

Fringe of Colour Films 2023: Mourad Kourbaj

Q&A

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With Mourad Kourbaj and Jess Brough

Jess Brough: Okay, I'm going to invite Mourad to the stage. Like, there's a distance between us, but it's nice to be sitting with you and talking again, because we actually, we had a really wonderful conversation a couple of months ago when we were recording our episode for Before the Applause, which is the festival's audio programme. And in case you haven't been able to check that out yet, Before the Applause is it comes in podcast form, and it's basically ten minutes or so episodes of all of the filmmakers and the people behind the films talking about them and giving a bit more context. And I really recommend all of you go and check those episodes out, listen to all of the ones that you can find either before you see them or after, or listen to them twice, because they're really magical. But just to start things off, how are you how does it feel to have shown your film to all of your friends? Clearly, am I right in thinking this is a premiere of sorts?

Mourad Kourbaj : Yeah, it is. I've only really shown it to friends and family. Nobody here. Okay. Yeah. I've only shown it to friends and family before. So it's really nice to show it to, like, a larger audience, but it is a premiere. Yeah.

Jess Brough: Amazing. Well, that definitely deserves a clap. So how does it feel to be in a space like this? And, I mean, I know that you told me you were working on the film for a project for school. Did you think that you would be showing it in such a large space or with people that aren't friends and family before? Was that the intention when you were making it?

Mourad Kourbaj : No, not at all. I just wanted to tell the story of my family. And I felt like when I was given the project, it was the project that I had to tell a family story using only still images. And I felt like I wanted to I immediately knew I wanted to tell this story, and I immediately knew the way I wanted to tell it, it was just about speaking to my family. And once I didn't even know necessarily what the format was going to be, it was just, okay, I want to know more about it just for myself, and then to be able to use that knowledge to tell a story. And it's such a nice thing that it's being shown beyond a closed circle and to the public.

Jess Brough: I mean, I was looking at the stats on Vimeo earlier, which is where we broadcast from for the online, and we have people watching from all around the world. I mean, I was just tweeting that the country with the fifth largest audience for us is Jamaica. I mean, this is how far the films are going, so it's a really wonderful thing and actually, I just wanted to read something from one of the responses that's been written about the film. And in case you're not aware of what the responses project is for every film in the programme,

one of the writers in our team has written a response of personal essay about the films. And Deborah Chu is the writer who has responded to your film. And I just want to share with you the opening from that response because I think it really touches on something quite meaningful. These sorts of conversations happen everywhere, usually later in the evening, after dinner has been cleared away, and it's just your mother and you left at the kitchen table, or during a long car journey with your father, the both of you staring straight ahead. Those strange liminal hours are when we are most susceptible to the past's return, when someone you love and trust is most liable to explode. A part of your history leaving you reeling. It doesn't matter that it happened years or decades ago, perhaps even before you were born. You're in this whether you want to be or not. In Mourad Kourbaj's *Una Muerte y Un Nacimiento*//A Death and A Birth, the destination is, unfortunately, literal. The trigger of everything was the bomb, declares Aunt Maria. And then, did you know there was a bomb? I don't need to hear his response. Of course, he had not known. Now everything is different. That's how it works. The long afterlife of trauma, the blood that keeps splashing back. And I'm really interested to know how that process was for you of unpacking this history. Did you feel like you were prepared to hear those stories, or were you quite taken aback in that process of collecting these memories?

Mourad Kourbaj : Yeah, I was totally taken aback. I knew briefly that my family had to move from Argentina to Spain. I know that my granddad had to leave earlier because his friend was killed. But the details were being revealed to me as I spoke to the people, to my family. And so I hadn't heard that the bomb had happened. I hadn't heard that my family were being followed by the police. I was being told this. And, of course, it was intense and emotional. But I was learning about my history and what brought me here. And I'm also learning about my close family members, my aunts and uncles, my grandparents, and their struggle through their struggle. It brought me here. So I think, yeah, of course, I wasn't prepared. I was prepared to hear an intense story. The details I didn't know yet.

Jess Brough: And it makes, I think, the rest of us really think, like, what don't we know about our own family stories? What would we hear if we had the chance to sit down and record those memories? And I'm sure you have so much more, um, so many more recordings that you weren't able to use in this film. What strikes me as really interesting is the similarity, in a way, between your film and Dami's film *Batería*, and the way that you're telling the story of quite palpable violence without the violence itself being shown in that way. That can often be quite in your face in films about violence. And, I'd love to hear you tell us a little bit about that use of collage, and if you felt that was a freedom in the still image, that maybe trying to recreate that with film more traditional sentence of the word would have limited you, or maybe provided some other sort of barrier.

