

New Documentary Follows Trailblazing Turkish Women

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An artist, an activist and a dancer with a Ph.D. challenge convention

Reviewed by Omid Arabian



Voices Unveiled: directed by Binnur Karaevli

"I used to study tradition," says artist Belkis Balpınar early in Binnur Karaevli's new documentary *Voices Unveiled*. "Tradition is keeping society intact... but in the meantime it keeps back the evolution and development. For that reason now I start to be against tradition."

The film, subtitled "Turkish Women Who Dare", examines the status of women in modern Turkey, a country precariously balanced at the juncture of modernist, progressive tendencies and traditional, religion-based values. Its main subjects are three women who are in their own ways challenging and transcending those traditional values; each represents a different approach to that process.

Of the three principals, Balpınar is the most compelling. She has clearly been pushing the envelope since she was a teenager—dating and marrying a much older artist to escape the confines of her conservative-minded family, then divorcing him to pursue her own dream. Now a recognized and respected artist herself, Balpınar misses no opportunities to challenge other women to think about and own their choices. Her art perfectly reflects her sensibility and outlook: working in the deeply traditional form of kilim (tapestry), Balpınar creates modern, abstract, and forcefully expressive designs that break out of the expected, commanding the viewer to look with new eyes. Clearly Balpınar has come to a point where life and art are one, and the film reflects this beautifully: her storyline begins with her shopping the bazaar for materials to make a new piece, and ends at the opening of a large exhibit of her work where, rather than resting on her laurels, she continues to tweak and adjust, making sure everything conforms to her personal vision.

Representing the younger generation is Banu Hantal, who divides her time between the university (a Ph.D. in psychology) and the dance floor (she is a semi-professional ballroom dancer and instructor). It's instructive to learn that Banu has had it no easier than Balpınar in the process of charting her own life-course. The film postulates that for all its aspirations to modernization and liberalization since Atatürk ushered in the Republic era, Turkey remains a country nestled in age-old conventions and norms—thanks in no small measure to the resurgence of Islamic ideology since the 1980s. Banu's family was not accepting of her desire to dance publicly, and she has had to continually walk the line between rebelling and reassuring, forging her way forward while demonstrating that her dancing is a legitimate and valuable pursuit. At the same time, Banu's story also demonstrates how far Turkey has come—Banu's husband, for example, appears fully accepting and supportive of her dancing - an attitude that one could probably never expect to find back in Balpınar's day.

Rounding out the trio is Nur Bekata Mardin, a former professor now working as a women's rights activist and organizer. When she's not busy as a wife and mother, Nur spends most of her time working on various projects benefiting the underprivileged and undereducated women who add up to a surprisingly large percentage of Turks. Among Nur's projects is the establishment of an agro-tourism cooperative in Mardin, a hill town overlooking the Mesopotamian plains. One of the film's highlights is the presence of the small-town women that constitute this co-op—their joyous sense of empowerment



An artist, an activist, a dancer: Belkis Balpınar, Nur Bekata Mardin & Banu Hantal

is quite beautiful and infectious. But it is also telling that somewhere during the making of the film, one of the women caves in to social pressures and the small-town sense of propriety, and cooperates with local reactionaries and government conservatives who shut down the film's coverage of the co-op. The episode lends further credence to the film's thesis—that Turkey remains a battleground for opposing tides of traditionalism and modernism, and Turkish women continue to serve as generals and foot soldiers.

Late in the film, someone offers a definition of "daring" that illuminates what sets apart those who bring lasting, meaningful change to the world: "Daring", she says, "is really looking inside yourself first."

...ing feeling, meaning or change in the viewer's feeling, thoughts, or feeling, feeling more, feeling more, and seeing what is really your own personal evolution." The women of *Voices Unveiled* certainly embody this definition, and truly earn the (sub)title "Turkish Women Who Dare."

Voices Unveiled will be screening Sunday, May 2nd at the Southeast European Film Festival. For further information please see www.seefilmfestival.org.

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