The Global Lens Collection: ‘Getting Home’/‘Song From the Southern Seas’

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One of the great things about DVD - aside from its ‘better than VHS’ preservationist principles - is the ability to experience cinema outside of one’s comfort zone. Sure, Hollywood has inundated us with its latest and lamest, sometimes even giving said stinkers the full blown “unrated extended director’s cut special collector’s edition” treatment. But for the most part, it’s the same old dress in a new digital skin. That’s why the format’s flair for the foreign and unusual is so valuable. Without the little aluminum disc, we might not have the efforts of offshoot labels like Something Weird, Film Movement, Fantoma, Zeitgeist, and Oscilloscope. Even better, many of our planetary neighbors have decided to give the West what for by delivering their grooviest, greatest hits in easily accessible cinematic bites.

Enter the latest contender for the concept of “cross-cultural understanding through film.” The Global Film Initiative, with the help of such famous names as Pedro Almodovar, Mira Nair, and Lars Von Trier (among many other celebrated charter board members), hopes to instill a better understanding in American through “a comprehensive effort to give value to stories from every corner of the world”, which they believe, "plays a vital role in promoting tolerance in all areas of human behavior". On 27 July, they released two DVDs as part of their Global Lens Collection - Yang Zhang’s Getting Home (Luo Ye Gui Gen) and Marat Sarulu’s Song from the Southern Seas (Pesh’ Juzhnykh Morej). Naturally, both films find more than enough common ground with the Initiative’s mission statement. They are also excellent movies to boot, linked by a commonality in purpose and personal perspective.

Getting Home (Score: 8)

Zhao and his factory worker buddy Liu Quanyou enjoy their nights out drinking. When the former discovers that his pal has actually passed away - “dead” drunk, so to speak - he decides to uphold a promise he made during one of their many imbibing bull sessions. With the body in tow and a couple of train tickets to his home town, Zhao will transport Liu Quanyou to his final resting place. The journey, however, will be fraught with complications including bandits, sucksters, and more than a few examples of people who just don’t care. Undeterred by the many misfortunes that accompany him, our hero is determined to make good on his word. In fact, his own sense of self may just rely on it.

One of the more intriguing things about international cinema is the defining dichotomy concerning comedy. In the West, it’s all absurdism and scatology. In the East, it’s all about manners and customs. A perfect example of this is Yang Zhang’s simple road trip Getting Home. With its simplified premise, vigneau style approach, and easy of achieving both laughs and heartbreak, it’s brilliant proof that wit doesn’t always have to revolve around body parts and their various vile functions. Indeed, the satire drives deep into the heart of China’s expanding class system (something the reigning Communists would deny as blatant propaganda), Zhang’s desire to show the lower level working class in his country and how they struggle to maintain both their dignity and their way of life. Indeed, the actual title of the film, based on the Chinese proverb “a falling leaf returns to its roots” illustrates both the old world way of the storytelling, as well as the well-meaning moral that accompanies the laughs.

There is a level of glorious gallows humor here, the notion of one friend escorting the corpse of another back to their home province proving ample enough for Zhang to play around him. In lead actor Benshan Zhao he has the perfect foil to follow through on this juxtaposed journey of self-discover and principled commitment. With his faced fixed in a veil of abject determination, we never doubt that Zhao will succeed. Instead, we wait in giddy anticipation at every new adventure, from a literal illustration of honor among thieves to those who could really care less if the man is keeping his word or not. As it bubbles along, brilliantly bordering the often blurred like between pathos and punchlines, Getting Home offers its own act of graciousness. By crafting such a perfect love letter to his country, by underscoring the decency of those who would fly directly in the face of purposeful political grandstanding, the director delivers the always welcome “just like us” parallels. Situations like Zhao’s are more than universal. They are part and parcel of the human condition - and no film is more human or humane than Getting Home.
Ivan and Mariia are Russian. Their neighbors Assan and Aisha in the tiny village of the Steppe region in Kazakhstan are Kazakh. Everything is fine between the two - that is, until the former have a baby. The child, shockingly, has features similar to the latter. Fast forward 15 years, and while still friendly, the couples are coming apart. Young Sasha is a troublemaker, getting into scraps for which Ivan has to pay - sometimes, physically. He is also beaten by his wife’s brother for being a less than successful Cossack. Eventually, both Ivan and Assan travel back to their ancestors to discuss their lineage - and learn a lesson in tolerance and never taking your heritage for granted.

Song from the Southern Seas is all about thwarting expectations. Kyrgyz filmmaker Marat Sarulu takes what should be a simple story steeped in racial unease and marital infidelity and, instead, twists the typical into something more epic in both scope and personal import. Not only is this a film about understanding your ancestry and the mistaken “purity” of ethnic roots, it’s the story of how emerging nations deal with a sense of identity and the clash of the past with the present. It also argues for the brave decisions made by those when times weren’t so “enlightened”, when marrying outside your culture could equal banishment, emotional exile...or worse. Add in a sly shadow play that acts like a Greek Chorus on the various misunderstandings and machinations going on and you have something that both speaks directly to the subject and then subverts and subjugates it as well. As in Getting Home, this is as much a celebration of Kazakhstan as it is a critical look at the country’s many misperceptions.

Sarulu is clearly hoping that a more complicated approach will give his subject some serious resonance. He’s right - up to a point. We don’t mind the weird combinations of anger and fun, the silly and soul searching somberness. This is also a highly contemporary film, even if the landscape looks virtually untouched by modern man. There is a dissection of religion, as well as a discussion of gender (in)equality and the place a woman holds in such a patriarchal world. In fact, Sarulu seems to suggest that females wield much more power and control than males, considering their role as child bearer and fulcrum of the family. Thanks to the organic backdrops and the purposeful positioning of the shadow puppet material, Song from the Southern Seas argues that everything about our inferred “birthright” - the land, the cultural divides, the time honored traditions and the broken rules - create our collective identity. How we handle such a realization says as much about who we are as the chromosomes and genes that supposedly define our ancestry.