

Lifestyle | Features

Aleppo film-maker vows to continue showing reality of Syria

A Syrian film-maker whose documentary on the siege of Aleppo brought a Cannes audience to tears has said she wants to show the world the reality of her country. Waad al-Kateab's powerful and intimate film "For Sama" is a love letter to her infant daughter, documenting the desperate conditions she and her husband were living through, in case they didn't survive. Charting five years of her life from student protester to wife and young mother in Syria's battle-ravaged second city, it won an emotional standing ovation at the Cannes film festival in May.

For Kateab, the film is more than the story of one family's struggle. "It's a realistic depiction of everything that's happening now in the country," she told AFP on Wednesday in London, where the documentary is touring. "Unfortunately, the world is deaf and blind to what is happening, but as Syrians, our goal is to continue to tell and share Syria's story." Kateab was just 20 when pro-democracy protests broke out, triggering a bloody crackdown by loyalists of President Bashar al-Assad that has killed 370,000 people and displaced millions.

The northern city of Aleppo suffered some of the heaviest fighting after rebels seized its eastern sector in 2012. The young film-maker's goal was to document the desperate conditions of life in the city as regime forces closed in—along with the joy of falling in love and the excitement of becoming a mother. When she and her husband Hamza, on a trip to Turkey to see his sick father, heard regime forces were poised to cut off the city's east completely, they decided to return. Within an hour, they had packed and were on a treacherous journey, dodging shells and sneaking past government troops into the now-besieged part of the city.

Hamza, a medic, threw himself into work at a hospital which at one point hosted 300 casualties in a single day—before itself being hit by an air strike. Kataeb dedicated herself to filming the situation, while wrestling with the question of whether or not to flee the city to protect her daughter. After six months, Aleppo was overrun and they were forced into exile, leaving the city as part of a huge civilian evacuation. Kataeb then set about bringing her footage together into a feature-length production that would capture the imagination of audiences "tired of war films or films on Syria".

"So our challenge was to come up with a film that was different," she said. The result is a brutally honest, moving portrayal of life under siege: the absurdity of laughter as missiles crash down overhead, the snowball fights, the aching grief of two boys grieving over their brother. Kataeb said her aim was "to continue to describe in a way that is true and real what is happening in Syria". "It's not a civil war, it's a revolution, and unfortunately, we the Syrian people are the ones paying the price," she said.—AFP



In this file (L-R) Actress Alexandra Billings, guest, writer/producer/director Jill Soloway, actors Jay Duplass, actors Jeffrey Tambor, Judith Light, Amy Landecker and co-Executive Producer Andrea Sperling, winners of Best Actor in a Television Series Musical or Comedy for 'Transparent', pose in the press room during the 72nd Annual Golden Globe Awards at The Beverly Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills, California. — AFP

Pioneering show 'Transparent' takes final musical bow

"Transparent," the series that forever changed how transgender people are portrayed on television, will sign off Friday with a feature-length musical finale—two years after it almost disappeared in the thick of a #MeToo scandal. The Emmy and Golden Globe-winning show is one of several that was forced to contend with the sudden loss of its main star due to misconduct allegations in recent years.

"Roseanne" turned into "The Conners" after Roseanne Barr was dismissed due to racist tweets, while "House of Cards" focused on Robin Wright's Claire Underwood once sexual assault charges against Kevin Spacey led to his departure. But for "Transparent," the exit of actor Jeffrey Tambor amid accusations of sexual harassment and inappropriate behavior by multiple cast and crew members meant a new season was out of the question, according to creator Jill Soloway.

To end the series, Soloway—who uses the gender-neutral pronoun "they"—decided to write a 100-minute final episode beginning with the off-camera death of Maura Pfefferman, the 70-something transgender woman played by Tambor. "The musical is our opportunity to say goodbye but also transition into a new form," Soloway explained on Entertainment Tonight Canada.

Soloway, whose sister Faith wrote the songs for the episode, said the format offered a "joyful way of dealing with the pain of the loss of Maura" while also "reminding ourselves that life is about finding joy." The result is an esoteric mix, with the series' typically deft exploration of human relationships combining with a bright "La La Land" touch to tackle serious subjects from mourning to the Holocaust.

Following a breathtaking fourth season set in Israel, the final episode is an opportunity for new tensions and outbursts among Maura's remaining family, including neurotic ex-wife Shelly, and their children Josh, Sarah and Ali (now Ari.)

Change is coming

Despite the absence of Maura, the trans community remains well represented on the show, most notably through the character Divina, played by transgender performer Alexandra Billings. The show has been praised for developing nuanced and complex

transgender characters without perpetually reducing them to their sexual identities, as has been the case with other series. While "Transparent" was not the first television show to feature trans characters and actors, it gave them more visibility than ever before.

In just a few short years in wider society, transgender people have become a much more widely recognized part of the LGBTQ community. On television, shows like "Pose" have moved the needle forward. "The world has changed so quickly," said Soloway, five years after the show debuted on Amazon, where it has earned the streaming giant eight Emmy Awards and two Golden Globes.

But Judith Light, who plays Shelly on the show, warned that while "change is coming," many transgender people in the US—especially African Americans—are still subject to harassment and violence. The actress, interviewed Monday by Yahoo! platform BUILD, said it would take more time for society to manage a true "transformation" on the issue.—AFP



In this file photo actress Gaby Hoffmann attends the Screening and Panel of 'Transparent' at the Director Guild of America, in Los Angeles. — AFP