

Film Festival Shows a Different Iraq

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London documentary screenings focus on culture as well as the struggle of daily life in Iraq. An Iraqi-French film director is on a mission to let the world know that Iraq's people have a long history and rich culture, not just terrorism and bloodshed.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Layth Abdulmir, a filmmaker who left Iraq in 1977 and now lives in Paris, went back home for the first time to make a documentary about "the painful situation, complete destruction and the gray colour dominating the country".

"I felt that the real picture of suffering Iraqis was absent and distorted," he said.

The distortions, he said, include the portrayal of Iraqis merely as collaborators with the Americans, or as people unable to shoulder the responsibility for ongoing violence and political chaos in their country.

"The dominant picture is of terrorism," he said, adding that media reports "forget that Iraq has a history. The media take the easy and fast picture, but we try to focus on the Iraqi character."

Abdulmir's hour-long documentary entitled "The Song of the Missing Men" is a journey from the marshes of southern Iraq to the mountains of Kurdistan, showing the rich, diverse culture of Iraq's different ethnic groups.

The documentary was the main feature film at the opening of the Iraqi Film Festival, held on May 6-10 at the London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

"We [filmmakers] need to contribute in conveying our culture and concerns in an anthropological and historical way," he said. "We need an analytical, not superficial, approach, so that westerners make sense of what's happening in Iraq."

The festival, which organisers say was the first of its kind in London, screened more than 15 documentaries directed and shot by Iraqi filmmakers from both the West or Iraq. It attracted at least 250 people on the opening day, with audiences packed into screening rooms and even sitting in corridors to view films.

The films focused on issues such as life under occupation; the sufferings of ordinary Iraqis in the absence of security and public services; artists trying to rebuild a looted arts centre; the lives of women and children; and journalists working in dangerous conditions.

Iraqi-British filmmaker Maysoon Pachachi said the festival was an attempt to show how ordinary people live under extreme conditions, and how they hope for change.

"We sit here and watch the news from Iraq, but we never know... the life of ordinary Iraqis," she said in a

speech at the festival.

Pachachi expressed hope that the filmmakers' work could effect some change in Iraq, even if only for the younger generation.

Many audience members were Iraqis, or of Iraqi origin. For the older viewers, the festival was a chance to see how Iraq had changed since they left.

"I want to go back tomorrow, but I can't," said Salih Ibrahim, a pathologist who left Iraq in 1981.

"Where would I go? This is hell, thanks to America and Britain... 7/7 [July 7, 2005 bombings in London] happens daily in Iraq."

Ibrahim said the festival was like a "bridge to my country".

The event offered some of the younger Iraqis in the audience an opportunity to learn about their parents' homeland.

For one young woman, however, the images of poverty and hardship in the southern marshes and Kurdistan, and particularly of a taxi driver struggling to support his family, were shocking.

"It's impossible that this is Iraq," said a tearful Layali, a student, touching a necklace fashioned like a map of Iraq, the country she left when she was two years old. "My parents drew me a shining picture of Iraq."

Instead, Layali said she saw "Iraqis portrayed as illiterates, ignorant and barefooted. I hope there is another picture that was not presented in the film".

"It's very important for the younger generation to watch such films because they grew up with no connection or sense of belonging to their nation," said Nihaya al-Othmani, who works as an Arabic teacher.

Holding her 10-year-old son Ardowan proudly, al-Othmani said, "Today he learnt what the word marshes meant."

For Abdulamir, a sense of national pride was central to the films and the messages they sent.

"We need to portray what is happening in Iraq without bias, " he said. "We belong to Iraq. I'm an Iraqi, and that is enough."

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