

TAKEOVER REVIEW

KHALED

2002 85m *prod* Canadian Film Centre, *exp* Peter O'Brian, *p* Paul Scherzer, *d/sc* Asghar Massombagi, *ph* Luc Montpellier, *ed* Christopher Donaldson, *ad* Jordan Estall, *sr* Herwig Gayer, Bob Rouse, *s ed* Urban Audio, *mus* Mel M'Rabet; *with* Michael D'Ascenzo, Michèle Duquet, Normand Bissonnette, Michael Kanev, Lynne Deragon, John Ralston, Gerry Quigley, Joanne Boland, Richard Banel, Alex Hood, Bryn McAuley.

After a brawl with schoolyard bullies, 10-year-old Khaled goes home, which is not much of a refuge from the cruelties of his underclass Toronto neighbourhood. His mother, Monique, can barely run their shabby apartment, partly because she's losing her struggle with an unnamed disease. Deserted by her Moroccan lover, who is Khaled's father, she relies on her son to do the shopping, prepare meals and bathe her.

Meanwhile, Little François, the sleazy manager of Khaled's building, offers to help Monique in exchange for sexual favours. At school, teachers and officials continue to be as mean (and probably racist) as the kids who attack him; his only friend is Ivan, a Russian immigrant. Hunched over in his bed at night, Khaled writes in his diary by flashlight. "Be careful with your eyes," Monique warns him. Maybe that's why he's fascinated by Rosa, an elderly blind neighbour. A concerned social worker wants to place Khaled temporarily in a foster home even though he was sexually assaulted in a previous one.

One day, Monique suddenly dies; however, Khaled determines to continue with his routines, pretending to the outside world that nothing has changed. He forges cheques to pay bills, goes to school, eats alone and grooms his dead mom. Khaled barricades the door to the apartment and sprays the place with air freshener when it begins to stink. Inevitably, the pressures reach critical mass. School worsens. The social worker is suspicious, the building manager is overtly threatening and everybody's asking about the stench. Barricaded in the apartment, the boy runs out of food. His scheme to get some food delivered by Ivan backfires when Ivan is attacked by François. Khaled rushes to rescue his friend and finally breaks down. "I think my mom is dead," he confesses to Rosa.

Khaled (Michael D'Ascenzo); photo credit: Michael Mitchell



The apartment has been stripped bare. Kids play in the distance. Moroccan music comes up on the soundtrack, and the image fades to black.

In his debut feature, Asghar Massombagi's methods contrast sharply with the approach of Jacques Doillon's *Ponette*, another heart-rending portrait of a child's confrontation with a mother's death. While Doillon's highly regarded 1996 film is a hyperstylized, impressionistic rendering of the world – from the vantage point of being tiny and overwhelmed by life – Massombagi (who picked up awards at the 2001 Toronto and Vancouver film festivals) forgoes all but the most austere poetic touches. Shot documentary style on video, the tightly paced movie offers a matter-of-fact account of Khaled's nasty reality: the fist fights, the bleak cityscape, the cheap fixtures and falling plaster, the cigarette butt floating in his sick, chain smoking mother's bath water.

Rigorously minimalist, the film (made under the auspices of the Canadian Film Centre's Feature Film Project), is reminiscent of movies from Iran, the writer/director's native country. When Monique's body finally gives in, Massombagi expresses her death unceremoniously: a glass falls to the floor and shatters, a foot loses its grip. Soon after, Khaled's loss and Monique's absence are summed up when he eats his microwaved instant soup, gazing at the full bowl he put on the table for his mother.

Less is always more for Iranian filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*, offers so little information about what its urban protagonist is out to accomplish in a remote village, viewers grasp at enigmatic clues to imagine possible scenarios, or speculate on a situation's ambiguities. In Massombagi's film, after Monique dies, Khaled finds a stack of old letters, a picture of himself as a baby in his father's arms and an audio cassette. Dad's face has been angrily scratched out. As Khaled gets to work on the problem of an electricity bill, he drops the tape into a boom box. It turns out to be a recording of bluesy oud riffs, Moroccan music that goes straight to the soul. The photo and the music evoke an entire back story: the father's seductive appeal to Monique, the happiness that was crushed by poverty, and who knows what kind of bad behaviour. Massombagi doesn't cut to a flashback montage; he lets the audience do it. And as Khaled finds a way to cover the bill with the music in the background, you imagine he's reinstating his father's presence and drawing strength from it. Of course, this kind of directorial strategy is not only an aesthetic of restraint: it's also a way to make emotionally compelling movies on tiny budgets.

