

HAWAII COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES & HAWAII INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

present

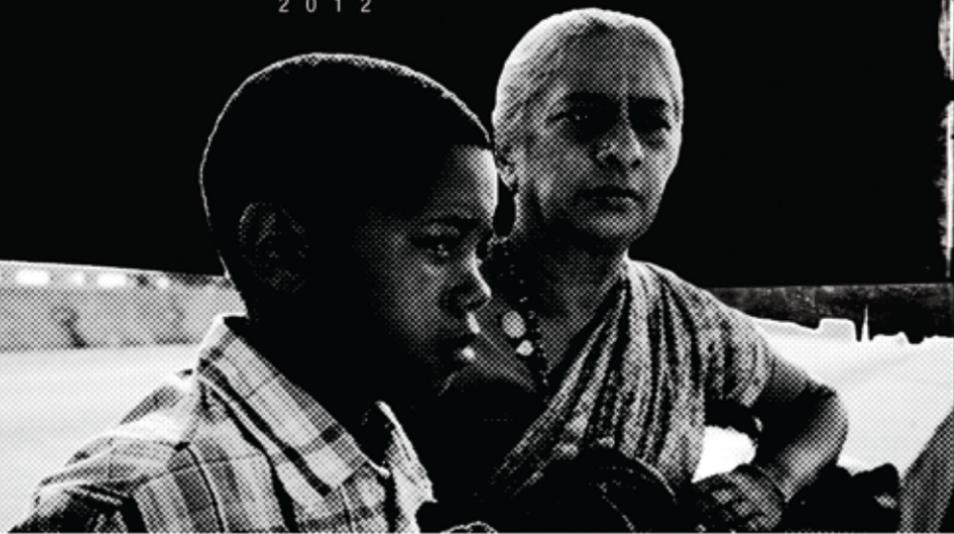
FILM
FOR



THOUGHT: BRIDGING
CULTURES

CHINESE TAKE-AWAY
LUCKY
SEEKING ASIAN FEMALE
KARAKARA
THE IRAN JOB

2012



B E L I E V I N G I S S E E I N G :
B R I D G I N G C U L T U R E S

Bob Buss

Executive Director

Hawai'i Council for the Humanities

“At a time when the world is in flux and the judgment of its leading democracy is in question, studies in the humanities have never been more important,” according to National Endowment for the Humanities Chairman Jim Leach, announcing an NEH initiative on Bridging Cultures. “At issue today is a world struggling with globalist forces on the one hand and localist instincts on the other.” That’s also a pretty good formula for telling stories by way of films from around the world—familiar and engaging, yet strange and foreign. After all, the subtitle of the original Hawaii International Film Festival was “When Strangers Meet.”

Film for Thought: because ideas, conversations and questions matter. Public humanities raise critical questions at times when we feel most vulnerable and alienated. We can ask about the history of violence and distrust, or about the ways the media shape our beliefs. We can ask about the nature of community or how we can be good citizens and neighbors. We can talk, think, and learn about the ideas raised by our questions.

Montaigne valued traveling, because through it we can discover the “perpetual variety of the forms of our nature.” What we see, though, paraphrasing the title of a book by filmmaker Errol Morris, is often informed by what we believe. Seeing from different points of view can therefore challenge our beliefs, perhaps shake their foundations. Even if only through books and films, we will always need to travel, moving away from our cherished perceptions and assumptions.

The Stoics said we should view ourselves as citizens of a worldwide community, and act accordingly. In times of so much misunderstanding, taking the time to experience a story about something we know little about might shift our imagination and political outlook when not much else will. Epictetus, born a slave, nevertheless came to know what parts of himself could be free—free to live a happy, meaningful, and flourishing life, free to be a noble and

effective person—and what conditions could not be controlled or changed. “*Everything has two handles: one by which it may be carried, the other by which it can’t.*”

