

BROKER

Monday, February 13, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Brian Tallerico | RogerEbert.com | Not Rated | 129 Mins.

Hirokazu Kore-eda uses arguably melodramatic plot structures to craft nuanced, delicate character studies. His focus throughout most of his career, but especially lately, has been on stories of unexpected families, and what that word even means. Is family the group you're born in or the one who cares for you, raises you and protects you? It's a theme of Kore-eda's going back to his masterpiece "Nobody Knows," but it's also reflected in excellent recent dramas like "Like Father, Like Son," "After the Storm," and his Palme d'Or-winning "Shoplifters." This year, he has quietly delivered the seemingly underrated "Broker," opening in limited release next week before expanding in early 2023. In a crowded Cannes slate this year, "Broker" slipped under the radar, and it deserves a much bigger audience. This is a moving drama about people pushed together by fate who end up not merely helping each other survive but elevate through an increasingly harsh world.



Kore-eda traveled to South Korea to tell this story, partly because that country more commonly uses something called "baby boxes." But one suspects it's also so he could work with the amazing Song Kang-ho ("Parasite"), who won Best Actor at Cannes. Song plays Ha Sang-hyeon, the owner of a laundry shop who volunteers at a local church. That's where he works an unusual scheme with his friend Dong-soo (Gang Dong-won) as the two take the infants dropped off by mothers who cannot care for them. The pair sell the babies on the adoption market. Yes, "Broker" is a dramedy about child trafficking, but Kore-eda instantly wants you to question your judgment of his characters. Is it that much better for a baby to enter the Korean foster system than to be sold to a family who will love and care for it? "Broker" doesn't directly address this question as much as let it hang in the air, reflecting how we will judge the characters moving forward.

Everything falls apart when a mother named Moon So-young (the phenomenal Lee-Ji-eun) returns to the church to get her baby back, stumbling onto the operation. At the same time, a pair of detectives named Soo-jin (Bae Doona) and Detective Lee (Lee Joo-young)

follow this new crew of outsiders, discovering that not everything is as it seems.

"Broker" shouldn't work. In the plot description alone, it sounds kind of ridiculous and almost insulting. And if one can't get past its contrivances, especially in the final act, it won't connect. However, I find it so refreshing when a filmmaker can use an old-fashioned melodramatic structure to connect emotionally. Kore-eda's films, particularly this one, are perfect examples of what Roger Ebert was getting at when he wrote of film as an empathy machine. They're not just asking you to walk in someone else's shoes, but they're demands for empathy for people you see daily. They're requests for empathy not just for the people on the screen but for the makeshift families you have been surrounded by. He uses melodrama not merely to manipulate his audience but to shift your emotional center and to push away the cynicism and judgment of the world. He presents his characters with such compassion and understanding that we come to love them too. "This car is filled with liars," says Dong-soo, and he's not wrong, but how did they get to this point? Why have they lied? What does it say about where they've been and where they're going?

It helps that Kore-eda's hand with performance direction has only gotten better. Song is as good as one would expect—he's literally never bad—but he's not alone. Lee Ji-eun is the revelation, conveying how much the character has been thrust into a situation she could never have imagined without feeling like a pawn of the plot. She's the heart of the story in that it's how her character turns from a young woman with no options to someone who finds her path through life. Kore-eda allows his emotion to build through his characters, and his ensemble gets that. If we don't believe their choices or emotions, the whole project falls apart.

Hirokazu Kore-eda understands that unimaginable life decisions aren't made easily. They're often made by people who have reached a fork in the road where neither direction felt like the right one. We're all stumbling through life at certain points. And it's the people we meet on the way, the ones who end up joining us, that keep us moving.

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Monday, February 27, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Liam Lacey | -Original Cin | Not Rated | 106 Mins.

Nowhere in the world is making films a more a consequential political act than in Iran.

Last Saturday, Taraneh Alidoosti, star of Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning movie *The Salesman*, was arrested for a social media post. Two other actresses, Hengameh Ghaziani and Katayoun Riahi, were arrested (and subsequently released) in November for expressing solidarity with protesters.

While other prominent filmmakers have left the country over the past two decades, no director has demonstrated the wish to stay and support change more than 62-year-old Jafar Panahi. His latest, *No Bears*, will be released on Friday, while its creator languishes in prison where he has been since July of this year.

Panahi has been one of Iran's most celebrated filmmakers since his 1995 debut, *The White Balloon*, followed by *The Mirror*, *The Circle*, *Crimson Gold*, and *Offside*, all of which won major international film festival awards. In his films and interviews with international journalists, Panahi has always been forthright about his criticisms of the regime.

Because of his support of the pro-democracy green revolution (2009-2010), Panahi was arrested, imprisoned, and banned from making films for 20 years. In the years since, his situation was upgraded from imprisonment to house arrest to travel restrictions.

During this period, in defiance of the ban, Panahi's career entered its dissident phase with a series of quasi-autobiographical films (*This Is Not A Movie*, *Curtains*, *Taxi*, *3 Faces*), that are exemplary in their combination of personal courage and creative invention.

