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SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

In 'Amreeka' and 'Big Fan,' the personal is potent

Writer-directors Cherien Dabis and Robert Siegel have turned their experiences into exceptional dramas.

By KENNETH TURAN, The Envelope

January 19, 2009

Reporting from Park City, Utah — Some things change at the Sundance Film Festival, but not everything. There may now be more cab companies licensed than in New York City and a Jumbotron screen installed at the foot of Main Street to broadcast the inauguration, but the festival's search for gifted young filmmakers remains a constant.

Some years, that search leads nowhere at all, but in this, the festival's 25th season, it has turned up two first-time writer-directors in the dramatic competition -- "Amreeka's" Cherien Dabis and "Big Fan's" Robert Siegel -- both of whom have turned personal experience into exceptional drama.

Of course, these filmmakers have previous credits, with Siegel being the screenwriter for "The Wrestler" and Dabis having made award-winning shorts, but what they have entered in Sundance takes them to another level.

Dabis' "Amreeka," which focuses the director's keen eye and warm touch on a Palestinian woman who immigrates to the United States, had its start in the filmmaker's childhood growing up in the Midwest during the Gulf War as the daughter of a Palestinian father and a Jordanian mother.

"The kinds of things people say 'That could never happen' did happen," she relates. Not only were there rumors that her father, whose five children were all daughters, had a son in the Iraqi army, but also the Secret Service came to her high school to investigate a rumor that her older sister had threatened to kill the president.

"That was a turning point," she says. "Up to then, I just wanted to be an all-American kid, I wanted to fit in, but after that, I embraced rather than denied my identity."

It was also at that point that Dabis "consciously decided to become a storyteller. I had a purpose, I wanted to change the way the media related to the Arab community. I wanted to tell our side of the story."

By a stroke of fate, the Gulf War situation repeated itself when Dabis began film school at New York's Columbia University just days after Sept. 11. "A decade after the Gulf War, it all kind of came full circle. It was like history repeating itself," she says. "It ended up reminding me why I became a filmmaker. There is so much power in fiction, in storytelling. People let their guard down, and the truth can get in."

The strength of "Amreeka" is its ability to take on a fraught situation and avoid both stridency and sentimentality, an elegant balancing act that Dabis says no one wanted to hear about. "When I first wrote the script, people wanted dramas that reflected events in the Middle East," she says. "Everyone thought it was too light."

In her determination not to get heavy-handed, Dabis reflects the attitude of one of her favorite directors, Mike Leigh ("Happy-Go-Lucky"). "He has such a sense of naturalism, you could get lost in his films, they feel so real," she says. "His combination of humor and drama reflects reality. It's something I really gravitate to."

So though "Amreeka" is serious, it is funny and playful as well.

"I grew up in the Midwest, I am accessible, a mixture of Middle Eastern and Midwestern hospitality," Dabis says. "I don't like films that hit you over the head. I don't want to preach to people, I want them to feel something."

Twin passions

"Big Fan," a poignant examination of a crisis in the life of the most die-hard of die-hard New York Giants fans, also has its roots in its writer-director's past but not in the aspect that is best known, which is Robert Siegel's six years as editor in chief of the brilliantly satirical newspaper the Onion.

"At the tail end of my Onion tenure, I got the itch to do something more than comedy journalism, to use a different part of my brain," Siegel says, but the path from that itch to "Big Fan" was not a straight line.

"Because it says 'comedy writer' on my tax form," Siegel explains, "I assumed I should be writing comedies and I wrote a series of them that weren't that special, the kind 24-year-olds at the bottom rung of Miramax have to plow through all day long."

Then another idea came into his head, a movie grounded in two aspects of his past, starting with his being "a huge sports fan" growing up in Merrick on Long Island.

"I listened to sports talk on WFAN radio, I'd lie in bed at night with the lights out and the covers pulled over my head and hear these kind of exotic voices from all over the New York area," he says. "I was addicted."

The other passion of Siegel's that "Big Fan" references are "gritty indie movies from '70s auteurs like Marty Scorsese. Beautiful loser outsider guys, guys walking down the street with their hands tucked into their pockets, I'm a sucker for them when I watch movies and when I write them."

When it came to casting Paul Aufiero, "Big Fan's" particular beautiful loser, Siegel resisted "the temptation to cast a bigger name just to get it made."

The actor he did choose, Patton Oswalt, is known for two widely different reasons: He's a hip stand-up comic and was such a popular regular on TV's "The King of Queens" that when he was spotted in Staten Island, where the film is set, "people thought the Beatles had landed at JFK."

Aside from looking like an obsessive fan, Oswalt had another key quality. As Siegel explains, "He's inherently sweet-natured. Paul has a cranky, curmudgeonly aspect, but he couldn't be just that, he couldn't project unlikable creepitude. I wanted somebody who had a likability factor. I wanted people to feel affection for him."

It's a tribute to the skill with which "Big Fan" has been made that that's what you feel.

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