

Laina with Late October Movies
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Captain Phillips

Richard Phillips was captain of a cargo ship, the US-flagged MV Maersk Alabama, that was hijacked by Somali pirates in 2009. This was the first time in 200 years that an American flagship was hijacked.

This true story was based on a book: A Captain's Duty: Somali Pirates, Navy SEALs, and Dangerous Days at Sea, and was turned into a thrilling movie with the always believable Tom Hanks playing the role of the captain. Also remarkable was the performance of a Somali-American, Barkhad Abdi, in his first starring role as the captain of the pirates.

It does not matter that we know the story and its outcome because the film maintains the tension and horror of the hijacking right to its end in almost unendurable anxiety.

What has happened in the waters off the Horn of Africa (where the failed state of Somalia seethes) is that Chinese and Japanese commercial fishing has so decimated the rich fishing grounds there that Somali fishermen are losing their livelihoods. To survive, a nasty enterprise has filled the vacuum: hijacking and holding ships and crews for ransom. Commercial ships, such as oil tankers with small crews, have insurance companies that pay the ransom, a terrible precedent that makes hijacking rewarding. The sad part is that poor young fishermen are forced by necessity to do the dangerous work of hijacking and the local warlords are reaping the money.

In this film, we see how Captain Phillips deals with this terrible event, comes very close to death a number of times, and also get a glimpse of barren, ugly Somalia and its starveling fishermen turned thugs.

Barkhad Abdi plays the role of the gang leader, Muse, who absolutely looks like someone who never had enough food in his childhood, yet he has survived. He is intelligent, sharp, yet naive and ignorant. He dreams of going to America, an imagined paradise which, when compared with where and how he lives, really is.

This is a fabulous cross-cultural film that offers us a real hero with both courage and a soul. Difficult as it is to watch, you will leave the theater wiser---and happy. The SEALs did it again.

Wadjda

Although this film was shown in Santa Cruz for only one week, I made certain to catch it on its last day. What a shame that this is not getting more attention. I found the film extraordinary (and very gratifying to watch).

Haifaa Al Mansour is a Saudi film maker, an unusual career path in a country that does not have a single movie theater. However, almost everybody with money (lots of Saudis) do watch DVDs at home. But the rest of the Muslim world will see it, and for us in the Western world, it should be required viewing.

This is a seemingly innocent story of a spunky little 11-year-old girl who desperately longs for a bicycle (remind us of the Christmas Story's Ralphie, who just wants a Red Ryder air rifle). The little girl, played by Waad Mohammad, could remind us all of our own once 11-year-old daughters. But this girl lives in Saudi Arabia, and even in a nice suburb of Riyadh and even when obviously middle class, she lives with a constant drumroll of what she cannot do and what she must do because she is female.

Mansour is wonderfully subtle in this film. She does not make it a feminist screed, but every issue that characterizes Saudi society is touched. Most obvious issues were:

The school where Wadjda goes is only for girls (we have such schools too), but the most important issue taught and enforced by the principal and teachers is to indoctrinate girls into their restrictions as females. They must wear total black hijab when out of doors, must never be heard laughing while outside (men must not

hear women\342\200\231s voices), must wear shoes that make no noise on the pavement (same reason), and above all must learn obedience (training for their future lives). The school\342\200\231s Principal is a beautiful but obviously bitter woman who admits that she was much like the independent Wadjda when she was her age. But she constantly criticizes Wadjda, who seems indifferent to the rules.

We meet Wadjda\342\200\231s mother and father, both handsome, modern looking people on the surface, living middle class lives in a nice house with all the expected modern amenities. However, under that surface lurk Saudi realities. The mother, who works at a hospital, has a three-hour commute both ways and depends on a Pakistani driver because women may not drive. She could find a job at a hospital in Riyadh, but she will not do it because then she would have to work beside men, something that her husband would not like.

