

**Merzak Allouache, director.** *The Rooftops*. 2013. 91 minutes. Arabic with French subtitles. France/Algeria. Les Films de l'Atalante. No price reported.

*The Rooftops* is without doubt Merzak Allouache's most interesting and most poignant film so far. In a sense, it sums up everything that Allouache has been tackling in his films for the past forty years. Each of his previous films explores a major theme. *The Rooftops*, however, seems like a tsunami that brings all the issues (Islamist violence, immigration, postcolonial corruption, among others) to the shore at once. In this scrutinizing critique of Algerian society, nobody is spared, even those members of the population who used to be the victims of the state and of the Islamists.

The film is structured as five separate short stories that happen in parallel within a twenty-four-hour cycle in five different neighborhoods of Algiers. The entire film follows the rhythm of the five calls for prayer in the background, which set the tone and atmosphere. All of these stories take place on rooftops, and the film is also marked by this dominant aerial and panoramic view of the capital. The sublime Mediterranean Sea is omnipresent, but it seems as if the inhabitants of Algiers have turned their backs to it. The setting is simply magical, especially with the sunlight over the city (so well described by Albert Camus in his lyrical texts on Algeria). The viewer cannot then overlook the constant paradox that juxtaposes the beauty of the natural setting with the ugliness of society.

The dialogue is very rich and carries most of the film's substance. This, obviously, is typical for African cinema in general (both north and south of the Sahara), in which a rich script compensates for the absence of special effects, pharaonic budgets, star actors, and such. In one of the five stories, for instance, the young musicians are joking about the French president's visit to Algiers and how the government puts a new coat of paint on all the places along his itinerary. One of them says, sarcastically, "I wish he'll pass by my neighborhood."

In another story history resurfaces, forcing people to deal with episodes from their past that remain controversial. This part features an old man who is considered insane and is treated like a sick dog by his family. He is chained and often insulted, confined in a cage on a rooftop. Like the wise *majnoun* (crazy person) in Maghrebian literature, this character tells the hidden truth about Algeria's past, particularly the liberation war (1954–62). He insists that the roles of the hero and the villain have been reversed. Unfortunately, with the exception of his young niece, who is willing only briefly to listen to him, nobody is interested in his old stories. Like most Algerians, everyone else is preoccupied with the daily issues of the present with no interest in the past.

Among the multiple issues in the film, Allouache takes up the dominant hypocrisy of both the government and the people. A young female director wants to shoot a panoramic view of Algiers from a rooftop for a film she has titled "Algiers, the Pearl of the Arab World." However, she instructs her cameraman to avoid the Christian and Jewish cemeteries because she does

not want anything “foreign” to appear in her film. This is therefore one of many deliberate attempts to obliterate parts of Algeria’s rich and complex history.

Allouache highlights other major issues as well concerning Algerian society. One of the rooftops is being used by a group of young religious fanatics to jumpstart the specter of Islamic fundamentalism while hiding suspicious business activities. On another rooftop a pseudo-imam who turns out to be a charlatan takes advantage of credulous people who consult him about all sorts of problems, such as a woman troubled by marital and sexual issues.

Another story concerns the iniquity and cruelty that are prevalent in Algerian society. An old landlord is trying to evict a poor old woman from her makeshift shack on a rooftop, where she has been giving shelter to her niece and the niece’s teenage son. From the dialogue we learn that the niece had been raped by Islamic terrorists during Algeria’s Black Decade of the 1990s, an experience that led to mental instability, her expulsion from her own family, her husband’s suicide, and her illegitimate son’s consequent drug abuse. Moreover, in each of the stories the female lead musician stands on a rooftop in a cold night, frozen and helpless while witnessing the tragic end of another woman on the adjacent rooftop. Sexism and violence against women clearly constitute another major concern in this film. In sum, *The Rooftops* serves as a mirror for all Algerians who need to pause and ponder what has become of their country.

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**Wanuri Kahiu, director.** *Pumzi*. 2010. 22 minutes. English. Kenya. *Africa First: Volume One*. Africa First. \$14.98.

*Pumzi*, directed by Wanuri Kahiu, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010 as part of the New African Cinema program, and later earned the award for Best Short at the Cannes Film Festival and the Special Jury Prize at the Zanzibar International Film Festival. Described as Kenya’s first science fiction film, *Pumzi* tells the tale of Asha (Kudzani Moswela) who lives in an authoritarian society thirty-five years after World War III, also known as the “water wars.” As evidenced by the name of the war and the scenes in which guards distribute water to individual citizens or show Asha collecting and purifying her own urine as a method of recycling water, water is now an exceedingly rare resource. Earth no longer retains sufficient environmental stability to sustain human life due to the combined effects of climate change, capitalist exploitation, and global warfare.