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Arts

IN FOCUS

# The Salem Film Fest looks at imprisonment in many forms



COURTESY OF INTERMEZZO FILMS

A scene from “Free Men,” one of the documentaries screening at the Salem Film Fest.

By Peter Keough

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Several of the documentaries screening at the Salem Film Fest (March 29-April 4; full disclosure: I’m a member of the jury) can be seen as prison diaries, accounts of individuals seeking freedom from various kinds of confinement, both literal and metaphorical.

For Kenneth Reams, in Anne-Frédérique Widmann’s “**Free Men**” (2018) the prison is all too literal. The film screens March 30 at 3:10 p.m. at the Peabody

Essex Museum; a Q&A with the filmmaker follows the screening. When he was 18 Reams participated in a robbery in Arkansas with a friend who needed money to pay for his graduation robes. His friend, who shot and killed the victim, got sentenced to life. But Reams got the death penalty.

That was 25 years ago. Since then he has been held in solitary confinement on death row. But in that time Reams has painted, sculpted, and gotten engaged to be married. As his lawyer labors to reopen his case and Reams organizes an exhibit of his art in London while planning his wedding, the state of Arkansas is about to break a macabre record by executing 10 men in 10 days. Widmann's documentary quietly condemns the justice system while extolling the resilience of those who seek to overcome it.

As the title of Katrine Philp's "**False Confessions**" (2018) indicates, the iniquities of that system begin well before the trial. The film screens March 31 at 7:30 p.m. at CinemaSalem; the screening is preceded by a performance from musician Prateek Poddar and followed by a Q&A with the filmmaker. Focusing on defense attorney Jane Fisher-Byrialsen as she works on behalf of wrongfully convicted clients, the film exposes the manipulative and deceitful tactics interrogators rely on to compel innocent people to incriminate themselves.

Philp's film revisits the case of Korey Wise, one of the so-called Central Park Five, convicted in 1990 of raping and nearly killing a jogger. All five teenage suspects confessed, though there was no other evidence. Wise was 16 at the time and was released from prison in 2002, after someone else admitted to committing the crime.

If he was innocent, why did he confess? Video of the cynical bullying and calculated lying by police interrogators over several hours to break him down show how it's done. Another video, of a 14-year-old boy, helpless and innocent, undergoing the same ordeal, is even harder to watch.

Lennon Lacy, an African-American teenager, never served time in jail but his brief life was spent within the confinement of a racist community. He was found hanging from a swing set on Aug. 29, 2014, in Bladenboro, N.C., a town with an ugly legacy of hatred and violence.

Jacqueline Olive's "**Always in Season**" (2019) takes up Lacy's case, which the local authorities determined to be a suicide but which Lacy's mother and others believe to be murder. The film screens April 1 at 8 p.m. at CinemaSalem; a performance by musician Walnut-Da Lyrical Geni precedes the film and a Q&A with the filmmaker follows.

The film also examines the history of lynching, presenting horrific archival photos and accounts that describe official complicity and the enthusiastic participation of entire communities. These atrocities were advertised in newspapers, watched by crowds, sometimes in the thousands, with photographs and grisly relics sold as souvenirs (perhaps Olive was alluding in the film's title to Billie Holiday's 1939 recording of the anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit").

Justice then was elusive, and as this film suggests, still is today.

Ten-year-old Oleg's prison is defined by the river near the battered house where he lives with his grandmother. Beyond it lies the front line of the Ukrainian civil war. Simon Lereng Wilmont's documentary "**The Distant Barking of Dogs**" (2017) accompanies Oleg over the course of a year, during which uneasy truces punctuate the continuous rocket and artillery fire that passes overhead. The film screens March 30 at 4:30 p.m. at Peabody's Black Box Theater; a performance by musician Melissa Fine precedes the screening.

Meanwhile, Oleg plays with his younger cousin and visits his mother's grave. During barrages he hides in the basement, speculating with his grandmother about how close the explosions might be. With an older boy, he wanders about

the mostly deserted, war torn streets picking up discarded bullets and other detritus of war until someone, inevitably, comes across a loaded handgun.

For Afghan filmmaker Hassan Fazili, the world became a prison for him and his family after a former friend and Taliban convert tipped him off that he was on the jihadists' hit list. He flees from Kabul with his wife and two young daughters to Tajikistan, and so begins "**Midnight Traveler**" (2019), a nearly two-year, 3,500-mile hegira recorded on three iPhones. The film screens March 29 at 9 p.m. at CinemaSalem; a performance by the musician Vibe The Great precedes the screening.

After Tajikistan denies them asylum, the family heads for security in the European Union. The route is long and treacherous. They pass back through Afghanistan, are smuggled into Iran, and then over the border into Turkey. After crossing illegally into Bulgaria, they are placed in a camp. Along the way a human trafficker threatens Fazili's children if he doesn't cough up more money. After an anti-immigrant mob attacks them in Sofia, they wonder if they are in more danger in Europe than they were from the Taliban.

Meanwhile, Fazili and his wife, also a filmmaker, endure such terror and dehumanization with resignation, desperation, and irony. Their children manage to find delight in the passing scenery. "Dad look!" one of the girls exclaims as they run through a field to another tense border crossing. "That mountain looks like a painting!"

The iPhone footage seems rushed but is precise and often beautiful and is edited in a way that reflects lives lived perpetually in medias res, in which a moment of peace gives way to a black screen and then a new, desperate crisis. It is like a found-footage horror film — "Cloverfield" (2008), for example — except here the horror is real.

Go to [salemfilmfest.com/2019/](http://salemfilmfest.com/2019/).

*Peter Keough can be reached at [petervkeough@gmail.com](mailto:petervkeough@gmail.com).*

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