



MOVIES

'Fireflies': Film Review

4:12 PM PDT 3/11/2019 by Jonathan Holland



Courtesy of Miami Film Festival

THE BOTTOM LINE

A study of loneliness and loss.



Iranian-born Bani Khoshnoudi’s film about the people of a Mexican port town made its U.S. premiere at the Miami Film Festival, where it took the HBO Ibero-American Film Award, following appearances at Morelia, Rotterdam and others.

A sensitive and slow-moving study about three suffering, displaced souls in search of better times in Mexico, *Fireflies* is indeed as melancholy as it sounds. Slow-moving, watchful and structured with great care and attention, the Iranian-born, U.S.-raised Bani Khoshnoudi’s understated film, as metaphorical in its way as her 2012 feature debut *Ziba*, is built on the concern the script feels for its characters.

So it’s all the stranger, then, that there’s a partial hole where the life of its protagonist should be, as though in the drive toward big statements, the film — which made its U.S. premiere at the Miami Film Festival, following appearances at Morelia, Rotterdam and others — has lost its feel for detail. But the movie’s strengths nonetheless outdo its flaws, suggesting that *Fireflies’* cold light could continue to illuminate the festival circuit.

Ramin (Arash Marandi, who starred in Ana Lily Amirpour’s critically well-received 2012 vampire Western *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*) is a young Iranian who has ended up an “illegal” immigrant in Vera Cruz after boarding the wrong cargo ship out of Turkey, having fled Iranian repression following that country’s revolts in 2009. Not a great deal of this is dealt with in this often wordless movie, and some viewers will struggle to locate Ramin as little more than generic.

Ramin is working as a laborer now, having left behind a boyfriend whom he longs to get back to and with whom he engages in tense Skype chats. His boyfriend is under the mistaken impression that Ramin is having a good time. Definitely he is not, and when he asks about boarding a ship home, the local mafia quote him a cool \$15,000.

It is of course possible to be a migrant in your own town. Ramin is staying in the hostel run by Leti (Edwarda Gurrola), who does little other than look after her aging uncle Jorge (Eligio Melendez). The film’s most engaging figure, Leti is desperate for what women are traditionally expected to have, her life and looks having conspired against her and made her an interesting mix of the pathetic and the defiant.

Leti has been abandoned by her boyfriend Ernesto (Eduardo Mendizabal), who has emigrated to the U.S., but whose brief return to Vera Cruz quickly extinguishes any hope that they could reunite. Via language exchanges and a little dancing, Ramin and Leti become friends.

Another new friend to Ramin is his fellow laborer, the intriguing Guillermo (Luis Albeli), who plans like so many to get away, as Ernesto has done, to the U.S. The film’s most intense, garrulous presence, Guillermo can never quite shake off his slightly threatening air.

Fireflies is rich in food for thought, opening up unexplored parallels between its characters, all of whom find themselves trapped in lives in a port town — a place of transit — that has now become their permanent reality, and from which there’s only the faintest hope of escape. But the script has perhaps bitten off a lot. Immigration, sexism, homophobia and other prejudices are all duly marshaled and brought into play, while dramatically the pic never takes us very deeply into its characters’ lives, so that though the watchable Gurrola in particular, as the lively, good-hearted Leti, makes a good stab at creating someone unique from the somewhat slim narrative, other characters fare less well.

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But his fear of revealing his sexuality to his new buddy means that he can't explain why, and such exchanges only serve to create a silence around Ramin that leaves him looking somewhat stranded not only in Veracruz but in his own movie, too.

Visually, *Fireflies* does a good job of rendering port locations that are vast and unfriendly by day and depopulated and ghostly by night, both moods being entirely appropriate. Likewise, several scenes are charged with a rich, tremblingly intimate air. There are occasional moments of cool street poetry, too: After Ramin visits a prostitute, a gust of wind blows up white plastic sheeting for a single, fleeting instance of grungy beauty.

The oblique title is never referred to in the film, but may indicate the light that its characters emit in their attempts to find human closeness. The film was co-produced by two of the brightest lights on the Santo Domingo film scene, Israel Cardenas and Amelia Guzman.

Production companies: Zensky Cine, Pensee Sauvage

Cast: Arash Marandi, Edwarda Gurrola, Luis Alberti, Eligio Melendez, Eduardo Mendizabal

Director-screenwriter: Bani Khoshnoudi

Producers: Elsa Reyes, Bani Khoshnoudi

Director of photography: Benjamin Echazarreta

Art director: Florent Vitse

Costume designer: Bertha Romero, J. Guadalupe Lopez Molina

Editors: Miguel Schverdfinger, Gilberto Gonzalez Penilla

Composer: Sohrab Karimi

Sales: FiGa Films

88 minutes