

'Welcome to Chechnya' and 'Unsettled'

For queers escaping the horrors of Chechnya, Syria and the like, the U.S. is still the Promised Land

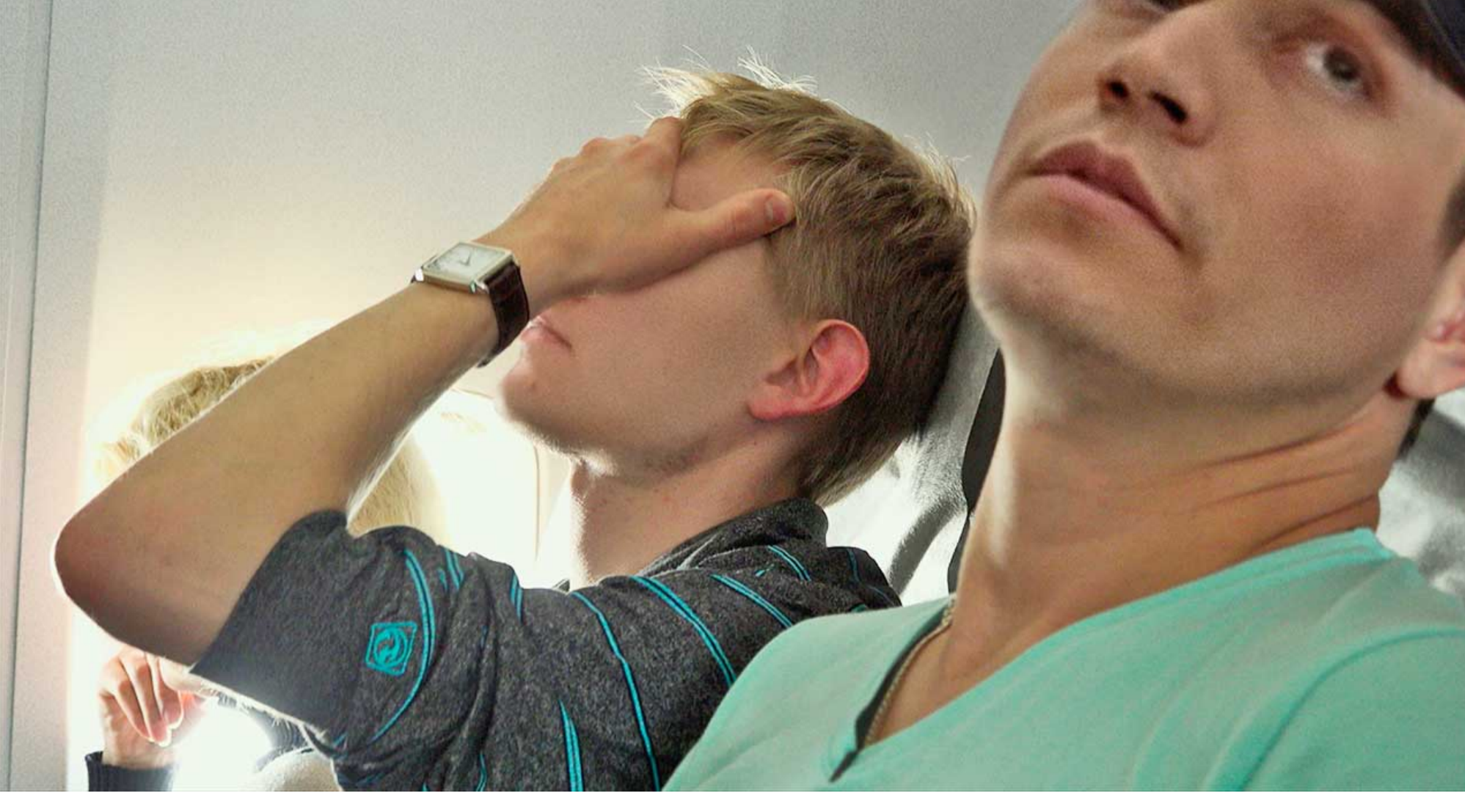
June 30, 2020 Michael Giltz

Writer Margaret Atwood says she didn't predict the future when penning The Handmaid's Tale. Everything she depicted in that dystopian nightmare for women has happened or is happening somewhere around the world. No crystal ball needed. Well, anyone looking to pen a futuristic novel to scare the bejeezus out of the queer community just needs to watch two new documentaries.

Welcome To Chechnya shows a network of activists sneaking targeted queer people out of that Russian republic a la the Underground Railroad, complete with safe houses, secret identities and heart-stopping moments at the border. Its cheeky, ironic title is about the only glimmer of humor in this nail-biter of a film.

Unsettled: Seeking Refuge In America is an ideal choice to watch right after that film. It also shares grim reminders of the violent world queers face, this time in Syria, Congo and Angola. But it looks to a brighter future in the US for four refugees. Their struggles are difficult and frustrating and at least a little bit hopeful. Then America elects Trump President, which is a little like watching Freddy Krueger pop out of the closet just when things seemed to be settling down. Still, we know they're better off in the U.S., despite the uncertainty and challenges.

The horrors of Chechnya



'Welcome to Chechnya', now airing on HBO.

Vladimir Putin's Russia, frequently targets queers; they're useful fall guys to rile up a populace angry at their shrinking lives and broken empire. When you've run out of Jews to demonize, queers are the next best thing. It's so bad, international outrage mounted when vigilantes would lure young gay men to meeting places and then brutalize, beat, rape and even kill them...all while filming it and posting the results on the Internet. Putin shrugged it off until eventually he was forced to pretend to care. A little.

