

Marooned in Iraq

In the wake of the war in Iraq comes a film which deals with part of the same territory, casting an eye on exotic Kurdistan, in the wake of the Iran-Iraq in 1988. Made by Bahman Ghobadi, the same director who made the first Iranian feature shot in Kurdish, *A Time for Drunken Horses*, this new film offers an intriguing glimpse into a world few in the West know and tells a simple and ultimately touching story of how lives are lived there.

The new film, also in Kurdish (with subtitles), is an odyssey of an aging Kurdish-Iranian singer, Mirza (Shahab Ebrahimi), who, accompanied by his musician sons, Barat (Faegh Mohammadi) and Audeh (Allah-Morad Rashtian), goes searching for his wife, Hanareh, who left Mirza 23 years before to live in Iraqi Kurdistan with Seyed, an ex-colleague of Mirza's. The journey is undertaken after Mirza hears that Hanareh is singing for Kurdish refugees at the Iran-Iraq border. In their wanderings, the trio is forced to perform at a wedding at a refugee camp, loses everything at the hands of armed robbers, and comes upon a newly discovered mass grave. Along the way, variable family feelings spring up for the 50-something sons: Barat falls in love precipitously with the singing voice of a young woman and pursues her, while Audeh, father of 13 daughters by seven wives, looks to adopt a couple of orphan boys.

Much of this odyssey is told by Ghobadi in humorous or offbeat tones. The film even falls into what must be the first instances of Kurdish slapstick, with Barat and Audeh sounding at times like--believe it or not--a bickering Kurdish Abbott and Costello. The finale, however, makes more explicit what has been implicit during the film with the humming sounds of aircraft overhead and the occasional muffled explosion. The war against the Kurds smacks home when Mirza comes upon the mass grave of victims of chemical bombing and learns that Seyed has died while his beloved Hanareh has been left in a miserable camp set up for surviving women. Mirza, it turns out, will never see Hanareh--she has been disfigured in one of the attacks--but he does head back to Iran with one prize, Hanareh's small daughter.

Perhaps the most compelling element of this very foreign film is the spare but beautiful landscape through which its protagonists move. This is not the Iraq seen so much on CNN, the country of dusty desert flatlands or squat, crowded brown cities; it is a land of slick mud roads coiling through barren hills, rank and steaming refugee camps, and stark, slanted snowscapes. Its cast, almost all of whom had never seen a movie camera before, are hardly acting but rather incarnating what the director wants. He indicated that he basically looks for the right physical types (perhaps like Fellini?) to fashion his films. In this case, too, he found three prominent Kurdish musicians to perform his lead roles. He even cast his mother in the role of Hanareh (whose face is never seen).

What Bahman Ghobadi seems most fascinated by--in *Marooned in Iraq* as well as his earlier film--is the presence of borders, and human beings' struggles to overcome or endure them. Such borders are a particularly apt metaphor for the Ghobadi's Kurds, a people whose unity is confronted constantly by frontiers that define and restrict their movements and their lives. His films seem an attempt to transcend such borders and to introduce his troubled land to a wider world.

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