

The Road to Guantanamo

The Road to Guantanamo comes precisely at a time when it might be easily flogged for political capital. Fresh on the heels of a vociferous Congressional debate on the Iraqi war and after recent contention about the necessity of the Cuba encampment for suspected terrorists, the film drops its load on to viewers with the true story of three innocent British citizens of Pakistani origin who were caught up in the maelstrom of the Afghan invasion and end up in Guantanamo for a protracted stay (*it opened June 23rd at Landmark's E Street Cinema and the Avalon*).

The filmmakers construct a believable narrative of what these men went through and how they survived. The three friends, all young, big city boys from the town of Tipton in Birmingham, end up in Pakistan in October 2001 to celebrate an arranged marriage for one of them. Before the event itself, they decide--not too brightly--to go into Afghanistan to see where the invasion action is. Bounced around in wheezing buses, they end up in Kabul looking for something to do, then in the town of Kunduz, trying to get back to Pakistan. It is here that they become co-mingled with others fleeing and are captured, first by the Afghan National Alliance, then by U.S. forces, which eventually consign them to terrorist holding camps, first in Kandahar, then to Guantanamo in January and February 2002. Here we see the three young men, Asif, Shafiq, and Ruhel (portrayed by actors Afram Usman, Rizwan Ahmed, and Farhad Harun, respectively) suffer through the isolation, interrogations, and agony of the "Gitmo" routine. After more than two years, for no clear reason and with no apologies whatsoever, they are released back to England.

The film, ingeniously made by directors Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross (Winterbottom's long time crew member), takes off from the actual experiences of the three prisoners, who are shown throughout in real studio interviews, but combines these with careful reenactments of those experiences with actors portraying them, all convincingly shot on location in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and London. The relentless prison and interrogation scenes, all convincingly staged with believable soldiers, intelligence officers and officials, put one in the hot seat, but they also avoid the predictable and the polemical. Thus, we have a true docudrama, adding staged scenes to give dramatic life to a real story line. This could, of course, be called cheating, or special pleading, but the technique (used constantly on television documentaries) does offer a tension and momentum that a drier presentation could not match.

Michael Winterbottom is a British director of dizzying versatility, and his latest film contributes to that reputation. He has made epic period dramas (*Jude, The Claim*), loopy comedies (*Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*), frank erotica (*9 Songs*), and hand-held melodramas (*Wonderland*). He has also made gritty dramas with war as a backdrop, like the excellent *Welcome to Sarajevo*. The grim journey of these Pakistani-Brits reminds me of one of his best films, a little-seen immigration story called *In This World* (2002). It indelibly outlines the sufferings of two young Afghan refugees in a Pakistan refugee camp who struggle through the Middle East and Europe to get to London--and some kind of work. This *Road* film is, in a way, that story in reverse: three young men, comfortable in England, moving through South Asia to the grimness that is Afghanistan--and then on to much worse.

While the film shows the three protagonists back in England and--in a sweet coda in

the summer of 2005--finally attending the wedding of Asif back in Pakistan, one cannot help but wonder if three new demon terrorists were minted in the cages of Cuba. The real men don't give strong evidence of becoming militant--one indicates that he has become more of a practicing Muslim, another gently says he sees life a new way--one cannot help wonder what such an inexplicable trial will have on their psyches, and so many other psyches caught up in our overseas adventures.

Though those persons of certain ideological propensities will see *The Road to Guantanamo* as a anti-war film--and lambaste it or laud it on the basis, to this viewer, the filmmakers' aim is not so much to make a tirade about the war on terror and its offshoots but to highlight the specific, frightful ordeal of three individual British citizens who, perhaps, wandered not wisely or too well.

July 2006