

# Arts & ENTERTAINMENT



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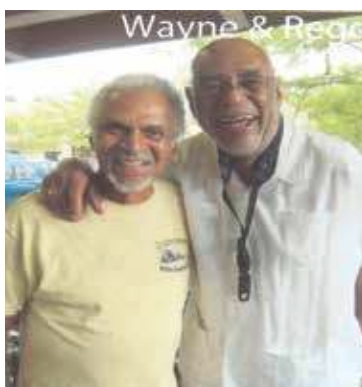
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## Documenting the Human Experience

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RaMell Ross began filming after spending time teaching in the community and making friends with two young men who are the film's major subjects. The time Ross spent building those relationships yields him access that would be hard to come by otherwise, allowing him to capture the smallest of moments with the greatest of empathy -- a toddler doggedly running circles in his living room, a young man practicing his jump shot; high school cheerleaders moving in unison. The result is a portrait of life among black people in the rural south that is uncommonly specific and compassionate. The film won special jury prizes at both Full Frame and Sundance.

"**Owned: A Tale of Two Americas**" examines the story behind middle-class home ownership in the U.S., revealing the concept of the "American dream" to be meaningfully available almost exclusively to white people as the result of a deliberate program of institutionalized racial exclusion. Director Giorgio Angelini connects a surprising number of narrative threads, including some clever use of archival ads and individual stories, to illuminate the links between the rise of the suburbs, the creation of urban housing projects, and the periodic displacement of people of color to build highways and, most recently, to make room for gentrification. It's an ambitious and surprisingly entertaining examination of patterns of structural bias that aims to bring us to a more accurate shared history that might yield better solutions.

"**The Judge**" offers a fascinating window into Shari'a law and life in the West Bank. Judge Kholoud Al-Faqih is the first woman to serve as judge in the Shari'a courts in the Middle East, which cover family law in Islamic society. (Women have served as judges since the 1970s in the civil courts, which include criminal and civil matters.) She is a compelling focus for the current state of life in the West Bank and Islamic society generally, as she walks (with equal parts joy and courage) a fine line of fully embracing her culture and seeing where it needs to shift in order to confront the most inconvenient and challenging parts of its truth. Director Erika Cohn (an American Jew) does fine and respectful work here which aims

to help particularly those of us in the West round out our picture of a culture about which we understand little, including aerial shots of the West Bank and the complex perspective of the male Chief Judge who was brave enough to appoint Judge Kholoud but is also a conservative Muslim with three wives. Fine, mind-expanding work. It will have a limited theatrical release and will also be available on PBS's Independent Lens and Amazon later this year.

"**Of Fathers and Sons**" feels important but is, in many ways,

into a community we understand very little, and leaves the viewer to wonder what sort of future children like these can envision.

My least favorite film of the first two days—though I expect I am an outlier in that regard—was "**RBG**," a biographical doc about Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. It is certainly a well-constructed compendium of her life story and legal significance, but presented with an entirely uncritical stance by two white directors, Julie Cohen and Betsy West. Taking nothing away from Ginsburg's undeniably



RaMell Ross directs "Hale County This Morning, This Evening," a new documentary that gives an intimate look at life in a mostly black, rural Alabama town.

almost unwatchable. Director Talal Derki returns to his former Syrian homeland and imbeds himself with the family of a jihadist man, Abu Osama, yielding an intimate portrait of a person who is both an extremist and, in his way a family man. He dotes on his young sons while clearly rearing them to be future jihadists, singing songs about glorious martyrdom, punishing them for shows of emotion. One of his young sons captures and "slaughters" a bird, comparing its beheading to his father's own actions, and his oldest son is sent off to alarmingly brutal military training at age 13. In 98 minutes, hardly a woman or girl is seen at all, until Osama threatens to bring the roof down on one of his wives if she doesn't stop crying when he comes home with a serious injury, and you realize that she (and likely other women and girls) have been there all along. Later he jokes of shooting a two-year-old girl who neglects to wear a hijab. Derki offers rare insight

significant contributions to women's rights and liberal thought, I was frustrated by the film's lack of awareness around Ginsburg's place inside of second-wave feminism, its unquestioning elevation of her vantage point as the ultimate defender of the rights of women and minorities, and its lack of critical analysis of her failure to seriously consider stepping down while President Obama might have appointed a successor for her, given her age and the importance of her seat on the Supreme Court. There is an underlying arrogance in both Ginsburg and in the liberal dominant culture view that happily drowns out an array of perspectives, including my own.

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*. Find her movie blog at [opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com](http://opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com).