



## Toronto Film Review: 'The Journey'

September 21, 2017, by Dennis Harvey



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**Cast: Zahraa Gandour, Ameer Ali Jabarah, Huda And Al Ameer, Hayder And Al Ameer, Ali Al Khassaf, Iamen Laeibi Mahdi, Haneen Raad Qasim, Zainab Ali Alshawi, Zahraa Emad Abdul Hussien, Kazemih Hindi Imran, Ahmed Lafta Atia Daradji, Zion Forrest Lee. (Arabic, English dialogue)**

Several dramas in recent years have attempted to fathom the mindset of a suicide bomber. Iraqi-Dutch director Mohamed Al-Daradji comes up with a different, emotionally accessible approach in "The Journey" by surrounding his fictive terrorist's mission within a panoply of train-station humanity, a gambit that at times is strongly reminiscent of vintage neorealist slices of life. Expertly juggling suspense and various narrative strands, never quite succumbing to the sentimentality it sometimes flirts with, this compact microcosmic tale should win over audiences on the festival circuit, and quite possibly beyond.

A young woman who says she's called Sara (Zahraa Gandour) removes her headscarf before entering Baghdad Central Station in late 2006, when the facility is about to re-open after years of devastation. The place is crawling with military, police and other security. Grim-faced, she does her best to blend into the crowd while examining those unlucky travelers, peddlers and others who are unknowingly about to become part of the deadly plan she's been persuaded to execute: "Purifying this place from the Americans" via the explosives wrapped around her midsection, which to inquisitive eyes make her look a few months' pregnant.

The mini-dramas she spies in this quiet before the anticipated storm include the pushy salesmanship of a flower-selling tot (Huda And Al Ameer), who berates her passive, stammering shoe-shine brother (Hayder And Al Ameer). The leader of a group of strolling musicians (Ali Al Khassaf) is confronted by his erstwhile betrothed (Iamen Laeibi Mahdi), who harangues him for making her wait 22 years — even though he spent all that time in a POW camp. A teenage bride (Zahraa Emad Abdul Hussien) ponders escape from her scolding mother (Kazemih Hindi Imran) and the imminent wedding she's clearly being forced into. A distraught-looking woman (Haneen Raad Qasim) hovers around with a large duffel, looking more suspicious than Sara herself.

Sara's coolly judgmental observation of these scenes is intruded upon in most unwelcome fashion: Salam (Ameer Ali Jabarah), a hirsute hustler already heard barking on his cellphone and harassing passers-by, takes notice of her sitting alone. Seeing nothing more than a pretty girl, he can't help but press his loutish attentions on her — so aggressively that in short order her secret has been detected. To shut him up, she plants an explosive device on him and takes him as her hostage. He tries to talk her out of her plans, even as they pretend to be a couple. That ruse doesn't prevent them being interrogated by U.S. soldiers, whose bullying, profane manner (Sara understands some English) does nothing to elevate her opinion of the “infidels.”

But Sara's determination begins to wobble when the aforementioned furtive woman impulsively presses on her and Salam the contents of her package — a baby, whose illegitimate conception has made the mother a fugitive from her own family. His tender side emerging, Salam contends the infant is an argument for life and mercy; Sara isn't so sure.

Packing a lot into a short narrative time span without seeming overstuffed, “The Journey” (which Al-Daradji co-wrote with Isabelle Stead) comes close to mawkish contrivance now and then but always stops short. There's no finger-wagging preachiness here, and the fundamentalist ideology that has led Sara to her suicidal mission is only hinted at. The result, given the hot-button subject matter, is surprisingly old-fashioned, in a good way: Reminiscent not just of Italian neorealism but classic plays by the likes of Saroyan and Wilder, in which small interactions between characters affirm the value of life with all its sorrows and bittersweet joys. The ambiguous ending may strike some as too much of a gimmick (as well as a very familiar one), but it works well enough.

Strong performances all around are highlighted by Gandour as a central figure whose backstory remains cloudy, but whose steely fervor is never in doubt. For much of the running time, her eyes are so hollowed-out it's as if Sara has already checked herself into the afterlife she anticipates as her reward for this terrorist act. The tech and design contributors help make the station and its surroundings come alive, teeming with activity that Duraid Al-Munajjim's nimble camerawork captures in consistently stimulating but never gratuitously showy terms.

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Reviewed at Toronto Film Festival (Contemporary World Cinema), Sept. 12, 2017. Running time: 82 MIN.

**Production:** (Iraq-U.K.-France-Qatar-Netherlands) A Human Film production in association with Iraqi Independent Film Centre and Lionceau Film, in co-production with Doha Film Institute. (International sales: Picture Tree Intl., Berlin.) Producers: Isabelle Stead, Mohamed Al-Daradji. Co-producer: Helene Cases.

**Crew:** Director: Mohamed Al-Daradji. Screenplay: Al-Daradji, Isabelle Stead. Camera (color, HD): Duraid Al-Munajim. Editors: Herve de Luz, Pascale Chavance, Al-Daradji. Music: Mike Kourtzer, Fabian Kourtzer.

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