

'Road to Istanbul': Berlin Review

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Courtesy of Hassen Brahiti/3B Productions
Earnest and topical, if not quite compelling.

Producer-director Rachid Bouchareb ('Days of Glory') unveiled his latest feature as part of Berlin's Panorama sidebar.

Turning a potentially explosive topic into a dour, only marginally suspenseful international trek, *Road to Istanbul* (*La Route d'Istanbul*) represents a slight step up for producer-director Rachid Bouchareb after his two previous flubs (*Two Men in Town*, *Just Like a Woman*), but has neither the emotional depth nor the burning sociopolitical intensity that this kind of subject needs.

Starring Astrid Whettnall as a Belgian mother desperately searching for a child who's run off to join the jihad, the film will inevitably draw comparisons with Thomas Bidegain's *Cowboys*, which premiered in Cannes last spring. But whereas the latter transformed a similar storyline into a sweeping contemporary quest with nods to John Ford, this hot-button affair plays like a gloomy art house version of *Not Without My Daughter* — a fact that could perhaps help to boost overseas sales after a Berlinale premiere.

Bouchareb tackled a similar theme in 2009's *London River*, which dealt with two parents looking for their children in the aftermath of the 2005 London terrorist bombings. Here, he focuses on a single mom, Elisabeth (Whettnall), whose 18-year-old daughter, Elodie (Pauline Burlet), runs off with her boyfriend to take part in the fight against Bashar al-Assad in Syria, leaving few clues as to her whereabouts.

With such a bracingly serious concept and a script credited to four writers, *Road to Istanbul* nonetheless remains highly simplistic in its narration, offering few surprises as it trudges on from Belgium to Turkey to the Syrian border, arriving at its tragic yet undercooked conclusion. Sticking almost entirely to Elisabeth's point of view, but still revealing Elodie's conversion to Islam and runaway plans early on, it fails to generate enough tension while dealing only half-heartedly with a social and religious phenomenon that has challenged western Europe for over a decade now.

In its best moments, the film shows what it's like to be a parent trying to handle a situation that's almost entirely beyond one's control — an idea expressed in a powerful scene where we see Elisabeth nearly paralyzed as she waits to receive a text message from Elodie. Whettnall (*Marguerite*) is at her most convincing in these sequences, conveying a steady mix of frustration and anger, as if her character wanted to both embrace and slap her daughter at the same time.

If there are a few such highlights early on, the story loses wind when Elisabeth and her girlfriend, Julie (Patricia Ide), arrive in the Turkish province of Hatay, with Syria just across the border. Enlisting a local cop (Abel Jafri, *Timbuktu*) who initially wants nothing to do with her, they painstakingly follow Elodie's trace, with Elisabeth going the extra mile (quite literally) to bring her girl back in one piece. But what should make for a gripping finale ultimately fails to ignite, especially under earnest, heavy-handed direction that never really expresses more than a mother's ongoing anxiety.

Bouchareb is not the subtlest of filmmakers, and when he's at his strongest — such as the Maghrebin WWII film, *Days of Glory*, or the intimate immigration drama, *Little Senegal* — he can make broadly appealing entertainment with real political undertones. *Road to Istanbul* lacks either of those qualities, resulting in a movie that has the director trying to dig deep, especially with a subject that's more prescient than ever, and coming up with little more than a bleakly familiar thriller that only skims the surface of the Euro-jihadi connection (primarily in a scene involving a video presentation made to other parents whose children have fled to Syria).

Tech credits are solid in all departments, especially widescreen cinematography from Benoit Chamaillard (*Heat Wave*) that skillfully contrasts the lush valleys of Belgium with the arid hills of Turkey, channeling Elisabeth's own voyage from the comforts of home to the more hostile atmosphere of a conflict zone.

Production companies: 3B Productions, Arte France, Scope Pictures, Tassili Films
Cast: Astrid Whettnall, Pauline Burlet, Patricia Ide, Abel Jafri, Faouzi Saichi
Director: Rachid Bouchareb
Screenwriters: Olivier Lorelle, Yasmina Khadra, Zoe Galeron, Rachid Bouchareb, based on an original idea by Rachid Bouchareb
Producers: Jean Brehat, Rachid Bouchareb
Director of photography: Benoit Chamaillard
Production designers: Noureddine Benahmed, Mira Van Den Neste
Costume designer: Julie Beca
Editors: Yannick Kergoat, Emmanuelle Jay
Composer: Eric Neveux
Casting director: Michael Bier
Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Panorama Special)
Sales: Elle Driver

In French, English, Turkish, Arabic
97 minutes

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