

Diverse Films Stand Out

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

in the U.S.

“*Yomeddine*,” set in Egypt, takes its name from the Arabic word for judgment. It’s been racking up audience awards at various film festivals, which may improve its prospects for an online and limited theatrical release in the U.S. It tells the story of Beshay, a leper who has spent most of his life inside an Egyptian leper colony. After his wife dies, he undertakes an arduous cross-country journey to find the family who abandoned him in the colony in childhood, and ends up with an orphan boy tagging along. The storytelling here is simple, but the lens is not; the first-time actor playing Beshay lives in a body ravaged by leprosy, and the film is shot in parts of Egypt that don’t appear on a tourist map, yet the film doesn’t feel like poverty porn. Rather, I experienced it as an opportunity to journey alongside perspectives and experiences that I am unlikely to encounter and might well recoil from, approached with humanity and care. Judgment is operating on many levels, in terms of how we judge people, and what sort of judgment animals and humans may face as they pass from this life to the next. There is beauty here beyond what we typically see or even look for, and a journey worth taking.

“*The Days to Come*” isn’t win-

ning any audience awards; audiences like their romances to be more in the realm of sheer fantasy, as a rule, and this depiction of how pregnancy changes a relationship is relentlessly real. But for those who, like me, can’t abide fake romance, no one does relationship realism better than Spanish director Carlos Marques-Marcet. Here he is aided by the fact that his lead actors are a real-life couple becoming parents; the film has an immediacy that would be well-nigh impossible to capture this well otherwise. We witness their struggle with how to talk about whether to carry the pregnancy to term, their disagreements over the career and economic consequences of parenthood, the way the raised stakes also surface resentments that might otherwise have remained dormant. Honest parents will especially experience many moments of recognition here; real relationships, for all their occasional beauty, are also mysterious and anything but easy. I’m guessing this film will find at least an online home.

“*Ms. Purple*” benefits from an intriguing performance by Tiffany Chu as Kasie, a young Korean-American woman stuck in the trap that beauty lays. Her beautiful mother left the family when Kasie was a child and leveraged her beauty for a more lucrative match, leaving Kasie and her brother Carey and



“*Yomeddine*,” tells the story of a man who spent most of his life inside a leper colony in Egypt and who takes a cross-country journey to learn about the family who abandoned him as a child, tagged along by an orphan boy who joins him.

their father devastated—and now Kasie has left behind her dreams of being a concert pianist, forced to leverage her own beauty to care for her father, who is unable to care for himself, by working as a karaoke hostess. The plot does no more than connect those dots, without much added insight—but Kasie is never less than compelling, including in her relationship to Carey, who she finally enlists for help.

“*Them That Follow*” is headed for a theatrical release, but deserves it less than any of the films above, though it is filled with good performances. It’s set in a backwoods community where a small number of folks find in scripture an encouragement to treat deadly rattlesnakes as faith detectors. I don’t doubt that such communities exist, but artistic renderings of faith—particularly faith outside the experience of most of audience members—often strike me as voyeuristic and not very true. This film, despite the work of a solid cast that kept me intrigued, never fully won me over; the extreme circumstances seem to be exploited for dramatic effect.

Nine other films are likely to appeal to a more limited set of viewers. “*Another Day of Life*” inventively combines animation and documentary footage to shed light on the Angolan Civil War, through the life of a gutsy Polish journalist. “*All My Loving*” manages to tell parallel stories of three privileged and self-indulgent German siblings in an absorbing way though, in the end, it is hard to find someone to like. In “*Take It or Leave It*,” a young Estonian man finds in single parenthood a reason to evolve a bit from irresponsible toxic masculinity, and “*Ghost Town Anthology*” tells a story of grief in a remote Quebecois town; both those films make up for their narrative shortcomings by providing interesting windows into Estonian and small-town Canadian life. The campy “*Knife+Heart*” was not my cup of tea but was a huge hit with queer audience members, who came and cheered in force for this crime thriller set in the late-’70s gay porn industry. “*Before the Vows*” is a rare opportunity to see a film from Ghana; its young director has

been dubbed “the Shonda Rhimes of Ghana” for her series “An African City,” and the plotting here is as conventional as they come, though set among gorgeous Africans. “*The Sharks*” is likely to be too opaque for all but the most dedicated of viewers, but gained awards recognition at the Sundance Film Festival for its first-time Uruguayan director Lucia Garibaldi; it’s a close observation of an impassive young girl’s dicey exploration of her power and desire. “*EXT. Night*” takes a chaotic journey with a filmmaker, a cabbie, and a prostitute who are thrown together for a night; it aims to shed light on the unrelenting turmoil and social stratification of Cairo in the wake of failed revolution but bogs down narratively. Finally, “*A Faithful Man*” is an overrated vanity project in which carelessly handsome French actor-director Louis Garrel directs himself starring as a carelessly handsome man being fought over by two gorgeous women (one played by his real-life gorgeous model wife and the other played by the lovely daughter of Johnny Depp and Vanessa Paradis). My advice is to hunt for everything else on this list first!

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