

PANORAMA SPECIAL
JUSTIN CHANG

The Road to Istanbul

DIRECTOR: Rachid Bouchareb

STARRING: Astrid Whettnall, Pauline Burlet, Patricia Ide, Abel Jafri, Faouzi Saïchi

After two meandering dramas (“Just Like a Woman” and “Two Men in Town”) featuring Muslim characters on New Mexico soil, the French-born Algerian director Rachid Bouchareb abruptly veers into topical territory with “Road to Istanbul,” a compellingly one-sided portrait of a Belgian woman desperately trying to find the daughter who ran away from home to join the Islamic State in Syria. Set at the juncture where Third World problems unexpectedly become First World concerns, the film follows the mother (strongly played by Astrid Whettnall) with a single-minded intensity that, for better and for worse, treats the child’s motivations as a largely offscreen mystery. While some of the final scenes are played with a bluntness that strains credulity, overall this swift-moving tale has a spareness and simplicity that feel welcome after Bouchareb’s more strained recent efforts; the sad timeliness of its premise should translate into solid festival play and modest art-house potential.

Still, for those viewers expecting some psychological or spiritual insight into why thousands of European youths — many of them women — have left their homes to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Bouchareb’s 10th feature provides little in the way of concrete illumination. The closest thing we get to an explanation from 18-year-old Elodie (Pauline Burlet) is an early scene in which she records a silent online video of herself, using title cards to tell the story of her conversion to Islam. Mysterious and withdrawn, Elodie tells no one what she’s thinking, much less what she plans to do next — not her basketball coach, nor her closest school friend, and certainly not her single mother, Elisabeth (Whettnall), who tries her best to stay connected to her increasingly distant daughter.

When Elodie takes off, claiming to be staying over at a friend’s place, it takes Elisabeth a few days to realize that her daughter was lying and has in fact vanished. A police investigation reveals that the girl flew with her boyfriend to Cyprus,



and that the two are making their way toward the southern Turkish province of Hatay, which suggests they’re planning to enter Syria and join with the jihadists fighting in the region. With Elodie proving largely unresponsive to her mother’s frantic text messages and phone calls, and the authorities unable to venture outside their jurisdiction, Elisabeth determines to travel to Turkey — and into Syria itself, if she has to — and bring her daughter home safely.

Bouchareb co-wrote the screenplay with his past collaborators Olivier Lorelle, Zoe Galeron and Yasmina Khadra, whose 2008 novel, “The Attack,” inspired Ziad Doueiri’s 2012 film of the same title. Like that movie, “Road to Istanbul” centers around an adult protagonist who, shellshocked by a loved one’s inexplicably life-threatening actions, undertakes a lonely quest for answers. It also has certain elements in common with Bouchareb’s “London River” (2009), which focused on two very different people searching for their missing children in the aftermath of that city’s 2005 terrorist attacks. Elisabeth proves no less dogged in her pursuit of Elodie, and Whettnall’s alert, intelligent performance holds the viewer steadfast, managing the tricky task of conveying heartsick agitation and panic without devolving into hysterics.

As the indefatigable Elisabeth braves the desert heat and makes her way toward the Syrian border, her every step seems grounded in the emotional logic of a mother’s unconditional love for her child, which does its part to smooth over the occasional implausibilities that loom in the narrative; under the circumstances, it seems extremely unlikely that Elisabeth would ever find someone who doesn’t want to be found. Without giving away

precisely what happens in the despairing final moments of “Road to Istanbul” (the title provides a clue), it’s worth noting that a more honest movie — one that hewed closer to the reality it’s clearly trying to channel — might have ended in less expeditious or conclusive fashion.

Some of Bouchareb’s characteristically on-the-nose messaging creeps into the later passages, mainly in the form of one finger-wagging local who yells “We Syrians, we’re dying!” and momentarily transforms a drama into a lecture. But there are also shrewd, glancing insights into the psychological grip that ISIS continues to exert on so many young Westerners, as evidenced by a support group Elisabeth attends with other parents to receive counsel on how to stay in contact with their wayward children. The story may feel a touch incomplete for not delving into how and why Elodie set herself on a course for death, but in some ways “Road to Istanbul” feels like a wiser, tougher movie for avoiding the path of easy explanations.

There’s something of a hint, perhaps, in d.p. Benoit Chamailard’s lingering, eerily beautiful shots of Elisabeth and Elodie’s riverfront home in the Belgian countryside; filmed in dim, overcast grays and blues, the scene is at once soothing and faintly disturbing in its utter seclusion from the outside world. Certainly Burlet, so memorable in Asghar Farhadi’s “The Past,” is one of those preternaturally expressive actresses who can cut to the heart of the matter with a single sad look and minimal dialogue. She’s entirely convincing here as a young woman who insists that she’s been found and yet, from the moment we first peer into her soulful dark eyes, seems deeply and irretrievably lost.

(Algeria-France-Belgium) A 3B Prods., Arte France, Scope Pictures, Tassili Films co-production. (International sales: Elle Driver, Paris.) Directed by Rachid Bouchareb. Screenplay, Olivier Lorelle, Yasmina Khadra, Zoe Galeron, Bouchareb. Camera, Benoit Chamailard; editors, Yannick Kergoat, Emmanuelle Jay; music, Eric Neveux; production designers, Nourredine Benahmed, Mira Van Den Neste; costume designer, Julie Beca; sound, Jean-Yves Munch, Olivier Walczak, Sebastien Wera, Michel Schillings. Reviewed online, Pasadena, Calif., Feb. 14, 2016. (In Berlin Film Festival — Panorama Special.) Running time: 93 MIN. Cast: Astrid Whettnall, Pauline Burlet, Patricia Ide, Abel Jafri