Films can handle their subject matter most artfully. Errol Morris himself is likely best known for his filming of narrative beliefs in *The Thin Blue Line*. He retells the murder and trial of a Texas man then on death row, depicting the testimonies of eye witnesses, revealing hopelessly conflicting and personal information, and interviewing all those involved in the case, including another man on death row who was almost assuredly the real murderer. All strangers in a strange land. ■

F I L M F O R T H O U G H T 2 0 1 2

Craig Howes

Film For Thought Humanities Coordinator

All five of this year’s selections for the *Film for Thought* series start with a literal failure to communicate. Translating between cultures is always a challenge when strangers from distant places meet. But the degree of difficulty soars when people don’t share the same first language, forcing one person into accommodating for the other’s ignorance, or forcing both people to seek out a translator.

In *KARAKARA*, one character speaks French, and the other Japanese. Neither is from Okinawa, where the film is set, and they must navigate their relationship through their mutual second language of English. In *THE IRAN JOB*, the American basketball player from the Virgin Islands depends on his Iranian employers, team mates, and new women friends to speak English in an environment he finds totally alien anywhere but the gym. In *LUCKY*, an elderly

Indian woman and a Zulu boy, though both citizens of the new South Africa, have no language in common. Here too, English translators—uncles, government officials, friends from the past, even cab drivers—must be enlisted, or even paid, to help this odd couple reach an important understanding.

CHINESE TAKE-AWAY forces the audience to share in the confusion. In this story of how a withdrawn Argentinian hardware store owner deals with a Chinese man who falls into his life, the director does not provide subtitles for the Chinese, putting the audience in the place of the reluctant Spanish-speaking benefactor who struggles to understand his unwelcome guest. Though for our international audience, the Spanish is subtitled, the Chinese still remains unmarked—although HIFF might be one of the few festivals where people might be more likely to understand the Chinese than the Spanish! And in *SEEKING ASIAN FEMALE*, the documentary maker becomes increasingly uncomfortable as she finds herself drawn into the role of translator for her Chinese and American subjects.

And yet, despite these formidable language challenges, the characters in every film somehow negotiate their way to a muted but positive conclusion. It's what most of us hope for in our own attempts at bridging cultures, and thinking about how to achieve this result is one of the core responsibilities of the humanities. ■

01

CHINESE TAKE-AWAY

d i r e c t o r

SEBASTIAN BORENSZTEIN

s c r e e n w r i t e r

SEBASTIAN BORENSZTEIN

p r o d u c e r

GERADO HERRERO

JUAN PABLO BUSCARINI

c i n e m a t o g r a p h e r

ROLO PULPERIO

c a s t

RICARDO DARIN

IGNACIO HUANG

MURIEL SANTA ANA



10.12

S I X P M

ARGENTINA
SPAIN

2 0 1 1

MANDARIN, SPANISH
W/ ENGLISH SUBTITLES

93 MINS

s y n o p s i s

From Argentinean director Sebastian Borensztein (*SIN MEMORIA*, 2010), comes a tale of lost love, found friends and the human connection that transcends language.

Staunch loner and hardware store owner Roberto, is more interested in counting nails and yelling at wholesalers than developing a relationship with friends or family. Until one fateful day, when despite his best efforts to keep others at bay, an unlikely friend appears in the form of Chinese immigrant Jun.

While indulging in his plane-watching hobby, Roberto unintentionally witnesses Jun being thrown out of taxicab. Speaking not one word of Spanish, and having nowhere to turn, Jun approaches Roberto for help. At first dismissive, Roberto eventually obliges. But when he opens up his home to Jun, an unexpected series of events begins to unfold... Powerfully, Borensztein's lost-in-translation dramedy of mis-matched cultures manages to touch the universal human language inherent in all of us.

t h o u g h t s

Joy Logan PhD.

