Foxtrot

Director: Samuel Maoz
Country: Israel
Date: 2017

A review by Jay Weissberg for *Variety*:

"Lebanon" director Samuel Maoz went in a risky direction by making a film as different and daring as "Foxtrot," and his boldness pays off in ways that make one reach for superlatives. Not content to merely confront the unspeakable grief of parents who lose a child, Maoz uses the film's tripartite structure to encompass a devastating litany of Israeli attributes that run the gamut from machismo to racism to a past subverted by the Holocaust and then back again to grief. Just as no novel can tackle a mother's fear of learning her soldier son is dead without being compared to David Grossman's stunning "To the End of the Land," so no film will be able to deal with a similar subject without being weighed against "Foxtrot." Brilliantly constructed with a visual audacity that serves the subject rather than the other way around, this is award-winning filmmaking on a fearless level.

Each of the three parts is stylistically and tonally distinct, practically guaranteeing that many will find fault with one section or another. The first throws you into a hothouse intensity that's wrenching to watch; the second has a hyperrealistic, at times comical surrealism recalling the sharply composed tableaux of Israeli photographer Adi Nes; while the third initially feels less distinctive, almost as if Maoz doesn't quite know how to end things. By the final frames, however, that last impression should be laid to rest, because the director knows exactly how to end things, with a quiet and devastating sense of cruel futility.

Within the first minute, the fatal knock on the door arrives: soldiers have come to tell the Feldmans their son Jonathan has been killed in the line of duty. After Dafna (Sarah Adler) faints, the fixed camera pans left to show Michael (Lior Ashkenazi, never better) standing in paralyzed muteness. With practiced efficiency, the three soldiers inject Dafna with a tranquilizer and then calmly explain to Michael that funeral arrangements are made, a help line is available, and don't forget to keep hydrated. Everything is arranged as he stares uncomprehendingly: the knockout tranquilizer they gave Dafna separates the couple exactly when they need each other most, creating an extra vacuum that further renders him helpless. Michael's older brother Avigdor (Yehuda Almagor) arrives and takes over without being asked, the misogynist religious officer (Itamar Rothschild) tells him what will happen at the funeral, and Michael seeks refuge in the bathroom where he deliberately scalds himself with hot water.

Much of this section is shot in oppressive close-ups whose claustrophobic nature has a sensate correspondence with the stifling atmosphere of "Lebanon." When Giora Bejach's camera does move, it tends to be in stiffly fluid ways, in keeping with the perception that all of this is taking place on stage; it remains unclear whether the cityscape glimpsed outside the windows is real or a phony backdrop. Heightening the sense of disorientation are tempered glass doors that distort what's on the other side, and overhead shots that draw attention to floor tiles made of optical-illusion cubes (production designer Arad Sawat deserves major recognition after this film).

Part two changes the focus to Jonathan (Yonatan Shiray), on guard duty with three other soldiers in a godforsaken spot near the northern border, where barely anything interrupts the dullness apart from the occasional camel passing. Then suddenly Maoz intensifies the surrealism with an extraordinary scene of a dancing soldier (Itay Exlroad) on the desert road, set off against paintbox colors of sky and sand alongside an old painted advertisement for ice cream. At night, Jonathan tunes in to the kitsch intonations of Renzo Cesana's "Walk the Lonesome Night," accompanied by a Wurlitzer, his boredom punctuated only by rare Arab travelers forced into humiliating, silent scrutiny by the tired privates clearly too young to be in the position of making life or death decisions. Then tragedy strikes.

The third and final section is about coping — or not — with grief. How it tears people apart, fades into the background for brief moments, then rises up again as those gripped by mourning drown in its suffocating embrace. At first it almost feels as if Maoz is ending with a commonplace coda, but the more simplified visuals force the viewer to hone in on the reality of what's happened. Gone is the overwhelming immediacy and stage-like atmosphere of the first third of the movie, and the heady surrealism of the second; the last chapter offers no aesthetic escape, no distraction from the truth. It is terrifying in its stark finality.

One of the reasons "Foxtrot" is so wrenching is because it's not satisfied with a simple story of loss: the film contextualizes the deaths and clarifies their futility. Michael's Auschwitz-survivor mother (Karin Ugowski) represents an unfathomable past from which no lessons have been learned. Instead, there's a twisted justification for oppression that inevitably leads to tragedy and trauma. Michael can neither escape the legacy of his direct Holocaust connection nor the soul-destroying mindset of an Israeli military apparatus designed to instill an us-vs.-them anti-humanism. Jonathan and his fellow soldiers are still young enough to retain their freshness, but before hardness or death settles on them as well, they can frolic in the pink-sunset landscape, accompanied by Mahler's 5th.

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