

# Common ground

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

The genteel French film *Monsieur Ibrahim*, directed by François Dupeyron, is based on the book *Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Koran*, by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, who also coscripted the movie. It is a tender story about a Turkish Muslim and a French Jew. The setting is 1960s Paris, in the gritty but colorful Rue Bleue district, once infamous for its assortment of streetwalkers.

Living in a dark apartment above the street is Momo (his real name is Moses), a pensive teenager who thinks a lot about sex. The film opens with him smashing his piggy bank and using his savings to pay for the loss of his virginity. He does this without the knowledge of his father, a depressed penny-pincher who is obsessed with the wife who left him (Momo's mother) and his own unrealized dreams.

Also living in the neighborhood is the "Arab," the soft-spoken Monsieur Ibrahim, who runs the local convenience store (his pâtés and champagne are popular with the hookers). The film centers on the relationship between Momo and Ibrahim, who gives the boy advice on matters of life (his distant father), loss (his absent mother), and love (the pretty girl who lives next door).

Rather than dwell on the differences between Jews and Arabs, *Monsieur Ibrahim* focuses on the similarities, right down to a "We're both circumcised" scene at a local bathhouse. Much of the wisdom Ibrahim preaches comes directly from the Qur'an (or as Ibrahim calls it, "my Qur'an"), a book unfamiliar to Momo but which he comes to respect as he observes its subtle teachings in action.

The film has a bizarre subplot involving the shooting of a scene in Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Contempt*. This inclusion not only establishes the era and allows Ibrahim to overcharge Brigitte Bardot (played by French star Isabelle Adjani) for a bottle of water, but it plants in his head the crazy idea of buying a red sports car like the one in the film so he can take Momo on a journey to the Middle East.

The heart and soul of the film lies in the inspired casting of onetime screen idol Omar Sharif as Ibrahim. He brings a lightness to a role that could otherwise be

played with severity. He conveys the sense that he understands what Momo (played by Pierre Boulanger) is going through (including his penchant for shoplifting), while suggesting that he is borrowing the young boy's sense of discovery in order to break away from the grocery and return to the land of his birth.

Though it's not a preachy film, *Monsieur Ibrahim* reminds us that even amid religious differences there is a common ground on which to build friendship and trust.

The Afghan film *Osama*, written and directed by Siddiq Barmak, takes place four decades after *Monsieur Ibrahim*, but it looks and feels like it happens earlier—about 1,000 years earlier.

The main character is also a child, a 12-year-old girl (played by first-time actress Marina Golbahari) whose family is suffering under the tyrannical rule of the Taliban. Her father and brother have been killed in tribal wars, and her mother has just lost her job at a foreign-run hospital, which has been shut down by the Taliban. Women are not allowed to work or even go out unaccompanied, which limits their ability to earn money.

To avoid starving, the mother takes the desperate step of cutting her daughter's hair and trying to pass her off as a boy—renamed Osama. She convinces a onetime friend of her dead husband to give Osama a job.

Barmak has no interest in sugar-coating the story. Osama endures a series of struggles that start out as difficult and end up as overwhelming. She is dragged off to the Madrassa, a religious school that also teaches military training. When she proves too weak to perform the drills, she is humiliated, despite the best efforts of one caring street kid to protect her.

Such compassion is no match for the Taliban's ruthlessness. Her identity is discovered, which leads to another series of trials, each one sadder and more unpleasant than the last.

*Osama* is unrelenting in portraying the despair of the girl's situation. Whenever we see a glimmer of hope or sense a moment of tenderness, it turns out to be a lie. Barmak's message seems to be that while intolerance and cruelty can manifest themselves in many ways, there is no cruelty quite like the kind exercised by those who believe they are righteous.