

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2023/24 SEASON**



**OUR RIVER ... OUR SKY**  
(Language: Arabic)

Director: Maysoon Pachachi, 2021. Running time: 117 minutes.  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 8 November 2023.

“The key scene in this Iraqi film comes about two-thirds of the way through. Sara (Darina Al Joundi) is on a bus stuck in Baghdadi traffic when there’s a nearby burst of machine-gun fire. Everyone ducks, wearily; they have all done this before. It’s 2006 and the war is raging. But it’s soon over, with only one corpse in the street; and the driver reassures the passengers they are all safe. Everyone sits up, mutters a few curses, take a few deep breaths and starts cracking jokes. If their bodies were dumped in a strange part of town, at least it would be a nice change of scenery! Maybe their corpse can go to Paris, Venice, Dubai! And this group of strangers all laugh in glee at still being alive.

What director Maysoon Pachachi is exploring is how daily life continues while the world around you is exploding. Sara, a writer with a Ph.D. in American literature who now translates letters for a living, keeps a map on which she marks the worst bomb attacks, which make it clear no corner of Baghdad has been spared. In her little corner of the world is her brother, Yahya (Ahmed Hashimi), a property surveyor, and her 8-year-old daughter, Reema (Zainab Joda), who is still very much a child, and also very much not. Next door is a Christian family, Sabiha (Badia Obaid) and her daughter, Nour, who are close friends with Sara and Reema. Across the street live P.O.W.-turned-taxi driver, Kamal (Basim Hajar); his heavily pregnant wife, Mona (Labwa Arab), her brother Kareem (Zaydun Khalaf) and their mother, Nermeen (Siham Mustafa). Kareem works in a sandwich shop that only stays open thanks to the bribes it pays, and frequently plays chess with Nabil (Sami Al-Ali), who uses a wheelchair, and whose unhappy sister, Dijla (Meriam Abbas) is another good friend of Sara’s. There’s also a young boy named Haider (Muslem Hassoun) and his drunk of a father, Abu Haider (Mahmoud Abo Al Abbas), who delivers letters around the neighborhood. And down on the river is a boatman (Ali Kareem), who listens to the radio, and observes. Sometimes that means pulling the bodies of young murdered women from the river. Sometimes it means following Haider as he sleepwalks, calling for his dead mother. And sometimes it means cringing with the others as a van explodes around the corner from the police checkpoint.

There is a great deal of violence, but the shootings happen offscreen; bombs are only shown in their aftermath and no Americans are visible. The movie is

concerned only with how people live with a war being fought all around them. For example, we learn Reema's school bus driver has been killed by watching another man quietly washing the blood and broken glass off the vehicle. Explosions are heard; and a column of smoke rises into the sky; and the camera watches. Kamal has a terrifying encounter in his taxi that badly shakes him up, but he doesn't mention it at home. Yahya's refusal to take bribes at work means his career is no longer possible; either he'll have to also become corrupt, or leave the country. Sabiha is brave enough to put a Christmas tree in her window, but there are consequences. Another neighbor's son is released from prison, and arrives home with a bloody bandage wrapped around his neck as Reema and Nour watch from the doorway. Mona and Nermeen have lost children in different ways, and cope by sniping at each other. And still dinner must be cooked, laundry folded and hairclips arranged so little girls can go to school. How do you live, without going mad?

Well. You play chess; you tell jokes; you go on dates over Skype. You read books; you tend the garden; you buy 10 fresh falafels with a friend and make small talk with the falafel guy. You research how to leave the country; and you look through photo albums of happier times. You don't dwell too much on the past; and you don't think too hard about the future. You don't look at bodies left lying in the street; and you make sure not to step in the puddles of blood. Sara's friendships are the core of the plot – the way in which she, Dijla and Sabiha console each other is as warm and lively a depiction of the way women talk as has ever been seen on the screen. And it's just as refreshing to see the main characters as a group of people who care about and look out for one another. Things are certainly not perfect and nothing is easy, but they are all quietly determined not to make things worse for one another. You sing songs; you fuss over the cooking; you wash the dishes. You keep it together; and you wait.

As Jonathan Bloom's camera observes the neighborhood, the plot, such as it is, falls into place: Can Sara keep living here, or does she need to leave? How do you decide whether the terror is too terrible to endure any further? Is it better to be alive as a stranger in a strange place or dead in your own backyard, where you belong? Ms. Pachachi, who cowrote the script with Irada al-Jubori, told the audience at the Raindance Film Festival that the movie has been designed as an act of memory for everyone in Iraq who lived through 2006, and as a guide to the nation's young people, not old enough to remember, who are fighting a different fight. It's a fascinating depiction of a city that has not been viewed fairly at all by Hollywood, and this deliberate attempt to redress that had so much trouble finding funding it took eight years and financing from seven different countries in order to be made. It's absolutely worth it – this movie knows to its core how gallows humor and living in the moment is the best way of bearing unbearable stress, and its interest in human resilience doesn't waste a

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second thinking about why bombers and murderers do what they do. It's the survivors who are important, whose stories matter. This is the exact opposite of most modern Hollywood films, which are a celebration of death. *Our River . . . Our Sky*'s focus is on life, in all its imperfect, painful, hysterical, messy, complicated, upsetting glory. For that alone it's an affecting and salutary watch."

**Sarah Manvel, *The Critic's Notebook*, November 12, 2022.**