Professor of Spanish and Latin American & Iberian Studies
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

"A Chinese man, an Argentine, and a cow falling out of the sky" is the hook line used to publicize Sebastián Borensztein's *CHINESE TAKE AWAY* (*Un cuento chino*). Although this odd grouping may seem more like the opening to a barroom joke, it aptly sets the stage for Borensztein's award-winning film about cross-cultural connections and the absurdities of life. Set in current-day Buenos Aires, *CHINESE TAKE AWAY* tells the story of a young Chinese immigrant, Jun (Ignacio Huang), who is begrudgingly taken in by curmudgeon shopkeeper, Roberto (Ricardo Darín). The plot, not unsurprisingly,

hinges on the trials and tribulations of Jun and Roberto, who eventually find ways to connect, despite the obstacles imposed by differences in culture, language, age, and even food.

More than just a lighthearted vision of cultural miscommunications, this film plays with the well-worn tropes of both Argentine nationalism and its discontent, and depicts the labyrinthine meanderings of life in ways that wink at the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. For writer-director Borensztein, however, the film is less complicated. In an interview for *Culturamas*, Borensztein explained that the film is, at heart, a fable about loneliness and survival. Perhaps it is this juxtaposition of the simplicity of human instincts with the complexities of life that has delighted national and international audiences alike. *CHINESE TAKE AWAY* won the Audience Choice and the Marc'Aurelio Best Film Awards at the 2011 Rome Film Festival, and was nominated for fourteen 2011 Premio Sur Awards, the Argentine equivalent of the Oscar, winning for Best Film, Best Actor (Darín), and Best Supporting Actress (Muriel Santa Ana). It also won Spain's prestigious Goya Award (2012) for Best Iberoamerican Film.

Ricardo Darín, best known to international audiences for his performance in *THE SECRET IN THEIR EYES* (2010 Oscar for Best Foreign Film), plays the irascible Roberto with an intensity that often moves his comedic frustrations at dealing with a stranger in his home into moments of intimate pathos. Darín's Roberto is a loner who would rather collect items, such as the

glass figurines he buys to honor his long-deceased mother, than forge relationships with people. Roberto does not own a computer or a cell phone, and spends his time perusing international newspapers to cut out the most absurd, tragic stories, which he imagines himself protagonizing in a Walter Mitty-esque way.

It is difficult not to read into Roberto's solitary life a common critique of the entrenched problems of Argentineity: the nostalgia for the lost hopes of the past (at the beginning of the twentieth century the standard of living in Argentina was considered to be among the highest in the world); the cult of the lost mother (Evita Perón, who died in 1952, is still venerated by many); the lingering wounds of the 1976-1983 military dictatorship (the trauma of the 1982 Falkland Islands War with Great Britain is Roberto's greatest absurdity). Ultimately, Roberto's humanization hints at the possibility of a different Argentina, one that could look away from Europe and its past to look forward in new directions.

Roberto's cynicism also pokes fun, in ways that are not always comical, at contemporary life in Buenos Aires, where taxi drivers rob you and the police threaten your personal safety. Although such social insecurities exacerbate Roberto's misanthropy, they do not explain why he rejects Mari's (Santa Ana) gentle offers of love, or why he tries to rid himself of Jun at every turn. He remains emotionally closed off, even to the viewers. In contrast, Jun is a much more accessible and likeable character, despite the fact that Borensztein has chosen not to subtitle any of the

Mandarin. Borensztein's decision here underscores the film's message that language is not the only ingredient in human understanding, cross-cultural or otherwise.

Although Jun and Roberto begin the film diametrically opposed, even in the way that they eat bread, life's coincidences and Chinese takeaway bring them together. When Roberto picks up the phone to order take-out for the first time (and to get an interpreter), he finally moves into the twenty-first century and into solidarity with Jun via a show of compassion, respect, and friendship. At one point Roberto insists that nothing in life makes sense, yet for Jun, everything has meaning. In a Borgesian way, Borensztein's third feature-length film suggests that there may be an order to life after all, but it is indecipherable. As Roberto discovers, perhaps it is enough to find understanding in the company of others, despite the absurdity, or the logic, of cows falling out of the sky. ■