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA ★★★ (3/5 stars)

Directed by: David France

Running time: 107 min

Life is exponentially worse in Chechnya, where Bond villain in training Ramzan Kadyrov sees The Handmaid's Tale as an owner's manual when it comes to women. Convincingly charged with crimes against humanity by humanitarian organization Human Rights Watch, Kadyrov's government simply hunts down, tortures and kills any gays it can. People are fleeing for their lives and Welcome To Chechnya, now on HBO, shows how.

Director David France follows his masterful How To Survive A Plague and The Death and Life Of Marsha P. Johnson with this ripped-from-the-headlines thriller he shot while posing as a tourist. His previous thoughtful, archival works brought the past to life. This is cinema verite.

Welcome To Chechnya is unnerving and scary, especially since the film underlines the danger by showing actual footage of queers being raped, beaten and apparently killed. When one brave soul decides to head BACK to Russia after escaping to "somewhere" in Europe so activists can launch a court battle, I was on the edge of my seat.

Director France uses complicated technology to disguise the identities of the people he covers. He digitally plants the faces of stand-ins from elsewhere onto the bodies of the refugees because no one is safe, even after traveling halfway around the world. For the most part, he does this smoothly. Once did I experience the uncanny valley effect when the face of a minor character slumped over in exhaustion clearly didn't quite match their body.

France uses a number of tricks to make the effect work, including a camera that veers around this way and that to avoid filming facial close-ups too much, even when people are opening their souls to us. It also helps if you don't speak their languages, since reading subtitles keeps one from paying too close attention to the way their lips don't quite match up to the dialogue. In a way, it adds to the film's aura of unreality. Admittedly, it's also a tad distancing and the technology makes this a movie that's one and done. I feel no need to watch it a second time. But god knows it's a better use of these tools than The Irishman.

Refuge from a cruel queer diaspora



From 'Unsettled': I to r: Junior Mayema, Mari N'Timansieme, Cheyenne Adriano, Subhi Nahas (Photo by Lydia Daniller).

Unsettled: Seeking Refuge In America, streaming on Worldchannel.org through July 12, is more conventional. Like France, director Tom Shepard has an impressive resume of documentary films covering subjects like a science fair, a Boy Scout fighting homophobia and the civil rights trailblazing work of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Now Shepard puts a face to queer refugees making a new life for themselves, starting in the Bay Area. Spoiler alert: housing is a bitch. Like Welcome to Chechnya, this film covers the violence they escaped from, albeit in a more suggestive, arty way. Still, you'll likely turn away at some brutal footage showing people stoned to death or tossed off the side of a building.

UNSETTLED ★★★ (3/5 stars)

Directed by: Tom Shepard

Running time: 84 min

Nonetheless, it's a happier antidote to the behind-enemy-lines exhaustion of Welcome To Chechnya. The people profiled made it out! They're safe! Now they just need to find work, homes and build a new life thousands of miles away from anyone they've ever known.

Subhi Nahas fled war-torn Syria and a life of privilege once even his own politically powerful father beat him and threatened his life. He's handsome, speaks excellent English and is soon ensconced in a really nice San Francisco apartment when not testifying before the United Nations Security Council, the perfect queer poster boy for LGBT refugees.

Junior Mayema is the son of a female pastor in Congo. She publicly preaches that every gay person in the world should be killed. Since Junior also reads as effeminate, he flees to South Africa, the first country in the world to enshrine gay rights in its Constitution. No luck there, for Junior is still verbally harassed and threatened on the streets. Now he's in the U.S., moving from room to room and ultimately homeless shelters, all while struggling with low-paying work, alcoholism and a propensity to unbalanced relationships with older men who soon tire of him.

Cheyenne Adriano and Mari N'Timansieme at least have each other. Whatever they face, this couple is deeply in love. They fled Angola after a parent literally tried to poison them. In the U.S., they find a creative outlet in their music but live in limbo, unable to work as they seek a permanent status amidst the Trump Administration's crackdown on any and all refugees.

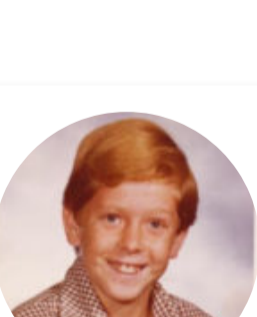
Shepard does solid work following these stories for years. He even works in a quiet observation of class and status, with Nahas seeming to float upwards thanks to a lifetime of comfort among privilege and his cultured, intelligent demeanor coupled with a male model's good looks. Nahas hits his own roadblocks but Unsettled shows how even as a refugee in a new country, your skin color, wealthy background and ability to present as masculine or at least acceptably metrosexual will have a profound effect on your ability to survive.

Welcome To Chechnya suffers for its necessary digital tricks, which do offer one powerful pay-off at a climactic moment. Unsettled is simply straightforward and sincere and somehow weirdly predictable. Neither film is a great work of art. It's too easy to conflate important subject matter with the quality of the films and they deserve more consideration than that. Both are solid examples of advocacy journalism, nothing more, nothing less.



Tags: David France, Tom Shepard, Unsettled, Welcome to Chechnya

← Carl Reiner, RIP



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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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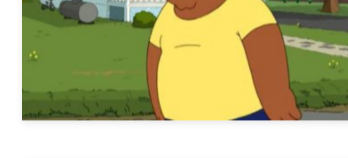
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