

Movies

ALISSA WILKINSON | FILM REVIEW



SIDESHOW/JANUS FILMS

Winter in the Landscape, Winter in the Soul

The latest intimate epic from Nuri Bilge Ceylan asks whether the world can change, and us with it.

TWO PATHS lie before the artist. One is through empathy, identifying deeply with the world and interpreting it so others can peer through the artist's eyes. The other is detachment, standing apart from everyone and everything, observing it from a position of cool remove.

Samet (Deniz Celiloglu), the protagonist of Nuri Bilge Ceylan's "About Dry Grasses," is the second kind of artist, and it has not been great for his soul. Four years into his mandatory service as a public school art teacher in East Anatolia, he's fed up with the locals, whom he finds to be mostly a waste of time. But he isn't terribly kind to anyone, including his roommate and fellow teacher, Kenan (Musab Ekici), who likes living there and enjoys his work. Samet is miserable, and eager for a transfer to Istanbul.

The one bright light — or, at least, distraction — in Samet's life is Sevim (Ece Bagci), his teacher's pet, a bright-eyed eighth grader who probably has a crush on her teacher. Their interactions cross no lines. But they interact like peers, and Samet brings her a small and insignificant gift, and even the other students have noticed he calls only on Sevim and her friends in class.

Which is why Samet is so shocked, and affronted, when he discovers that two pupils have accused him and Kenan of inappropriate contact with students. He can guess who those two are, and he's mortified and angry.

From here the story starts churning, and Samet's bad mood deepens. Ceylan, the living reigning master of Turkish cinema, loves to throw a displaced intellectual into a confounding situation and watch him squirm, but his camera is always a source of stillness, pausing for long stretches on the same frame, often juxtaposing the natural landscape with a character's internal life. Here, the landscape is wintry. Everyone is forever trudging through the snow, and the eternal whiteness throws individual figures and faces into sharp relief.

Samet sees the potential for a great image — he is an artist, after all. Ceylan sprinkles stunning still portraits into the film, presumably taken by Samet, of the local people, which might suggest he has some interest in their lives after all. But if he feels curiosity, he masks it well. The center of Samet's world is Samet and his superiority. (He seems of a piece with the misanthropic writer in Christian Petzold's "Afire": His irritations with people serve to convince him that he lives a life of more meaning than they do.)

Portraiture can capture something ephemeral about a person's essence, or it

Deniz Celiloglu plays a detached and generally unkind artist in "About Dry Grasses," in which two teachers are wrongly accused of inappropriate conduct.

can simply be composition, fixing people into a landscape. Samet's portraits, though stunning, are the latter. He tells his students one day that they'll study portraiture, but when they balk, he just tells them to draw what they know — as if they couldn't know people at all.

Maybe that's why Samet, meeting another local teacher named Nuray (Merve Dizdar) on a blind date, at first is not interested in her at all. She is beautiful, smart and feisty, and she's the opposite of Samet, having lost a leg in part because of her activism, while Samet can't really summon the passion to care about politics. What he sees is her missing leg, and it makes her uninteresting to him. It's only when she hits it off with Kenan that he changes his mind, as much to put his friend down as to actually know Nuray.

Ceylan's portrait of an artist feels a bit self-referential, or perhaps self-inquisitive. (He co-wrote the screenplay with two frequent collaborators, his wife, Ebru Ceylan, and Akin Aksu; the story is based in part on

Aksu's journals during a three-year compulsory teaching stint in Anatolia.) In addition to his filmmaking, Ceylan is a photographer, like Samet. His films often function as their own kind of portraiture. They're long, and slow, and their sheer duration coaxes the audience to stop simply looking at his characters as pawns in a story and enter the texture of their inner lives. In one surprise moment, both viewer and characters are suddenly popped out of their context, reframing everything we've been watching. Suddenly we see Samet as a man who is performing for everyone; he is telling his story instead of living it.

In "About Dry Grasses," Ceylan is asking a vital question of himself as well as the audience: What does it mean to be engaged in the world? And if you choose to back away and watch, rather than become involved, is it self-protection, superiority or just cowardice?

"About Dry Grasses" clocks in at nearly three and a half hours, but the running time feels right. It has the warp and woof of an epic in miniature, one that feels literary and also oddly anti-literary, because Samet never really changes. The landscape doesn't either. Whether or not the world can change is an even bigger question and one that Ceylan isn't interested in answering. Instead, he is placing two paths before us, and before himself.

