

# FILM REVIEW

**Khalid Shamis, dir. *The Colonel's Stray Dogs*.** 2021. 73 minutes. English. - South Africa. Journeyman Pictures. \$7.50. <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/thecolonelsstraydogs2>

*The Colonel's Stray Dogs*, directed by the London-born Libyan-South African filmmaker Khalid Shamis, documents the life of Shamis's father, Ashour Shamis, focusing on his work as a longtime anti-Gaddafi activist, especially with the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NSFL). Though almost entirely focused on the political life of Ashour Shamis, the documentary provides an account of Libyan politics, society, culture, and international relations since 1969. Through the perspective of the older Shamis it sheds light on the political and military efforts to topple Gaddafi, whose downfall did not come until the Arab Spring. It also highlights the foreign intervention in support of the uprisings in 2011, along with the aftermath.

The film, which begins with how Ashour Shamis's dream for an Islamic Libyan State led him into exile in the UK to escape possible persecution, draws on archival as well as personal emotional content. While the director embarked on this project with the aim of fulfilling his own quest to understand the mystery and uncertainty surrounding Libya and, more importantly, his own father, most of the film is a record of his father's activism.

Khalid Shamis relies on stories that present multiple outlooks on his father's experiences. These stories are told by members of the director's family, his father, mother, sister, and brother. The film leans heavily on archival propaganda and archives of about four decades of British and Arab television news bulletins. The father's story is told with observant and evocative cinematography, but the highlight of the film is the history and development of the Libyan opposition movements and activities. The rest of the film chronicles the eventful downfall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 and the jubilation that followed, ending with disturbing images and stories of horrors, civil war, and violations. All of these frustrated Shamis, so that he embarked on another exile, possibly this time a final move.

One important takeaway is that despite his devotion to Libya, Ashour Shamis was actually endangering the lives of his own family more than


that of the dictator. The film shows how the son had viewed his father's life as mysterious. His father was busy with politics, and the burden of maintaining the family was borne by his devoted wife Sahmela. It is heartening to hear her say that while Ashour was busy with his revolt against Gaddafi, she had a revolution of her own bringing up the children. To unravel the mystery, the son questions his father's choices, given the mess he and the Libyans inherited after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, as well as the sensitive question of the possible linkage between violence and terrorism. The nobility of opposition to a malicious dictator becomes questionable when violence is used for political objectives, given that this is the definition of terror. However, the director says this in a sarcastic way, not questioning his belief in his own father's just cause. The personal intimacy of father and son is not sufficient to counter the gap that existed between the life of the son and the memories, attachments, and aspirations of the father.

Though the perspective of the film is mostly personal, the narrative is that of history with the personal immersed in the hotbed of politics and secrecy. In the post-Gaddafi scenes, the film attempts to create a portrait of Libya through a background of images, footage from news bulletins and media coverage, and the Libyan landscape of 2011. Shamis returns home full of hope and aspiration. However, his dreams are shattered on the hard rocks of reality, as his plan for the Islamic State is ignored by those who choose to run Libya in a militia style which gives birth to terrorism, violence, foreign intervention, and civil war. Therefore, while Ashour joyfully spends time with members of his extended family, he finds himself unwelcome among his past comrades who now run the government.

For the director, Libya has always been a remote, closed, and mysterious place. Thus, the film may actually be seen as uncovering the hitherto hidden life of the director's father, which is symbolically expressed in the scenes involving boxes of archival materials and memorials. These include the different non-Libyan passports Ashour has held, arms catalogues, photo albums, and video and audio cassettes which were finally accessible to the younger Shamis after so many years. The frustration expressed by Shamis raises the question of what went wrong in the country, but this question is not answered in the film. Both father and son seem unprepared to elaborate on this, or to identify the drivers of the conflict and violence that the country has experienced since 2011.

The director tries to do his job both with some emotional connection and as an outsider. He succeeds in many instances, as elaborated above, but ultimately fails to capitalize on this viewpoint to explain both the frustrations of ordinary Libyans and his own father's seemingly irrevocable second exile. Telling the forty-year story of a country is a formidable task that may not be presented entirely through the complicated story of one man in exile. The

perspective is an original one indeed, but the film is necessarily limited as it relies almost solely on the reports of biased media, propaganda, and stories from close family members.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2023.104