05

LUCKY

d i r e c t o r

AVIE LUTHRA

s c r e e n w r i t e r

AVIE LUTHRA

TANYA WELZ

p r o d u c e r

LANCE SAMUELS

c i n e m a t o g r a p h e r

WILLIE NEL

c a s t

SIHLE DLAMINI

JAYASHREE BASAVRA

VUSI KUNENE

JAMES NGCOBO

BRENDA NGXOLI



10.18

S I X F I F T E E N P M

SOUTH AFRICA



2 0 1 1

ENGLISH, HINDI & ZULU
W/ ENGLISH SUBTITLES

100 MINS

s y n o p s i s

This touching film from South Africa weaves a simple yet profound story of an unlikely friendship between two people brought together by fate. LUCKY tells the tale of ten-year-old South African orphan Lucky, who leaves his village to make it in the big city. However, upon arrival Lucky discovers that the reality of his new situation is not what he had envisioned.

Promised a stable home, and an education, Lucky arrives to find an uncle who is only interested in the money he can get for Lucky's care. Quickly, Lucky finds himself in a dire situation with nowhere to go. Yet just when all seems lost, hope arrives in the form of a formidable Indian woman living down the hall...

Directed by Avie Luthra, LUCKY is a tale of overcoming both adversity and prejudice. In LUCKY, Luthra manages to masterfully bring to life the complex cultural dynamics of modern South African all told through the lens of one child on the margins of society.

At the center of a film's genesis is its screenplay, an imagined text then dramatized by actors and choreographed by a director. In the film LUCKY, Indo-British director and screenwriter Avie Luthra envisions a version of post-apartheid South Africa from his perspective as an informed outsider, a little less than two decades after the end of racial segregation in 1994. His dramatized text focuses on the unlikely relationship between Lucky, a ten-year-old Zulu orphan sensitively performed by Sihle Dlamini, and Padma, an octogenarian Hindi woman ably played by Jayashree Basavara.

The story chronicles the aftermath of the death of Lucky's mother, a sex worker who suffered from AIDS, and who leaves behind a son without a father. Lucky sees no future for himself in his rural KwaZulu village without the education she taught him was a necessity, and he leaves for Durban, the big city, with the address of an uncle in hand. Thus begins his odyssey, filled with the hope of finding a place for himself in this new world—a journey propelled by an existential crisis over his identity within a volatile backdrop of historical, cultural and mythical ideologies.

A heartbreaking encounter with his uncle heightens Lucky's sense of distrust of relying on the familiar and increases his confusing isolation, but also opens up a space for an encounter with Padma, someone from an altogether alien culture who speaks a foreign tongue. She is the product of the old South Africa, one that gave her an ironically privileged status as a second-class citizen that is reified in her view of Black people as dogs. In fact, her first act of generosity towards Lucky is to shelter him from his dissolute uncle by locking him outside on her balcony overnight, like an animal, without access to a bathroom.

The audience witnesses much of the unfolding drama from similarly off-putting vantage points that take the new South Africa's measure. We see the promise of hope deferred from behind bolted exits, through surreptitious glimpses from curtained windows, and among hiding places in dark crannies. In a later reflection at a desegregated restaurant, Padma responds to this shift in demographics with a jeremiad

about how her neighborhood has changed for the worse. Although Indians now live side by side with Africans, the old conflicts remain. The tentacles of these unresolved tensions pervade each claustrophobic frame of the film, and neither Padma nor Lucky can escape the vestiges of a violent and repressive past. Their lives are filled with harassments that impinge on their daily struggle for survival.

Avie Luthra's dramatized account of their situation is shot from two distinct perspectives seeking to reconcile themselves with one another. The predominant one belongs to the Zulu orphan, who is bewildered by what the world does to him. The second belongs to the widowed Hindi woman, who is perplexed by questions about what she should do about his circumstance. These perspectives function as useful representations of issues relevant to people from communities that were noticeably absent from the main public discourse during apartheid's white rule.