The heart of Massombagi's film is its unsentimental portrayal of the central figure. As played convincingly by Michael D'Ascenzo (a performance that's matched by Michèle Duquet's Monique), Khaled is neither cute urchin or pitiable victim. Introduced with his fists swinging, he's a tough little kid who, when attacked, fights back hard. Khaled also displays a purposefulness that contradicts ideas of children as helpless munchkins or mental incompetents. In fact, he recalls the Iranian kids in movies like Jaffar Panahi's *The White Balloon* and Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven*; obsessed loners focused on single-minded goals.

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As Massombagi tracks Khaled's survival tactics, he picks up on the boy's rapid thinking processes, the way he meets his responsibilities with unquestioning determination and crisp efficiency. But on the other hand, when he applies lipstick to his mother's decomposing lips, you understand that without help, he's not really capable of dealing with his new reality. In spite of his worldliness, his seemingly emotionless handling of every challenge that confronts him, Khaled is a needy child who can't admit to himself that Monique is gone. The deadpan expression he wears in almost every scene might seem like heroic stoicism, but it's also the face of deep denial.

The primary dramatic tension of this picture comes from wondering how long Khaled can plan and execute his strategies while maintaining the pretense that Monique is still in his life. It's like waiting for the inevitable catastrophe that will crush a child whose most beautiful memory is of the birthday when his mother bought him an ice cream sundae with hot chocolate sauce. The movie's final shot, of Khaled's empty apartment with no sign of him anywhere, is a screen on which the audience can project its own movie of his future. Abusive foster homes? Institutions? Khaled's fear turning to rage and explosions of violence? Massombagi keeps political rhetoric, sociological jargon and moral conclusions out of the mix. Here are the facts, he's saying. Draw your own conclusions.

Maurie Alioff

TAKE ONE

TURNING PAIGE

2002 112 m *prod* Chaos, At Shepherd Park Productions, *exp* Carolyn McMaster, Colin Neale, *p* Carolyn McMaster, *d* Robert Cuffley, *sc* Robert Cuffley, Jason Long, *ph* Mark Dobrescu, *ed* Ken Berry, *pd* Paryse Normandeau, *c* Chris O'Neil, *mus* Michael Shields; *with* Katherine Isabelle, Nicholas Campbell, Torri Higginson, Brendan Fletcher, Philip DeWilde, Nikki Barnett.

Paige Fleming, a high-school student who dreams of becoming a writer, lives with her father in Moncton, New Brunswick. Her mother committed suicide two years earlier. Now Paige looks after her father, Ross, as he tries to recover from alcohol addiction. Her older brother, Trevor, left the family shortly after mom's death; however, before he did, he got into a fist fight with Ross, who ended up in the hospital. One night, Trevor unexpectedly returns after a long absence and reawakens the memory of their dead mother.

Paige, who fictionalizes her life in the plots of her stories, asks her English teacher for help with her writing, but feels betrayed when her teacher reveals more to her literary friends than Paige would have liked. Ross, whose grasp on his work-a-day life is tenuous at best, resumes drinking and loses his job. Trevor finds this out when Ross comes home while Trevor is searching through some of his mother's clothes in the basement. Ross drunkenly insists he put them back. When Trevor refuses, the two fight and Ross is hurt again. Paige blames Trevor and starts to drink herself. This leads to a drunken confrontation with her teacher.



Later Paige comes home to find Trevor wrecking the living room with a golf club. He insists the family must come to terms with the mother's death and confront the turbulent past. For once Paige agrees with him, and tells Ross she can't stay if he doesn't deal with it. Ross refuses to do so.

Calgary-based director Robert Cuffley chose his season well in setting *Turning Paige* near the end of winter. The snow, harsh skies and perennial foggy breath add to a feeling of being trapped, accentuating the characters' inability to escape. The family is the crucible within which the characters must struggle to come to terms with their past and each other, and one couldn't ask for a bleaker confluence of circumstances than this family must endure. They are ravaged by rage, denial and alcoholism. Mom was, before her suicide, a shut-in and alcoholic. Ross (Nicholas Campbell) has been in AA for almost a year. He has secretly begun drinking again, though he hides it from his children as long as he can. Before the end of the movie, Paige (Katherine Isabelle) starts drinking heavily herself.

Cuffley focuses on the emotional triangle of Paige, Trevor (Philip DeWilde) and Ross, whose relationship is all but defined by the mother's absence. Isabelle (from *Ginger Snaps*) gives a strong performance, gracefully navigating the intense emotional shifts between her relationship with her teacher (Torri Higginson) and her dysfunctional family. Campbell (from *DaVinci's Inquest*), as the bumbling, tortured father is exceptional, and proves once again he's an actor of hidden depths. Evocatively using misdirection and implication – mimicking the character's deliberate evasions – Cuffley's feature film debut is a moving portrait of a volatile family hiding from its troubled past.

Michael Power

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