In *No Bears*, Panahi plays a filmmaker who has rented a primitive concrete-block room in an Iranian village near the Turkish border. Despite erratic Wi-Fi and the increasingly paranoid villagers, he is trying to remotely direct a movie in Istanbul.

The film is about a couple of middle-aged Iranian expats — café waitress Zara (Mina Kavani) and her husband Bakhtiyar (Bakhtiyar Panjeji) — who have crossed over to Turkey and are trying to acquire stolen passports to escape to Europe. The actors are a real-life couple who are also attempting to get out of the country.

There's a practical reason why Panahi has chosen to set up his base near the border, rather than in Tehran. His assistant director, Reza (Reza Heydari) cross the border legally to bring him rushes on a hard drive and consult with him. At a nighttime meet-up, Reza tempts Panahi to take the step across the invisible border to join the Turkish crew, but the director jumps back fearfully.

Zara and Bakhtiyar's predicament has a parallel love story in the local village, a riff on the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. A young woman, Gonzal (Darya Alei) has been betrothed since birth to angry misfit Yaghoob (Javad Siyahi) but she loves Soldooz (Amir Davari), a young man who was expelled from university for joining a political protest. The villagers, led by the local sheriff believe the arranged marriage will heal a rift between two families.

There is a rumour that Panahi, while shooting a local wedding ceremony, has accidentally captured a compromising image of Gonzal with Soldooz under a walnut tree.

The villagers demand to see the photos on his camera, but Panahi resists. The villagers, though initially courteous and deferential in dealing with the stranger in their midst, become increasingly threatening. They demand he takes an oath that he has no such image on his memory card, though the local sheriff confides that it's fine if Panahi lies. The important thing is to keep the peace by bowing to authority.

All this takes place against a background where drought has ruined the local farming economy. The villagers depend on smuggling both humans and goods across the border area, which is controlled by criminal gangs, who will kill anyone who attempts to get through without paying.

The presence of the politically ostracized director near the border, in his new car, attracts interest from the Republican Guard that no one wants. "You guys are looking for an excuse to make me leave the village," says Panahi, in an obvious echo of his confrontations with the Iranian regime.

Meanwhile, the director's responsibility in recording reality and creating fiction comes under scrutiny. The film in Turkey is falling apart, as the actors are angry that Panahi is playing games with their own desperate real-life story. Panahi's presence in the village has unleashed forces that turn increasingly dangerous.

At times, *No Bears* can come across as frustratingly convoluted, but Panahi is an artful filmmaker, who surprises us by breaking the rhythms of the film with disruptions, confrontations, and plot twists. There are also tender, quiet sequences, as Panahi bonds with his landlord's mother (Narjes Delaram) who cooks him hot meals in a clay oven, and he provides her with medication for her sore feet.

Perhaps surprisingly, given what Panahi has been through, there are no obvious villains here, just fearful people capitulating to authority and superstition. The fearful "bears" that supposedly roam the border territory are a fiction, designed to keep people afraid and in their place. To paraphrase Shakespeare in another context, the fault is not in our bears but in ourselves.

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ALL THE BEAUTY AND THE BLOODSHED

Monday, March 13, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Sophie Monks Kaufman | IndieWire | Not Rated | 113 Mins.

That title. Even before it screened, “All the Beauty and the Bloodshed” cast a shiver across the Venice Film Festival competition, sounding more like a line from a Yeats poem than the latest documentary from the director of “CITIZENFOUR.” The big news: the film lives up to it. Already a robust director, Laura Poitras has leveled up with a towering and devastating work of shocking intelligence and still greater emotional power.

“All the Beauty and the Bloodshed” is about the life and art of Nan Goldin and how this led her to found P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), an advocacy group targeting the Sackler family for manufacturing and distributing OxyContin, a deeply addictive drug that has exacerbated the opioid crisis. It is about the bonds of community, the dangers of repression, and how art and politics are the same thing.

The biggest compliment is that this film is worthy of Goldin, a woman whose words are as stark as her art, and whose art shows our most intimate and vulnerable selves. To this day, Goldin is known for her breakout photography collection “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,” which includes joyfully candid images of the queer family she had at the Bowery in ’80s New York, self-portraits of sex with her boyfriend, and then her face with two black eyes after he later did his utmost to kill her.

“All the Beauty and the Bloodshed” opens with shaky video footage from P.A.I.N.’s first piece of direct action in The Sackler Wing of The Metropolitan Museum in 2018. They chant “Sacklers lie, people die” and then lie on the ground feigning death. Goldin later reveals that she is inspired by the protest methods of ACT UP during the ’80s. It won’t be the first parallel that she or Poitras make between the AIDS and the opioid crises, and the politics of how certain people are left to die in America.

Poitras then takes us back to the suburban house where Nan grew up. Of her beloved older sister, Barbara, Goldin says, “She made me aware of the banal and deadening grip of suburbia,” speaking with a piercing affect that never lets up, not for a single answer, giving the narrative of her sprawling life the propulsive gait of a panther. For her part, Poitras understands the connections between events decades apart to such a degree that every detail included from a dysfunctional ’50s upbringing will later pay off in tens of different ways, so that this film achieves the monumental task of turning episodes from a life into one side of a perfectly intact shape.