However, their move to the center in a country that universalized access to equal rights under Presidency Nelson Mandela also encounters the failure of language fashioned around ideas of inclusiveness that are supposed to erase the deleterious effects of apartheid's legacy. One sees how limited language is as a vehicle to facilitate the dialogue leading to this change. The words Lucky's mother captured on a cassette tape prior to her death, for instance, are a disembodied text that her son uses to negotiate the new landscape. And yet, as with the prevailing discourses about inclusion that South African people attempt to embrace, the inadequacy of the words is revealed.

t h o u g h t s

David Odhiambo PhD.

*Assistant Professor of English & Novelist
University of Hawai'i at West O'ahu*

Ultimately, meaningful moments come about in understandings that aren't mediated by language. It is only in the intimacy of gestures—whether it is Padma brutally stabbing Lucky between the eyes with a walking stick, or allowing him to sidle up beside her while looking through photographs in her album—that authenticity emerges. Inevitably, it is through acts of kindness, not violence, between these characters that hard edges soften into meaningful encounters, and hints of progress can be glimpsed.

Inevitably, Luthra's thoughtful film privileges the non-violent teachings that come at a personal cost, advocated by two men from different cultures, Mahatma Ghandi and Desmond Tutu. Acts of compassion in the sphere of relations between beings, and not words, serve as a useful vehicle through which the new South Africa can be built. ■

09

SEEKING ASIAN FEMALE

director

DEBBIE LUM

screenwriter

DEBBIE LUM

AMY FERRARIS

TINA NGUYEN

producer

DEBBIE LUM

TINA NGUYEN

CHRIS GUEVARRA

STEPHANIE WANG-BREAL

CIANNA STEWART

cinematographer

DEBBIE LUM

cast

STEVEN BOLSTAD

JIANHUA "SANDY" BOLSTAD



10.13

S I X P M

10.16

S I X P M

UNITED STATES



2 0 1 2

ENGLISH, MANDARIN

W/ ENGLISH SUBTITLES

80 MINS

s y n o p s i s

When 60 year-old Steven, a Caucasian male looking for a young Chinese bride, roams dating websites to find yet another Chinese woman to fulfill his romantic quest, he finds 30 year-old Sandy. Sandy lives in China and quickly responds to Steven's emails. Before long, Steven visits Sandy in China and brings her back to the United States to get engaged. Sandy's life is suddenly flipped around as she tries to adjust to a new country and its culture through her possible new husband, who she has only recently met.

Sandy doesn't speak English and Steven doesn't speak Chinese. The two communicate through a language of their own- through gestures, presents, physical affection and picking up on each other's moods. Obviously, this creates an unimaginable level of frustration and misunderstandings between the couple, which is how the Chinese American filmmaker, Debbie Lum, starts to mediate their relationship as their translator. As Debbie's involvement in the couple's relationship deepens, the trio creates a new dynamic relationship where each is dependent on the other. SEEKING ASIAN FEMALE analyzes the mentality behind the mysticism and notions of seeking an Asian woman and what this represents in American culture.

"Why do some white males have 'yellow fever'—the White/Western male obsession for Asian women?" This is what the filmmaker Debbie Lum wanted to know. In SEEKING ASIAN FEMALE, Lum's debut into the world of film directing and producing, she takes us on her journey of seeking the answer to this question by documenting the love story of Steven Bolstad, a sixty-year old white man with yellow fever.

Steven, a cashier attendant at the San Francisco airport parking garage, has been married twice to non-Asians,

and single for twenty years prior to meeting his third and Asian bride. His quest to find an Asian life partner begins after his son marries an Asian woman and seems happy with his choice. After five years of (desperately?) seeking Asian female, he finally meets Sandy online. Sandy—her Chinese name is Jianhua—is a thirty-year old woman living in Anhui province, China. She goes online in hopes of finding an open-minded Chinese man who would marry someone who is considered an "old maid" in her society. Instead, she falls in love with an American man, twice her age.

Featuring a love story that crosses national, racial, cultural, and even generational boundaries, this film is undoubtedly brimming with tensions, struggles, and conflicts. But it also peels away the different layers of human relationships in a global age, touching on issues of transnational migration, (hetero-) normative love, and technology.

