

SIFF 2022 Review: Zia Mohajerjasbi's Arresting "Know Your Place" Explores a City's Limits

Stephen Saito · April 17, 2022

Nearly an hour into "Know Your Place," writer/director Zia Mohajerjasbi reaches his destination, even though it seems hopelessly out of reach for the film's lead character Robel (Joseph Smith). Standing with a suitcase that isn't his, the high schooler may have his pal Fahmi (Natnael Mebrahtu) along with him, but he is utterly lost in the city where he's spent most of his life, making a rare foray out of South Seattle where his mother Amuna (Selawit Gebresus) will gladly open the doors for others in the tight-knit Eritrean and Ethiopian community for such communal gatherings as prayer services out of their small apartment, but rarely steps outside herself and keeps him close after the passing of his father a year before. That event clearly added to Robel not quite having his footing these days, but is only a part of his disorientation, experiencing a different life at his suburban high school than at home where only he and his sister Fayven (Esther Kibreab) will occasionally speak English and carrying the burden of helping the household run smoothly when with Fayven out working, he is the only way to connect with the outside world for Amuna.

In his striking directorial debut, Mohajerjasbi doesn't draw attention to the sight of Robel lugging a suitcase around Seattle, but it holds all the power of what's come before, with the filmmaker exerting a control over all the small details of the young man's life that would seem to make him a prisoner of his surroundings rather than having limitless directions to start walking when he's sent out on an errand to get a suitcase full of vitamins and cash to a woman traveling soon to Eritrea. It's fitting that this is a particularly selfless act on the part of both Robel and Amuna after learning that a cousin in Eritrea has been sick and could use the supplies when you get the sense that Amuna hasn't heard from this sister-in-law even when her brother passed, a request would just fall into the many that has been asked of them as refugees and "Know Your Place" constantly impresses in conveying the pressure that Robel and his family face on all sides as they retain ties to places they no longer reside and struggle to feel a part of the places they do, leading to a resignation to go along with the wishes

of others rather than ever thinking about putting themselves first and making any changes that could make their lives easier.

Refraining from the path of least resistance himself, Mohajerjasbi gets at such rich observations in his own time, occasionally handing over a scene to an actor for a mesmerizing monologue tied to the deep faith that runs throughout the community that is apt to make you a believer as well. At times, there could be more focus in scenes tied directly to the plot to eliminate overstating a point, but it's a small price to pay for what the film captures in its unforced natural rhythm and cinematographer Nicholas Wiesnet, who previously found a perfect balance in an entirely different immigrant story "It Happened in L.A.," honoring traditions of classic Hollywood while telling the story of those lured there by the dream and not being entirely what they expected, works similar magic here with a Bradford Young-esque hyper-saturation that make the shadows seem inescapable yet allows anything that emerges out to burst with life. "Know Your Place" somehow manages to be in tune with both the soul of its lead character and the city it's set in, even though they can seem at odds with each other and even with the ground shifting beneath Robel's feet, it gives a lay of the land that is all but impossible not to see yourself in, as hard as it might be for those on screen.

"Know Your Place" will screen at the Seattle Film Festival on April 17th at 4 pm at the SIFF Cinema Egyptian and April 19th at 5:45 pm at the Ark Lodge Cinemas. It is also available to stream through the duration of the festival, ending April 24th.