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Movie Review: 'Jiyan'

New York Kurdish film festival review

By Joe Bendel

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A swing is in the barren lands where Saddam Hussein unleashed a brutal poison gas attack. (Courtesy of New York Kurdish Film Festival)

Geography has done few favors for the Kurdish people. Divided between four largely hostile countries, the Kurdistan region has seen much suffering, particularly at the hands of Saddam Hussein, who did indeed have sufficient weapons of mass destruction in 1988 for a brutal poison gas attack on Iraq's Kurdish population. Five years later, the effects of that atrocity still linger, as one Iraqi Kurd learns when he returns to help rebuild his homeland in Jano Rosebiani's "Jiyan," which screened recently during the New York Kurdish Film Festival—the first America fest dedicated to Kurdish cinema.

Diyari has not been to his ancestral home of Halabja in years, having immigrated to America following an earlier attack on his people. He has come to build an orphanage for the many children whose parents and families were killed by Saddam's gas. It is an appropriate mission for Diyari, because he seems to have an affinity for children, particularly two young cousins, Shêrko and Jiyan, who only have each other left in the world. Though she hardly speaks, young Jiyan, whose name means "life," forges an especially deep bond with their new benefactor.

Since the attack killed many of Halabja's eligible bachelors, there has been little romance in the town. As a result, Diyari's arrival definitely attracts attention, but he has a wife and two young girls back in America, and is far too noble for anything illicit on the side. Diyari is certainly a laudable protagonist and Shêrko and Jiyan are definitely strong rooting interests, but the film is a bit too sweet for its own good, with no real dramatic conflict to keep viewers focused. Still, Rosebiani elicits some very strong performances from his young actors, (Pisheng Berzinji and Choman Hawrami), and employs some very effective recurring images and motifs.

Koutaiba Al Janabi's lens captures the harsh unforgiving Kurdistan landscape, creating a real sense of place. However, the greatest merit of "Jiyan" is its depiction of the persistent effects of Saddam's chemical weapons. It becomes clear the attack did not just happen within a discrete time period and was then safely over. Rather, it is as if the village is attacked day after day for five years, leaving a toxic environment where sandstorms become instruments of death, stirring up and dispersing the sedentary chemical agents.

While it might have benefited from a stronger narrative drive, "Jiyan" is quite powerful when it addresses the life-and-death issues facing Iraqi Kurdistan. It clearly was a fitting selection for the final day of the first annual New York Kurdish Film Festival.

Joe Bendel blogs on jazz and cultural issues at <http://jbspins.blogspot.com> and coordinated the Jazz Foundation of America's instrument-donation campaign for musicians displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

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