Mourad Kourbaj : Totally. I feel like the limitation of having it had to be only still images meant that, okay, I've got this audio now, how am I going to represent what my family is saying to me? And I guess, as I kind of touch on in the podcast, that there were two things that the collar was meant to represent. It was firstly, okay, I've got photographs. I can create some kind of movement through cutting out the images and then making them appear and reappear and disappear. And I felt like I could create movement within the restriction of still images. And then the second one was to do with this idea of memory, like this idea that, okay, the events they're speaking about were 40 years ago, 50 years ago. Ah. A lot of time has passed since that, since then, and these memories fade, and these photographs have faded alongside the image, uh, alongside the memories. And it's not the whole if you had to

visualise the memories that my family were telling me, they're visualising fragments, certain events, it's not everything. And I felt like it was a way of representing that through that. And I guess the restriction kind of made me think about that. I guess if I had no restriction, it might be a different film. And actually, just one thing about when you mentioned about the vimeo, there's people from all around the world. It's funny, because when I put the film on vimeo, just on Private, I'd finished it and I showed it to my family. And at that point, my mum would be sending it out to all of her friends in Argentina, in Spain, and it was like, on Private, but there was like, 150 people. How are there so many people?

Jess Brough: Someone's been sharing the password.

Mourad Kourbaj : Exactly. Who could it be?

Jess Brough: Spain is actually the fourth biggest audience country, I have to say. What a fantastic assignment for a project. It's such a creative thing. And, I'm assuming that I shouldn't assume, really, but the collection of photographs that you use, some are from your family's archives, and some are from a public archive. How did you collect those image? How did you decide which ones you wanted to choose?

Mourad Kourbaj : Well, I guess there was actually, I just kind of chose images. Well, there was many images I was trying out. How does it look with the composition of taking certain bits out? Does it work with the flow of the film? I guess it's just trial and error and working with images and editing them. For example, the image of the boat is the image of the original boat that my family travelled on.

Jess Brough: Did somebody in your family take that picture?

Mourad Kourbaj : No. As an image I found, but the image that I found, it had Venice in the background, so I edited Venice out of the image. I don't know if anybody realised, but there's mental that's Venice in there. Yeah. So I guess it's like trying to see what works with the film and then make it relevant to what I'm talking about.

Jess Brough: I have to say, I think this is the most creative, genius use of collage I think I've ever seen. I really have never seen a film like this, and I just think this is such a it's such a special thing the way of blending family stories and imagery. And, if you're okay to talk about it, I'd love for you to speak to us a bit about the dedication to the film and the importance for you of the voice that you are really keeping alive through this movie.

Mourad Kourbaj : Totally. Yeah, I guess, uh, with my mom not being here, uh, watching this film has, like it's a very significant thing. Like, she she struggled with motor neurone disease (MND) in the last years of her life, which meant that she wasn't able to speak. The final year of her life, she wasn't able to speak. So to have spoken to her at a point where she was able to speak and to have this audio obviously, of my whole family, but to have it of my mum and to have it forever, I think, is incredibly important for it to be such a crucial element of the film. And yeah, it's a way for me to connect with her. The month after she passed away, we had a memorial for my family and I, with our close friends, and I showed this film in the memorial, and I added that last section for the memorial. And yeah, I just felt like it was important to have her voice there at that point, and I just wanted because it was obviously such an important person I lost from my life, and I just really wanted to dedicate it to her because, yeah, she's my mum.

Jess Brough: I mean, thank you so much for sharing this with us and your mum's voice with us. I think it's the kind of film that really stays with you, and I haven't really been able to get it out of my head since the first time I watched it. And I think we were all quite unanimous in knowing that it had to be a part of the festival. I don't want to hog the microphone because really, a filmmaker Q and A is for everybody. So, if there's anybody in the audience who would like to ask a question, please do. You, can just raise your voice and I'll repeat the question into the microphone. Okay. Yeah. Wonderful. So the question was whether other threads that you're interested in exploring beyond this or do you feel like this was the story? Sorry, am I butchering that paraphrasing on the point?