About Dry Grasses
Not rated. In Turkish, with subtitles. Running time: 3 hours 17 minutes. In theaters.

MANOHLA DARGIS | FILM REVIEW

Danger and Companionship in Two Teenagers' Migration Odyssey

Senegalese cousins struggle to reach Europe in a drama by the director of 'Gomorrah.'

THE ITALIAN DIRECTOR Matteo Garrone has a talent for cruelty. There's always been more to Garrone's movies than unkindness, but he has a striking facility for crystallizing human baseness in images that are both specific and laden with surplus meaning.

Io Capitano
Not rated. In Wolof and French, with subtitles. Running time: 2 hours 1 minute. In theaters.

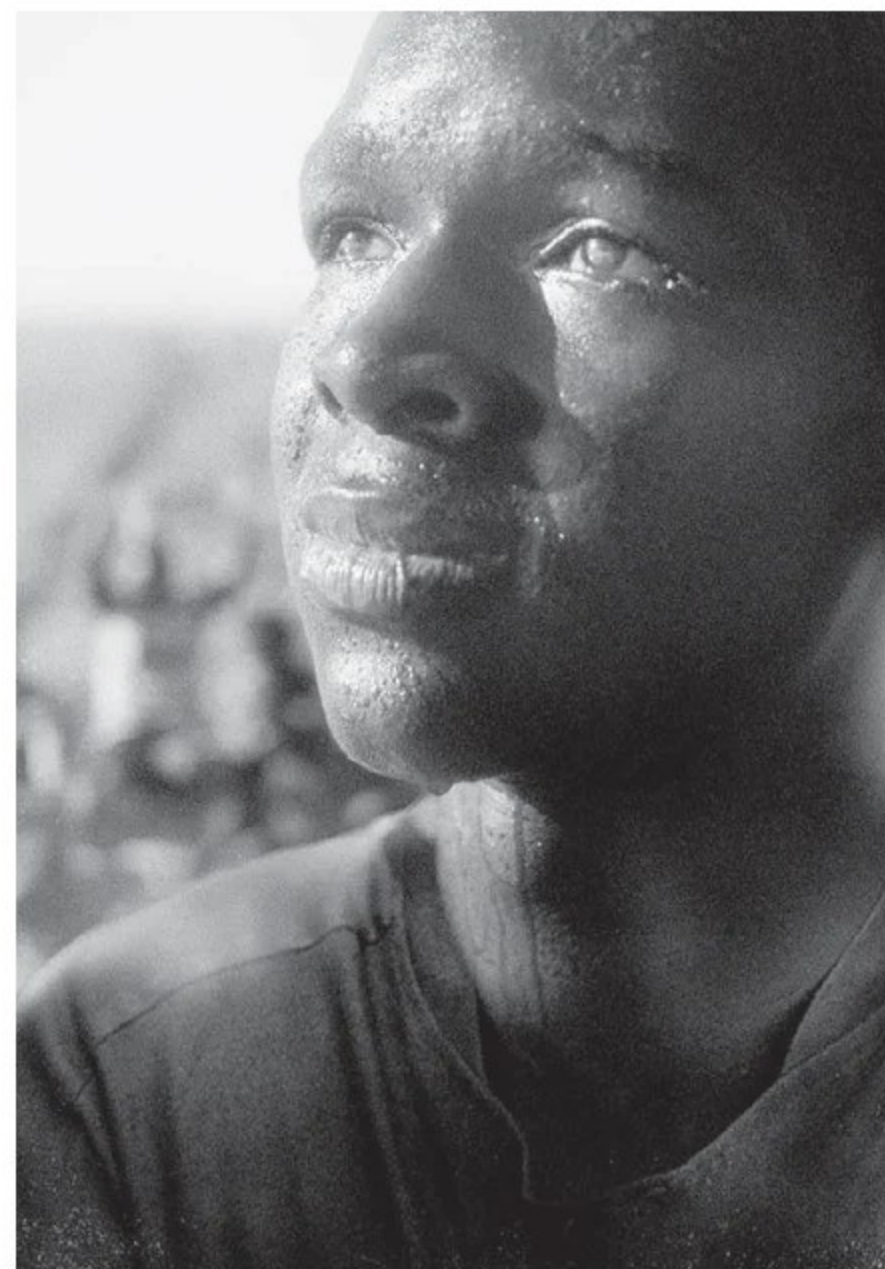
When I think of "Gomorrah," his 2008 drama about a Neapolitan criminal syndicate, I immediately re-see the shot of two dead teenagers in the bucket of a bulldozer — a grotesque Pietà.