Narratives of migration strongly color Steven and Sandy's love story. When Sandy agrees to marry Steven, she moves to the United States with a K-1, fiancée visa. This visa allows Sandy to stay legally for three months before she has to marry Steven, or leave the country. From the moment Sandy arrives in California, the audience sees her struggles of living in a foreign country, and her attempts in making and maintaining connections with new Chinese friends living in America as well as with her family in China. These difficulties certainly taint Sandy's idea of America, which she once thought was "heaven." Leaving America or Steven, however, is not

an obvious option unless, as she confides in Lum, she has a green card. The ties to legal resident permit become her ties to Steven. As the story progresses, the audience learns of various tensions between Steven and Sandy. Sandy's jealousy of Steven's former Chinese lover, Molly, creates frictions that the filmmaker helps mitigate by serving as their translator. This jealousy seems to create another conflict during their marriage that drives Sandy to temporarily leave Steven. Unexpressed expectations of what love, and a Chinese or an American lover should be create obstacles and tensions throughout the film.

Technology and its importance in human relations in today's America or the world, including China, also shape the storyline of the film. They met through the Internet, and communicate with each other using the online "Sherlock" translator. Steven's iPhone camera documents their journey. Technology matters. Their love relationship simply could not have happened without it.

It is also technology, coupled with the critical lens through which the movie is narrated, that allows this film to challenge the normative convention of documentary films. Lum occasionally uses the mirror as an apparatus for visually locating and inserting herself into the film. She is also mindful about her own social location as a Chinese American whose Chinese American parents have also been born and raised in the U.S., and she often shares her thoughts and emotions without hesitation throughout the film. Lum explicitly acknowledges that she travels across the

t h o u g h t s

L. Ayu Saraswati

Assistant Professor of Women's Studies
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

boundaries of being a filmmaker, becoming an important character in her own story, and influencing how it unfolds.

Since the film ends with no clear answer to the question asked in the beginning, I wonder what would have happened if the film had stayed faithful to its curiosity about why “yellow fever” persists in twenty-first century America. Would it reveal the larger racial and social structures in the U.S., China, and the world, and how these structures influence who and how we desire, and the social consequences of such desire? Would it uncover the predicaments of nuptial migration? Would it document the persistence of gender inequality in this era of cyborgs and cyberspace? Perhaps we may begin to discern the answers by carefully thinking about these issues when we view the film. ■

13

KARAKARA

d i r e c t o r

CLAUDE GAGNON

s c r e e n w r i t e r

CLAUDE GAGNON

p r o d u c e r

CLAUDE GAGNON

SAMUEL GAGON

TAKAKO MIYAHIRA

c i n e m a t o g r a p h e r

MICHEL ST-MARTIN

c a s t

GABRIEL ARCAND

YUICHI ATTA

YOUKI KUDOH

TOSHI MOROMI

MEGUMI TOMITA



10.14

T W E L V E P M

10.15

F O U R P M



s y n o p s i s

This Canada-Japan co-production, filmed entirely in Okinawa, revolves around retired professor, Pierre, and his companion, a runaway wife, Junko. Together they travel throughout Okinawa as lovers, strangers and at times, confidants.

French-Canadian, Pierre travels to Okinawa to take part in a Qigong retreat and then vacations. Through happenstance he meets Junko and they find themselves in an awkward relationship when Junko fights with her husband and requests to participate in Pierre's travels. As they visit the islands of Okinawa, Pierre discovers more about himself and the events that have brought him to his present circumstance.

With the beautiful landscape of Okinawa as its backdrop, seasoned director, Claude Gagnon, shows us the best of the human experience when one chooses to connect with those across cultures and its lasting effects. Deliberate, unique, and self-reflective, this show entertains and subtly, makes you examine your personal views on relationships.

The age-old question of utopias arises in this new Okinawan-Canadian production. Amid the natural and urban settings of Okinawa, French Canadian retired professor Pierre travels to Asia for the first time, in search of true meaning. After a five-day qi-gong retreat at a plush beachside resort, Philip moves to the bustling city of Naha, there to plan out the remainder of a restful stay in Okinawa. In Naha he meets attractive, middle-aged Junko, who is searching for her own escape from the miseries of an abusive relationship.