Wadjda\342\200\231s father seems to be a geologist (perhaps) because he works in the desert, coming home once a week. He is obviously in love with his beautiful wife, but he is being pressed by his mother to take another wife and try to have a son. Wadjda asks her insecure mother if she loves her husband and never gets a straight answer. Can there be real love when one is so subordinated and anxious that only by being the most beautiful can a woman keep her husband?

Most interesting to me is the clear picture that although the religious rules are the creation of the men, women serve as the enforcers, much like the Kapos in Nazi concentration camps. Saudi culture is one great concentration camp.

Other cultural issues in the narrative are corruption (a little boy pulls rank and connections against the hapless Pakistani driver, also very insecure as a foreign guest worker). Female entrepreneurship, a growing trend in Saudi, is slyly demonstrated by Wadjda\342\200\231s attempt to earn enough money to buy the bike.

The little girl enters a Koran-recitation contest at school, even humbly joining the religion club, and despite her personal disinterest, studies to win, and win she does. When she is asked what she will do with the money, she honestly says that she will buy a bicycle. The irate principal tells her instead that the money will go to the poor Palestinians! Her mother tells her she should have lied. Apparently lying is the only way women can survive in such a culture.

Lots of information in this movie, but done with a light touch, and this woman director may well get Academy mention for this, her first feature film. (No, she no longer lives in Riyadh, but amazingly got permission to film there. So glad she did.)

The Fifth Estate

It is difficult to make a film about a person whose admirers and critics are so polarized; but the very fact that the director did not stake a position made it work.

This is the story of Julian Assange, the creator of Wikileaks, whose computer-hacking skills enabled him to violate the secrecy of not only corporations, but even that of the US Government. Spies have always managed to get into the secrets of both industrial and government systems. Industrial spying can provide competition with advantages not paid for through their own efforts (China does this). Political spies give their governments insights into the plans of other governments, something ubiquitous during warfare. The British and Americans broke both the German and Japanese secret codes, to their advantage.

Assange, however, began his quest to abolish secrets (except for his own) in defense of whistle-blowers, those brave souls who out a company or government doing something that they consider evil. But even whistle-blowers may not always be right. This is something never discussed in praising the courage of whistle blowers, an assumption that they are entirely moral and completely informed.

Assange began his career with the notion of providing whistle-blowers the secrecy to reveal their secrets without the retribution and cost to themselves that is generally the consequence of these betrayals. With such a mission, he quickly secured the services of myriads of volunteer hackers, all considering themselves the good fellows.

Julian Assange, however, did not stop with protecting whistle-blowers. This did not give him enough publicity to become a great mover and shaker in the world that his outsized ego needed. He then went on, with the help of a naive young man, Bradley Manning, who downloaded entire files of classified diplomatic correspondence, which Assange then decided to publish--wholesale, unfiltered, and without concern for the damage to life and limb such publishing could do. He believed he alone could assess the greater good.

Although Assange comes out looking pretty bad by the end of the film, the film, like the public discussions, failed to distinguish between protecting whistle-blowers and savaging an entire government's confidentiality. That savaging is the hallmark of anarchists who fool their followers into thinking that once secrets are revealed, we will have a brave new world. Of course, this is not true, nor is it ever likely to be.

Most important is the error of calling Wikileaks the new face of journalism. It is not journalism, a discipline that requires analysis, thought, and responsibility. Anonymous data dumps are none of these things.

The naive Bradley Manning is now serving 35 years in prison for letting this particular Pied Piper, Assange, lead him into treachery. Assange and one of his other followers, Edward Snowden, are avoiding prison by seeking refuge elsewhere. Assange is holed up in a remodeled bathroom in the Ecuadorean Embassy in London and Edward Snowden, in sanctuary in Russia. It is ironic that only countries that do not permit press freedom would take in these criminals.

The movie was fascinating, fast moving, and the acting of Benedict Cumberbatch was spot on, as it always is. He gave us an Assange with the proper mixture of charm, articulateness, and egotistical sleaziness that the real Assange presents to the world.