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'Iraq in Fragments'

Documentary. Directed by James Longley. (Not rated. 94 minutes. At the Opera Plaza, Berkeley Shattuck.)

Perhaps the most intriguing thing about "Iraq in Fragments" isn't its subjects, although they are indeed pretty interesting, but the circumstances in which this film was made. A Seattle filmmaker, presumably sane, sneaked across the Iraq border from Egypt after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and stayed in Iraq for two years, without a visa or proper permission, shooting this documentary.

As the title implies, James Longley's objective was not to make a comprehensive documentary about the Iraq war but instead to focus on one

human story for each of the three predominant ethnic groups in Iraq -- Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims and Kurds. Except for a couple of brief shots of American soldiers guarding checkpoints, there is no foreign presence in this documentary other than behind the camera: This is a documentary about the Iraqi people.

Part 1 follows 11-year-old Mohammed, a child in Baghdad with no interest in school (he is in his fifth year at the first-grade level), whose future appears to be as an auto mechanic. He works at an auto repair shop owned by the man who adopted him (Mohammed's father has been missing for years, apparently imprisoned or executed by Saddam Hussein's regime). Frightened by memories of air attacks and bombings, the boy wishes "to go abroad, where nothing will happen to you."

Part 2 is at once the most amazing part of the film and its least compelling. It takes place within the Shiite movement of Moqtada Sadr and follows one of Sadr's lieutenants, sheikh Aws al-Khafaji, a 32-year-old cleric, as Sadr's regime in Naseriyah and Najaf organizes elections and pushes its interpretation of Islam.

I say amazing because it would have seemed impossible for an American journalist to gain access to "the enemy" as it strategizes in private meetings, obtain interviews and even be allowed to film a raid against alcohol sellers at a local market. Yet the film drags in this section because it is about a movement more than one human's journey, and is filled with one speech after another at Shiite rallies.

Part 3 takes place in a rural village in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, a place that seems very far from the war. In this village, farmers grow wheat, tomatoes and sunflowers and make bricks in ovens. Against a sky filled with black smoke from petroleum fires, Longley focuses on the friendship between two boys and their fathers.

In this last passage Longley shows a poetic, almost elegiacal artistry. After two years, he might not understand the Iraqi people fully, but they have won his heart and mind.

-- G. Allen Johnson