A young Afghani woman, Habiba, sits on a gurney in a Red Cross clinic in Kabul, one leg dangling in front of her. A female staff member holds her other leg, a prosthesis, asking why she has cut away some of the top. Habiba, who's about 21, explains that it was hurting her stump, so she tried to fix it. Maybe it has something to do with her pregnancy, she says.

(10.05.2005)

This is the film's first mention of a pregnancy, and the news is a bit startling. Equally startling is the realisation that a lot of the staff also have prosthetic legs. The patients here often become staff, as a way of giving them jobs.

Habiba makes a pittance begging on the streets of Kabul. She sits in the dust, unidentifiable beneath her blue chador, asking passers-by for alms. "Men say disgusting things," she says. "They assume I'm a prostitute. They don't see my leg."

In fact, Habiba is happily married. Her husband, Shah, works as a cobbler. His right leg was blown off while he was laying mines with the Mujahideen in the Shomali Valley, where Habiba grew up.

There are thought to be as many as 10 million mines buried in Afghanistan. All sides have used them in the conflict since the Russians invaded in 1979. In 2002, when this was filmed, the Americans were dropping cluster bombs on the country, deadly showers of "bomblets", some of which failed to explode. These become like live mines, sitting on the ground.

Habiba was 11 when she stepped on a Russian landmine in 1992. She was trying to catch a cow in an area she thought had been cleared of mines.

She and Shah already have three children, but there is no sign that her pregnancy is unwelcome. A child is a gift from God and this really is a love story, as the title says. When he lost his leg, Shah thought he might never have a family. Then he set eyes on Habiba, whose family had moved to Kabul to escape the Taliban fighting in their valley. Her sister Mairy spoke on his behalf when he asked for Habiba's hand. "They won't look down on each other," Mairy told her father. "They are flowers from the same garden."

Land Mines is Dennis O'Rourke's first film since Cunnamulla in 2000. That film was controversial even by O'Rourke's standards (he also made The Good Woman of Bangkok), and Land Mines may be partly a reaction. "I wanted to make a film away from Australia, a film which was personal - about people from another culture and place whom I could love and who could relate to me - but in my mind this film also had to be about a global issue of pressing importance."

That's O'Rourke in classic raiment - the documentarian as voyager, romantic, reformer and poet, a strange mixture of egotist and missionary. If he didn't make such engrossing and challenging films, he'd be a little preposterous. Some people think he is, anyway, which is perhaps to confuse the man with the work.

O'Rourke always expresses himself better in images than words, and Land Mines is a beautiful film: simple, direct, engaged and very eloquent about an obscene situation. It's acutely revealing of both the filmmaker's compassion and his anger, without being hysterical. It shows old Russian training films about how to use mines, as well as footage of George Bush announcing a desire to help "the poor souls in Afghanistan". He includes footage of painfully slow and dangerous land mine clearance, undertaken by NGOs such as the Halo Trust, as well as a Pentagon officer admitting at a press conference "it is unfortunate that the cluster bombs are the same colour as the food packages."

O'Rourke has absorbed some of the techniques of the best Iranian films, trying to give his shots a sense of space and stillness. There's a constant tension between his desire to editorialise and his wish to observe, but it's quietly productive. The film is neither all head nor all heart, more a galvanising balance of the two.


<<< zurück zu: News

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