Mourad Kourbaj : I'm very happy with how it ended up. There was so much like, I recorded 3 hours of footage that I had to cut down to nine minutes. There's definitely more for me to explore, and there's so many stories that were incredibly captivating and important, but I couldn't include it. The original project had to be four minutes to film. I did do it for nine minutes because I worked on it afterwards. But there's so much more that I could go into, and I'm sure I will one day. I haven't actually sat down and listened to all the audio since my mom's passing. I haven't totally been able to listen to just the kind of conversation with her voice yet. But I'd like to at some point. And it's nice to know that I've got that audio there for me to explore. And yeah, it's definitely something that I'd like to do in the future. But I kind of wanted to make something that felt like it told part of the story or had some kind of beginning and end, despite it not being at the beginning and the end of the journey. But I just wanted I guess that kind of yeah, that's what happened.

Jess Brough: I did think that was a particularly amazing part of aspect of the film in that we really are taken on a journey and you've done such a good job of just pace setting and starting us where we started. And I know it's not the end of your family's journey. I'm really interested to know. I wrote a we quote down, actually, from I think it was, [inaudible] who said this I could be wrong, but I'd love to hear a little bit about maybe your interpretation of what he said when he said, memory has been a way to forget. What do you think that meant? What does that mean to you?

Mourad Kourbaj : So, it's actually my Uncle [inaudible] who said that. And it is interesting like that. I did feel like I wanted to end with that quote because I felt like it allowed the audience to have something to think about when they finished watching the film.

Jess Brough: So I'm cheating by asking you...

Mourad Kourbaj : No, I guess I was thinking about it recently when I went to Spain and visited my grandparents and I was with my Aunt Maria, and we were, like, speaking about it. And, my grandma, she struggled with memory loss because you would think that memory is the opposite of forgetting it's. It's obviously remembering. But my aunt was kind of like because she my grandma struggled with memory loss. I guess my aunt kept on repeating. She was like, oh, she can't really just keeps on forgetting things, considering things. And this fixational memory almost is I was speaking to her and like, this struggle of remembering is almost like a way of forgetting the the most difficult memory that that one can have. Like, I guess my grandma has just, like, decided in many things she's just going to forget it, rather than facing up to the truths that have happened in the past. Although she struggles with memory loss, it's almost like she also has chosen to forget certain things. And I guess with something so traumatic like this it obviously stays with you your whole life. But I think you

can make memories maybe can be flexible, that if you decide, okay, I want to just going to forget it, then you can decide to do that despite it not being the way to resolve or move on from something. I don't know if that makes sense.

Jess Brough: Yeah, like a kind of compartmentalisation or protective barrier.

Mourad Kourbaj : Yeah, it's like a protective barrier. And the memory can become that. And you can almost be in charge of what your memories are. And if you decide, okay, like that's in the past, I'm going to forget that, then that becomes part of your memory because you've decided, okay, like, I'm going to forget it. But it felt like a very poignant statement that kind of, I wanted to end with that because each sibling or each of my mum's siblings, including herself and my grandparents, all dealt with it in these different ways. And, like, it's just that's why it was so important. It felt really important to gather all of these memories into one film.

Jess Brough: You're really showing the range of ways in which people experience or react to trauma and movement, which I think is also really important in itself. Right. Like, showing that people can have agency over their memories, which is not really something that people really talk about. I babbled again. Does anybody else have a lovely question? We've got space for two more. Two minutes more. So you're planning on going to Argentina soon? And what are you kind of hoping or thinking you might find out?

Mourad Kourbaj : Well, yeah, it's true. I guess there is going to be a continuation of this story. Inevitably, there's going to be memories there that I don't know yet. I don't know yet to be discovered in some way. And it's true. I guess I'm telling that I told that story then at that point. Now, if I was to tell the story, it'd be a different thing. And when I'm in Argentina, it would feel like a different thing. And then coming back from Argentina will be like a different thing. And I guess, yeah, I know that's going to be I've never been there before. So I'm also reacting to all of this from a distance. I've never been to this country where my family had to flee. So I'm going to feel something there for sure. I'm going to feel a kind of I know that well, my mum said that she hates Argentina. My granddad never hasn't been there since. So it's a place that I'm sure that will be felt not obviously, you can kind of feel it. Um, so, yeah, there's going to be a new way of telling this story in the future, for sure.

Jess Brough: Thank you for that question and just what an amazing film. And I really encourage everybody who has already to read the response and listen to mores episode of Before the Applause. And please join me in thanking him for this wonderful discussion.