



FILM REVIEW

Serdar Kaya

FILM

Al-Kateab, W. and Watts, E. (Directors) (2019). *For Sama* [Film]. PBS Frontline. Channel 4 News. ITN Productions. (96 minutes)

What happens when a peaceful city turns into a war zone? What do people do when bombs start falling? Do they stay put, or do they flee to safety? At what point does the decision to stay become so dangerous that all but a minority of residents choose to leave?

The literature on displacement has focused on these questions and similar others for decades. Yet, one can argue, the ordeals of civilians in war zones remain largely a mystery to us, as they are difficult for outsiders to relate to, let alone comprehend fully. Documentaries help to overcome this challenge. *For Sama*, in particular, is a must-see for migration scholars, as it captures the extent of the horrors ordinary people witness before they become refugees or internally displaced persons.

The documentary is a first-hand account of the Syrian civil war, as recorded by Waad Al-Kateab (pseudo family name), who was a senior student majoring in economics at the University of Aleppo at the time the conflict began in 2011. Waad used semi-professional

equipment to record the events around her as they happened. She captured the changes in her neighbourhood from the early days of the uprising to the capture of the city by the regime forces in 2016. Her vast video footage was later cut by co-director Edward Watts, a filmmaker known primarily for his 2015 documentary entitled *Escape from ISIS*.

Some of the content that made it to Watt's final 96-minute cut is hard to dismiss. It is war unfiltered. Bombs fall. People carry wounded children to the makeshift hospital in the neighbourhood. There are no stretchers, so wounded adults are dragged through the corridors to the operating room. Everyone is fully alert. Everyone is racing against time. Perhaps everyone is doing more or less what helpless people do in wars when they are under attack.

Of all these nerve-racking scenes, two are arguably the hardest to forget. One is the emergency C-section scene where the baby has no pulse, while the wounded mother is still unconscious. The doctors start resuscita-

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tion immediately. After some very long seconds of CPR, the baby starts breathing, much to everyone's relief. The other is the Queiq massacre scene, where local people find bodies in the river and start hauling them out of the water. They lay them out in rows in a public square for identification. The victims were local merchants and not even fighters. Yet, for some reason, the regime forces bound their wrists behind their backs and tortured them before shooting them in the head and dumping them in the river.

The documentary captures such extraordinary occurrences successfully, but it does not limit itself to the brutality of war. To the contrary, Waad's personal story is intertwined with the ongoing tragedies. Waad's life changes dramatically during the years she records the events in Aleppo. She falls in love with and eventually gets married to Hamza, a doctor who tries to help the wounded the best he can with the little equipment he has. The couple's priorities start to change when Waad becomes pregnant with their daughter Sama, whom the documentary is named after. Waad cannot be sure if they can protect a baby in a war zone, so she keeps re-evaluating their decision to stay.

Most people in the neighbourhood make similar risk assessments continuously, and no one can really know who will still be in Aleppo next week or who will still be alive. Yet life goes on even in the unlikeliest of places. People attend wedding parties. They cheer up and dance. As modest as the party may be, people still find ways to forget about everything and just be human again for a while.

For Sama has captured life as is, without the cameraperson herself even knowing what will happen next. This spontaneity is proba-

bly the most outstanding quality of the production. From one scene to the next, viewers witness life in war-torn Aleppo with all the brutality that people have long normalized. It is almost as if viewers experience developments as they happen, alongside those in the recording. For example, in one scene, viewers learn that another family has fled. Those in the recording have also just learned the news. They are thus quietly processing the information. Most viewers probably find themselves doing the same. No one really knows where that family is right now, or whether they will be all right. Nor does anyone know whether staying or fleeing is the right thing to do. Then someone breaks the silence by pointing at a boy nearby who is sad because his best friend is gone. This is the way *For Sama* tells its story.

Ever since its premiere at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas, in March 2019, *For Sama* has gained critical acclaim. After being shown in many festivals around the world and winning many awards, it was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, and it won the International Emmy Award for Best Documentary. Readers of *Refuge* will find it informative and enlightening.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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