

VENICE 2008

A Bull's Eye, without the arrow. By Julien Welter

The Mostra ends today, having offered in its sidebar sections some new discoveries that will make themselves known long after the award ceremony is over. For critics covering the main competition (which included the disappointing "Gabbla" from Tariq Tegua, which I gave one star) while trying to enjoy the local gelato and other delicacies, one doesn't always get the chance to discover the sidebar films. One of these is "Zero Bridge" (which I gave four stars), the first feature film by Tariq Tapa, which was shot in Kashmir.

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The American Tariq Tapa edited his first feature film "Zero Bridge" himself**.

Kashmir, where his family originates and where the film was shot, prevented him from becoming complacent. In a land under military occupation, where nothing is guaranteed but the heavy burden of traditions (first-born rights, arranged marriages, harsh social stratification), and where much is left to discover in terms of cinema, Tapa demonstrates a personality both combative and flexible. The titular Zero Bridge is a vital thoroughfare of Srinagar, and it is under such constant military surveillance that one is prohibited from even standing still there.

Among the decaying urban infrastructures, noisy traffic, and multiple local dialects which surround the bridge, Tapa introduces us to a young man named Dilawar who is similarly at a crossroads in his own life. Intelligent and mischievous, Dilawar is a pickpocket who wants to escape Kashmir in order to join the adoptive mother who left him behind when she moved to Delhi. His plans are foiled by two things: one is an unusual friendship with the victim of one of his stealing sprees (a beautiful and nurturing young woman) and the other is the constant surveillance of his uncle, a mason who sheltered him after he was abandoned. These send him towards a crisis of conscience, as the soothing soundtrack of Kashmiri folk songs makes his journey more bearable for us, but only for a short while...

Made on a shoestring, "Zero Bridge" is a surprise from start to finish and it will move even those with hearts of stone. The direction is as intuitive and spontaneous as Srinagar is precarious, dangerous and claustrophobic. The film calls to mind the beloved cinema of the early 1960's, reminding me of Jerzy Skolimowski's "Identification Marks: None" (1964), or Milos Forman's "Black Peter" (1963), while Tapa himself prefers to cite Ermanno Olmi's "Il Posto" (1961).

All the while, the economy of the filmmaking has all the feistiness and resilience of an American B-movie from the 1950s, and that's because of the density, tension, and energy of an editing style whose ellipses reveal a director who has already developed his own distinctive voice.

Tariq Tapa could soon occupy the position of Tariq Tegua in the international competition section of Venice. If so, let's hope he gets there!

**[Correction: Tariq Tapa co-edited "Zero Bridge" with Josée Lajoie]