Their cross-cultural encounter is more crossed than one might expect. Although Pierre's and Junko's relationship quickly turns sexual, it is not entirely social. Pierre prefers to search for utopia through nature and solitude; Junko prefers company. Pierre wants peace and quiet; Junko wants lively music and dancing. One might interpret these divergences as stereo typically gendered and cultural—the older, rugged Western individual male versus the younger, group-oriented Asian female. But this film does not let the characters off the hook quite so easily.

Instead, the film traces the back story of these two to explain their encounter as quirky, quixotic, and ultimately humanizing. We learn that Pierre lost a dear friend two years ago, and has spent his days ever since regretting what he sees as his life's failures. "I don't want to die a loser!" he cries. We learn that Junko treasures her teenage son's love, and keeps being drawn back to her husband because of that love. But we learn far more about Pierre than we ever do about Junko. The film ultimately is his story from beginning to end, with Junko relegated to a supporting role.

Sound provides rich texture to the story. Pierre seeks quiet, but is constantly interrupted by noise—helicopters, jets from the U.S. military base, Junko's almost desperate sexual yelps, Junko's quiet weeping, the high-energy Okinawan music at the bar. Even Pierre's solitude has sonic dimensions—the lapping of ocean waves, the melancholic plucking of the sanshin musical instrument, the French song that he and his best friend used to sing,

the quiet sound of the weaver's shuttle. These provide a soundtrack to this story of encounter. In particular, the sanshin performs neat turns of accompaniment, echoing the ways in which the instrument and its characteristic sound have become sonic icons of Okinawa itself.

Language and place act as critically intertwined narrative elements. Montreal resident Pierre considers French his mother language, writes in his journal in French, and speaks English fluently. Tokyoite Junko lived in California in order to study English. Okinawan native Akemi hardly speaks English, and does not understand much of what Pierre says. Junko offers her services as interpreter to Pierre, thereby establishing a relationship with him as his eyes and ears in this new Asian world.

The English subtitling of the film plays a narrative role, dropping in and out to inform the audience when and what we need to understand. Pierre's realization of the pervasive presence of the U.S. military bases on Okinawa is intercut with shots of Americanisms and English signs (e.g. American Village). His final cautious decision to remain in Okinawa pursuing bashofu (banana fiber weaving) rests upon a personal commitment to learn Japanese. Language thus connects people to places and the power relations therein.

In the end, both Pierre and Junko find their idealisms tempered by the lens of Okinawa and each other. Pierre's yearning asceticism gets reconfigured in the process. He did not think he would have sex again, but finds himself in bed with

t h o u g h t s

Christine Yano PhD.

*Professor of Anthropology & Department Chair
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa*

Junko. He abandons his vegetarianism for Okinawan soba containing pork. He gives up his no-alcohol policy for Okinawan awamori (wine), especially as served in the beautiful, rustic karakara—a ceramic flask with a ball inside that rattles “karakara” when empty and in need of a refill. None of these steps come easily for him (except maybe the sex), but each plays a part in reconstructing who he thinks he is.

Junko, too, changes from clinging victim in an abusive marriage to one gathering the strength to leave her husband. She takes a small step toward political activism too, alerting American filmmaker Michael Moore to the highly contentious U.S. military base situation in Okinawa.

The film leaves the two main characters with their transformations not yet complete, but hovering, poised. As the karakara vessel signals its own emptiness, so too does the film signal possibilities for refilling the vessel with newly configured selves, one step at a time. ■

17

THE IRAN JOB

d i r e c t o r

TILL SCHAUDER

s c r e e n w r i t e r

TILL SCHAUDER

p r o d u c e r

TILL SCHAUDER

SARA NODJOURI

c i n e m a t o g r a p h e r

TILL SCHAUDER

c a s t

KEVIN SHEPPARD

LEAH SHEPPARD

HILDA LALEH



10.13

ONE FIFTEEN P M

GERMANY
IRAN
UNITED STATES

2 0 1 2

ENGLISH, FARSI

W/ ENGLISH SUBTITLES

93 MINS

s y n o p s i s

When American basketball player Kevin Sheppard accepts a job to play in one of the world's most feared countries – Iran – he expects the worst. But what he finds is a country brimming with generosity, acceptance, and sensuality. With a charismatic personality that charms everyone he meets, Kevin forms an unlikely friendship with three outspoken Iranian women who share with him their strong opinions on everything from politics to religion to gender roles.

