time, to unforgettably illustrate how the human spirit resists attempts to crush it.

The film's opening moments telegraph the style and intention of director Abderrahmane Sissako, who was born in Mauritania and now lives in France. A gazelle hurtles across the sand, pursued by a barrage of gunshots from half a dozen AK-47s fired by young men chasing it in a pick-up. The gazelle runs and runs, as the men continue to shoot and miss

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
DARLEEN ORTEGA



it. "Don't kill it," the men say. "Just tire it."

More shots ring out, this time aimed at a line of idols, arranged in a row as targets. These are art objects, carved human figures presumably meant to evoke the local populace as ornamental and religious statuary. The men shoot mercilessly, destroying the side of a face, a breast, an arm, and shooting through a chest.

The actions of the shooters have a quality of intention, yet they feel crude, indiscriminate. All forms of artistic expression are forbidden in this extremist version of Islam; these objects will no longer be allowed. But it feels relevant that they are shooting at a rendering of faces and limbs that evoke the local population and its culture, traditions, and art. The targeted callousness of the shooters serves more than one purpose.

The armed invaders are not from the local

culture. Rather, they are young men from Arab cultures; they speak Arabic, French, a little English, rather than the local languages. They shout orders through the streets: Smoking is forbidden. Music is forbidden. Playing with balls is forbidden. Women must wear gloves. Essentially all expressions of individuality, all evocations of feeling are no longer allowed.

Yet they mostly do not appear to be religious zealots, but rather bored young men, bullies here to do a job. We hear them talking about their favorite European soccer teams. One of the commanders regularly sneaks off to smoke. He drives all the way out to a married woman's house away from the town to flirt with her when her husband is away, and chides her for having her head uncovered.

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