

## ‘The Journey’ (‘Al Rahal’): Film Review | TIFF 2017

12:59 PM PDT 9/26/2017 by Deborah Young



**A young woman suicide bomber stalks the Baghdad train station with a hostage in Mohamed Al-Daradji’s thriller.**

The distinguishing feature of *The Journey* (*Al Rahal*), like all the films of Iraqi-Dutch writer-director Mohamed Al-Daradji, is its sober moral perspective on the war that devastated Iraq and reduced its people to orphans, madmen and dispossessed refugees. The story of a girl suicide bomber who roams Baghdad Central Station with glassy eyes is part will-she-or-won’t-she thriller and part parade of symbolic characters who represent the country’s wounded population. It’s the kind of local allegory that will find its most appreciative audiences in the Mideast and at festival venues like Toronto and London.

The story is set on the first day of the Eid holidays in 2006, when nervous U.S. troops still occupy Baghdad. In reality, there is a timeless quality to the action, which takes place inside the train station in the course of a single day. The nightmarish sounds of confused mosque voices introduce Sara (the intense Zahraa Ghandour), a girl with dark circles under her eyes and cold determination in them. It doesn’t take much guesswork to figure out that, between her backpack and thick waistline, her body has been weaponized to explode.

Removing her headscarf, she blends into the teachers escorting a bunch of schoolkids to the reopening ceremony of the Baghdad Central Station after years of war and devastation. Some ambassadors are expected to attend, under the surveillance of American soldiers in bulky camouflage uniforms, who ceaselessly scan the crowd.

Rather than head the story into straight thriller territory, Al-Daradji and co-screenwriter Isabelle Stead opt for a more philosophical, humanistic turn. In a first twist, Sara is spotted by the curly-haired Salam (Ameer Ali Jabarah), a small-time con artist who sells substandard prosthetic limbs from a bench in the station. He promptly starts to flirt and harass her. Bad move: She takes him prisoner just by showing him her thumb on a trigger hidden in her pocket. He docilely follows her around as her hostage, though given her level of distraction, it seems obvious he could overpower her without much effort.

Casting realism aside, the film turns into a duet between Sara and Salam as they navigate the microcosm of the station and its denizens, all symbolic figures. There is an unwilling young bride in a wedding dress and a middle-aged woman whose fiancé has returned from prison and doesn't want to marry her anymore, a random trio of musicians and an old man escorting his son's body in a coffin.

Before long, a woman thrusts a canvas bag at them. Instead of a bomb, there's a baby inside and Salam refuses Sara's order he abandon it. This absurd handicap actually helps them pass as a family while they wait for the ceremonial train to arrive.

As in the director's *Son of Babylon*, in which a little boy and his grandmother searched for the boy's missing father, and his orphanage doc *In My Mother's Arms*, here, too, children play a major role in conveying Iraq's national tragedy. Mona the tough little flower girl and her brother Ali the plucky shoeshine boy are designed to pull the heartstrings. Their sad, empty eyes contrast with Sara the fanatic's unblinking determination.

In a dramatic scene that shows the actors at their best, Ghandour rants about purifying the country and bringing justice, while Jabarah blasts back that she's a terrorist and a failure, not a martyr. After the years of ISIS and terrorism that have intervened since 2006, it's a pretty one-sided argument as far as the audience is concerned.

The one scene that generates real tension is when the couple (and baby) are taken in for interrogation by a pair of very nervous and foul-mouthed U.S. soldiers who first rough them up, then senselessly let them go without checking Sara's backpack or padded waistline. Though low on logic and overly caricatured, it is still frightening.

*Production companies: Human Film, Iraqi Independent Film Centre, Lionceau Film*

*Cast: Zahraa Ghandour, Ameer Ali Jabarah*

*Director: Mohamed Jabarah Al-Daradji*

*Screenwriters: Isabelle Stead, Mohamed Jabarah Al-Daradji*

*Producers: Isabelle Stead, Mohamed Jabarah Al-Daradji, Helene Cases*

*Director of photography: Duraid Munajim*

*Editors: Mohamed Al Daradji, Pascale Chavance, Herve De Luze*

*Music: Mike Kourtzer, Fabien Kourtzer*

*Venue: Toronto International Film Festival (Contemporary World Cinema)*

*World sales: Picture Tree International*

*82 minutes*