



# TIFF 2017: 'The Journey' Is A Creative Exploration Of Post-War Iraq And Its People

By Edgar Chaput -September 15, 2017



## *The Journey*

Directed by Mohamed Jabarah Al-daradji

Written by Mohamed Jabarah Al-daradji

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2017 is quite the poignant moment to make and release a film surrounding a suicide bomber. Irrespective of the fact that *The Journey* is set in Iraq in 2006, the truth of the matter is that over the past couple of years the West has been rocked on a number of occasions by terrorist attacks in extremely public spaces. If a film of this nature had been released a decade ago, the reaction of Western audiences would arguably have benefited from the comfort of geographical and cultural distance. Not so today. Welcome to a world where now almost everyone can relate in small or significant ways to what life was like in the immediate aftermath of the infamous 2003 Iraqi invasion.

Sara (Zahraa Ghandour) starts the day by walking a solitary path amongst the parked trains as she heads towards the station in Baghdad. There is purpose to her stride, conviction. Upon arriving, she takes notice of the various people that temporarily populate it: children selling flowers and cigarettes, a mother scolding her soon-to-be-wed daughter, a band of musicians, a mother soothing her baby, and a salesman of sorts, Salam (Ameer Ali Jabarah), speaking

especially loud on his cell phone. Sara would much rather be left on her own, but when accosted by Salam, who wants to woo her, she finally reveals her full purpose for being there: her thumb rests just inches above the ignition button for her suicide vest. Thus begins a roller coaster day during which Salam will try to talk her out of her kamikaze mission.

*The Journey* is a very particular film, the sort of movie that dares to take new turns rather than settle into a predictable pattern, thus keeping the audience on its guard. That said, the bold storytelling choices opted for by director Mohamed Jabarah Al-daradji are not exactly the sort where plot twists change everything the viewer thought they knew about the characters or story. Rather, Al-daradji whimsically has the film's tone, style, and visual pallet morph as Sara's titular journey encourages her to rethink her ways via the many people she encounters, from American soldiers to the children salesmen, and even Salam. Cinematographer Duraid Munakim deserves plaudits for helping create a variety of worlds for the viewer to discover, from the dusty, gritty reality seen in the early stages, to the dreamlike version of Baghdad Sara strolls through.

What makes *The Journey's* fluidity so engaging and grounded in emotional and intellectual realism is that Sara's episodes are not perfect Kodak moments. Rather, they are rooted in the reality of the Baghdad's denizens: strenuous relations with the U.S. soldiers patrolling the grounds, mourning for family members dead through various tragedies, romantic struggles steeped in local cultural and religious realities, etc. Sara slowly begins to see the light, so to speak, but the movie is smart enough to not make the moments of personal redemption saccharine. Their individual beauty lies in the fact that real people lived through such chapters in 2006, and probably still are today to varying degrees, more than a decade removed. Despite that obvious tragedies and struggles have befallen many of the characters Sara meets, there is an undying ray of hope that keeps shining throughout the film. Iraq is a difficult place to live by all accounts in 2006, yet here are people nevertheless living their lives, trying to appreciate what they have, always pushing forward.

It goes without saying that *The Journey's* heart rests with the dynamic between Sara and Salam. Here as well the director proves his intelligence as a great storyteller. Sara is remarkably stoic, in stark contrast to Salam, who rarely shuts his mouth. While their tit-for-tat repartee is primarily inspired by how their respective personalities are so different, which itself produces a few brief moments of levity, the film never loses sight of the fact that Sara is there to kill a bunch of innocents. The tense interplay is juggled brilliantly, aided in no small part by non-professional actors Zahraa Ghandour (who has a face one could just as easily fall in love with as be terrified of) and Ameer Ali Jabarah. On the topic of the cast, just as remarkable if not more so is that every member a non-professional. Al-daradji revealed in the post screening Q&A that they are all performing for the very first time. This should come as little surprise given that Iraq lacks a robust film industry, so for the director to get such good performances out of his cast is nothing short of remarkable.

*The Journey* is an adventurous endeavour. The significance of such a statement reaches beyond the mere fact that the protagonist herself goes on a personal journey through a series of poignant encounters. The film as a whole is a unique concoction of cinema vérité coupled with audacious directorial flourishes. It successfully avoids falling into the trappings of artificiality, using its occasionally ostentatious touches to delve deeper into the emotional heartbeat that keeps the people of Baghdad going. Smart, well acted, and touching in surprising ways despite its subject matter, *The Journey* is well worth taking.