Kevin's season in Iran eventually culminates in something much bigger than basketball: the uprising and subsequent suppression of Iran's reformist Green Movement – a powerful prelude to the sweeping changes currently unfolding across the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring. In THE IRAN JOB director Till Schauder reveals the human, often humorous, and sometimes heartbreaking sides of Iran, giving us access to a country often hidden in mystery.

In his own words, Kevin Sheppard, the central character in director Till Schauder's documentary, THE IRAN JOB, is a journeyman, having started as a point guard at Jacksonville University, having played professional basketball in China, Brazil, and Israel, and now being offered a lucrative one-year contract in Shiraz, a city in southeast Iran. But it is 2008: Iran has been declared part of the Bush administration's "Axis of Evil," Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been in power since 2005, and Iran has turned more and more into an ultra-conservative Islamic state that along with its

aggressive posturing to other countries has taken away basic human rights from its citizens. And presidential candidate Barack Obama has accepted the Democratic nomination that would lead to his historic inauguration as the 44th president of the United States.

Sheppard is reluctant at first to go to Iran: "They trying to blow up Israel. Iran is so crazy. Everyone's riding camels." But he finally accepts the contract that will pay him double the salary paid to domestic players, an incentive to foreign players who might have reservations about going to the Middle East. He departs from the U.S. Virgin Islands, leaving a worry-ridden family, and a girlfriend who now must wait another year for his marriage proposal. As in the case of most "hoop dream" stories, Sheppard encounters the usual ups-and-downs. He is appointed the team captain by the coach, with an accompanying burden: if Sheppard doesn't lead his first-year, inexperienced team to the Iranian Super League playoffs, he won't be given a contract extension. Outside the gym, political extremism surrounds him, but with a brash mindset he affirms, "I try to stay away from politics as far as possible. . . . [And] try to focus on what I do and that is basketball."

But perhaps more than a promising "feel good" sporting story, THE IRAN JOB documents cultural slights and misreadings of an American/African American/male by a country that publicly denounces the U.S. as "the Great Satan." The street walls are adorned with anti-American slogans and graffiti. His apartment, which he shares with

another foreign player who comes from a war-battered country ("Zoran, he tells me some shocking stories, which really open my eyes because here I am from America and . . . he's from Serbia, which the USA bombed"), has 600 TV channels, 400 pornographic, perhaps due to a team owner whose impression of American players is that they are oversexed.

In addition, public interaction with a member of the opposite sex is not only disapproved of, but illegal. Eighteen minutes into THE IRAN JOB, a doctor treating Sheppard for a sprained ankle advises that swimming would be good therapy. Sheppard complains that it is unromantic and uncomfortable to be at a pool with only men. The doctor responds, "This is not like your country. . . . Maybe uncomfortable but it's Islamic."

What becomes a salvation for the young athlete is the friendship that develops between Sheppard and three young Iranian women, one of whom is his nurse at the clinic. Through them, Sheppard sees another side of Iran that is not filtered through the antiseptic lens of the media and Islamic law. In a heart-rending and honest conversation in his apartment—an innocent social gathering that if discovered could land the women in jail and deport both men—the women utter their frustrations at being second-class citizens. One woman asserts, "I don't believe in Islam because . . . one woman is half of a man and the woman's rights is half of a man's rights." When Zoran suggests that they leave Iran and live abroad, the sentiment is mixed. Yes, they would love

t h o u g h t s

Gary Pak PhD.

Professor of English

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