Two very different adolescents figure in "Io Capitano," which tracks a pair of Senegalese cousins as they struggle to make their way from their home in Dakar to Europe. Seydou (a tremendous Seydou Sarr) lives with his widowed mother and younger siblings in a cramped house, but spends much of his time with Moussa (Moustapha Fall), his friend and cousin. Both boys want to live in Europe, where Seydou dreams of finding stardom as a musician. So, when they're not at home or school, they work at building sites hauling heavy loads to save for their trip. They have a wad of cash when the story begins; it won't be nearly enough.

Garrone efficiently fills in Seydou's everyday life, its routines and textures, its possibilities and limitations, with attentive camerawork, his customary eye for pungent detail and relaxed, measured rhythms. Seydou and Moussa's fondness for each other and mutual dependence are evident in their gazes and gestures, and in the unforced intimacy of how they walk and talk together. They're sweet, pleasant, optimistic and nice to be around; they're also teenagers. When Seydou tells his mother that he plans to go abroad, she chastises him — worry radiates off her like a fever — and he quickly backs off. Soon after, though,



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he and Moussa leave.

Their journey is divided into distinct sections that take the teenagers deep into the Sahara, involves a barbaric interlude in Libya and eventually brings them to the edge of the Mediterranean. It's an often punishing trip, one punctuated with, and increasingly defined by, violence that can be near-phantasmagoric in its depravity. Garrone, who wrote the script with several of his regular collaborators, has drawn from accounts by migrants who have made analogous journeys. It took one of the movie's advisers, an Ivorian man named Mamadou Kouassi, three terrible years to reach Europe, where he works in Italy advising migrants. (Similar crossings are detailed in reports from organizations like Human Rights Watch.)

Seydou Sarr, left and right, plays an adolescent who embarks on a perilous journey from Africa to Europe in "Io Capitano," a film by the Italian director Matteo Garrone.

By the time Seydou and Moussa are on a bus out of Dakar, they have heard about the dangers of their enterprise. But they're excited by the idea of adventure and by the prospect of fame, their naïveté stoked by the videos they watch on a cellphone. "White people," Moussa teases Seydou, "will be asking you for autographs." Seydou also wants to help his family (his mother has a small market stall), though Garrone doesn't emphasize the family's poverty. Seydou and Moussa are poor, certainly by the standards of the Westerners who presumably constitute this movie's target audience. Yet they're not abject, downtrodden; rather, they are kids, open to the world and eager to chart their own course.

This gives Seydou and Moussa's youthful desires a universal aspect, of course, which

initially frames their undertaking as a classic adventure rather than as a docudrama lifted from the news. Whatever the powerful political forces and the socioeconomic conditions that have helped shape the characters' lives, the boys themselves approach their journey as an ambitious undertaking, with visceral giddiness not desperation. Their innocence is palpable. It also creates an intense sense of apprehension, at least for viewers aware of the agonies experienced by refugees, migrants and asylum seekers worldwide. I think Garrone trusts that his audience has some awareness of those agonies, and perhaps even a role in them.

Soon enough, Seydou and Moussa have crossed borders and are on the first arduous leg of their journey. After buying counterfeit passports (they run out of cash quickly), they end up crowded onto an open-bed truck driven by heavily armed smugglers and overflowing with migrants — men, women, children — from different countries.

In these scenes and elsewhere, Garrone recurrently shifts between close-ups and extreme long shots, which alternately brings you within breathing, at times, panting distance of the teenagers, and underscores just how small and vulnerable they are. When one migrant falls off the truck, the drivers just keep going. The horror that washes over the boys' stunned faces is visceral, and it is haunting.

"Io Capitano" can be rightfully difficult to watch, and an extended sequence set in a Libyan hellhole where migrants are tortured and sold is flat-out grim. Garrone doesn't spare you much, but if the movie never turns into an exercise in art-house sadism, it's because his focus remains unwaveringly fixed on his characters who, from the start, are fully rounded people, not props, symbols or object lessons. Garrone invites you into a story and demands your attention with visual clarity and narrative urgency. Yet his great strength here is the tenderness of his touch, which works as a kind of force field that keeps your own despair at bay and your sympathies on his complicated, transparent, achingly hopeful characters.