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Eye on the Oscars: Foreign Language

By TODD LONGWELL

Critics and auds alike have seen it time and time again: achingly serious foreign-language film Oscar submissions that seem to have been chosen for the nobility of their intentions rather than their entertainment value.

"Anything that tugs at the heartstrings and sets it against a grand historical backdrop tends to have an advantage, whether or not it's actually good," says Box Office Magazine and KPCC "FilmWeek" film critic Wade Major. "If you talk to people on the foreign-language selection committee, some of the younger members, they're very often fatigued by all the well-meaning, earnest movies about World War II, the Holocaust and oppression in foreign lands -- whether it's China or Iran -- or families losing farms."

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But 2011 has brought a crop of foreign-language films in which po-faced pedantry has taken a back seat to dynamic storytelling, from Belgium's "Bullhead," which uses a mob movie framework to explore the adult aftermath of childhood sexual assault, to Mexico's "Miss Bala," which takes on the hot-button topic of narco-trafficking via a suspense thriller about a beauty pageant contestant (Stephanie Sigman) kidnapped and coerced to work for a crime cartel.

"We believed that if we did it well, the social commentary would come from beneath and we wouldn't have to have long, didactic dialogues," says "Miss Bala" writer-director Gerardo Naranjo. "In fact, in the movie, the (lead) actress almost never speaks and neither does the bad guy. I think that one of the common mistakes of Mexican film is that we overdo our jobs and try to explain everything and draw conclusions."

Italy's "Terraferma" starts off as a coming-of-age tale about a 19-year-old Sicilian (Filippo Pucillo) caught between the old (his grandfather's dying fishing business) and the new (his uncle's tourism trade). Then their fishing boat happens upon a faltering raft of African refugees, and the film veers wildly from social drama to suspense.

"I didn't want to send any message, I was just trying to portray the situation, which I thought was interesting enough to be told in (cinematic) language," says the film's writer-director Emanuele Crialesi. "For me, immigration is an important subject of the century" and, even though he wanted to he wanted to explore the issue from a human rather than a political point of view, he allows that "whenever we deal with the human subject, we we're dealing also with politics somehow."

As for foreign films that serve their social issues straight up, Philippe Falardeau, writer-director of the French-language Canadian Oscar entry "Monsieur Lazhar," thinks some people might prefer them because they get enough standard-issue action, romance and psycho-drama from movies in their native tongue.

"As a spectator, we want to know what's happening in those (other) countries," he says. "It's our window to their world."

In years since "Schindler's List," auds have been give a wealth of cinematic portrayals of the Holocaust. But director Agnieszka Holland's fact-based drama "In Darkness" provides a fresh perspective on the tragedy, while still managing to be moving and suspenseful.

The film explores the moral frailties of both the film's protagonist, anti-Semitic Polish-Catholic thief Leopold Socha (Robert Wieckiewicz), and the Jewish refugees he helps hide in the sewers underneath the Nazi-occupied town of Lvov. It also shows how life goes on both below and above ground -- and not just through women knitting and children fighting over crayons. People fornicate, masturbate and shoot up. A man commits adultery while his wife and daughter watch from the next bed.

While these scenes will titillate some, Holland included them to illustrate a simple human truth.

"During the Holocaust, even in the ghettos, the sexual life was very rich," she says. "I think that people needed this closeness, this sensual dimension."

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