We are told at this early stage that Barbara died by suicide. Nan then got the hell out of there, warned by doctors that if she stayed at home, the same fate would be hers. “All the Beauty and the Bloodshed” is dedicated to Barbara. The storytelling around Nan’s biography, her queer family, art, and what it looks like to take on the billionaire Sackler family are so thoroughly absorbing that it is only at the end when everything circles back to Barbara, following the testimonies of family members who lost children to opioid overdoses, that one realizes that grief has been the emotional bedrock all along.

Poitras expertly moves from past to present, interviewing the investigative journalist, Patrick Radden Keefe, whose expose of the Sackler family in the 2017 New Yorker article “The Family Who Built

an Empire of Pain” resulted in his house being staked out by a shady figure in an SUV. Poitras is on home turf when it comes to investigative storytelling and she digs out old adverts from after 1996, when OxyContin was launched in the states by the Sackler Company’s corporation Purdue Pharma. To combat the population’s fears they released reassuring commercials, and a man in a suit makes a direct address to the camera as he tells lies about OxyContin being non-addictive.

Back once again into the past into the most exuberant part of Nan’s history: the discovery of her queer tribe, at first in Provincetown where she became friends with John Waters’ actress Cookie Mueller and then in The Bowery in New York. A galimorphology of photos and slides show birds of paradise, drag queens in feathers, young, beautiful, wild things in the bath, at shows, dancing, smoking, eating, fucking. The life-force running through these still images is electric and conjures up a time of freedom and possibility in the 1970s and ’80s, before AIDS, when hordes of people could bundle into a windowless loft space and live out their artistic and lifestyle impulses on the cheap.

When AIDS does start taking names, the film stays true, and locates Goldin’s attempts to express what was happening through her art in collaboration with the late, great David Wojnarowicz. His text on “The Killing Machine Called America” is leveled to evoke what was happening then and what is happening again, in a new way, now

We are given a whistle-stop tour through the subculture, with clips from films by Vivienne Dick and Bette Gordon and anecdotes from Tin Pan Alley, a bar where only women worked and Nan was “the dominatrix.” Each vignette comes with its own colorful detail or punchline. There is no dry box-ticking information, only vividness. It turns out that Goldin the orator cuts through the fugue of conformity with the same wallop as Goldin the photographer, and Poitras is there to give her the sharp edit that she deserves.

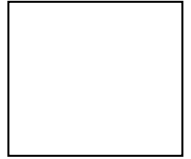
In the context of the breakdown of her relationship with the man who beat her up, Goldin offers a key: she “likes to fight.” Fighting is a motif of “All the Beauty and the Bloodshed” — whether against a man who means physical harm, a family where no one tells the truth, or a pharma corporation intent on laundering its name through artistic donations.

As the film progresses, the line between art and politics melts away to nothing. P.A.I.N.’s protests belong in museums on artistry alone, nonetheless they occur with the very specific goal of getting museums to stop accepting Sackler money and to take down their names. The film embeds with the group as they discuss an old memo where the Sacklers say they want “a blizzard” of Oxy prescriptions to be released across America. For their next protest, they release a blizzard of prescriptions from the top floor of The Guggenheim down into its auditorium. It looks astonishing.

The event that led Goldin to found P.A.I.N. was her own overdose. She nearly died but came back, and stays clean with the help of a drug called buprenorphine that she maintains is more difficult for doctors to prescribe than OxyContin. I won’t spoil the confrontation that “All the Beauty and the Bloodshed” suddenly offers up, except to say that, as it happens, Nan is holding the hand of her friend and fellow P.A.I.N. member, a tiny gesture that underlines how community has been the ballast that allowed this extraordinary woman to survive.

The documentary has been so rammed full of information, but in its last 15 minutes only the core principles flow, revealing a mighty coherence. The origin of the phrase “All the Beauty and the Bloodshed” is dropped in to offer a fitting and furious elegy for those on the other side. This is an overwhelming film.

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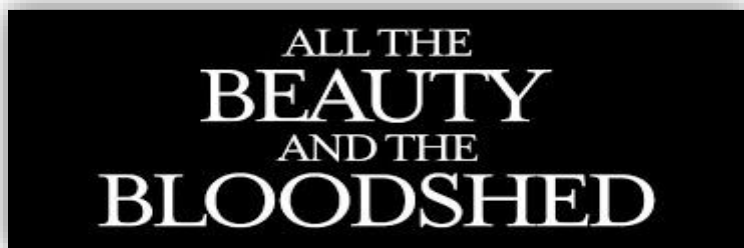
—AwardsWatch

Monday, February 13 at 7:30 pm

"A complex layer cake of guilt and suspicion."

—Danny Leigh, *Financial Times*

Monday, February 27 at 7:30 pm



"An epic documentary about Nan Goldin and her activism against the Sackler family."

The Guardian

Monday, March 13 at 7:30 pm