

Oregon (& Paris) filmmaker Penny Allen's

Late for My Mother's Funeral – 2013

in light of three works by Oregonian's set in the once Ottoman Middle East:
Oregon cartoonist Homer Davenport's *My Quest of the Arab Horse* – 1909
Oregon journalist John Reed's *The War in Eastern Europe* – 1915
Oregon's 6th Poet Laureate Paulann Petersen's *Blood Silk* – 2003

David Milholland © 2014

One so easily constructs the barrier's preventing an Oregonian of the distant US West Coast from penetrating the Muslim culture of the ever-mysterious Middle East. Today, this latter world has become much more immediate via non-stop media reports, ongoing wars, and the increasing arrival in our communities of citizens of the many Islamic nations. Sorting through its wealth of contributions to human knowledge and art, coupled with its multi-millennial history and tempting resources that have lured many outsiders including the US into intricate imperialism, is impossible yet vital at this point in all our lives.

Recently, before the Oregon debut of *Late for My Mother's Funeral*, director Penny Allen said, "This is a tale of enigma and absence." Her success with this motion picture is highly nuanced, revealing wellsprings of sorrow, survival, and a hovering patina of hope, as an absence wafts by in the breeze.

These four Oregon-born creators produced works set far beyond our provincial borders to share their entrée into lands still reflecting the long decay of the Ottoman Empire. Each deserves a far broader audience for as Petersen reveals, "In the swift fall of darkness, the world takes hold."¹

Long after becoming William Randolph Hearst's lead political cartoonist in San Francisco and then New York, Homer Calvin Davenport kept ablaze his love for Silverton just east of Salem where he was born and raised from 1867 through 1890. When Homer was but three, his mother predicted his career and fame as a cartoonist. On her deathbed she bade her husband do all in his powers to help their son realize that dream.

Freer of responsibility than anyone around, Davenport's entranced childhood trained his eyes and hands to capture his world while living fully in its embrace. After his rise to national eminence in NY, having left Hearst in 1903 when drawn by the vision of Teddy Roosevelt, Davenport cashes in an immense chit from Teddy himself in 1906 and leaves New York with a Presidential writ asserting his fitness to assemble a large breeding stock – 27 pureblood Arabians – from their Syrian stewards, the Anazeh Bedouin. He achieves his collector's goal and has an epiphany in the 135° heat: "Ever since a small boy, I knew that I was just as much of an Arab as any in the desert. I had been one of its members all of my life."²

My Quest of the Arab Horse takes the reader into the torrid heart of the desert spanning Syria and Iraq where our own petro-political shenanigans have profoundly mired us a century later. Davenport's sojourn is a brief but keenly respectful one – a visit by a member of the Equus tribe to his mates – themselves astute students of horseflesh who recognize and reward his shared passion and expertise.



"Sultans," Homer Davenport, 1906

¹ excerpt – "Regeneration," *Blood Silk*, pg 33

² excerpt – *My Quest of the Arab Horse*

En-route to Syria, Davenport inevitably travels through Stamboul, the Byzantine capital known as Constantinople among seemingly dozens of other names. The seat of Ottoman power, long in decline as Egypt and other powerful states worked out veiled independence, Istanbul was a critical stop for anyone seeking permission to travel in the region, or to explore shifting political sands of the vassal states and all those intriguers using its veils of power and obscurantism to guise their own dubious, or nefarious, activities.



John Reed in Europe reporting WWI

Portland's own John Reed, born here in 1887, followed his highly successful *Insurgent Mexico* (1914) recounting his amazing adventures with Pancho Villa and company, by traveling to the eastern front in WWI before US involvement. *The War in Eastern Europe* (1915) covers a virtual train wreck of horrors rife with mounds of skulls and lost hope in what he deems a war of traders – traitors to humanity.

Late in the book, Reed bobs up in Istanbul, for a reprieve and a look at players of many nations tucking into markets and scurrying through dark streets pretending their activities are invisible. It's a city where price manipulation is deemed civic necessity, and the stricken public's response is: "We don't care for victories! Give us bread!"³

Reed concludes his insightful, oft delightful account of visits about the imperial city with this observation: "It's the end of the Turkish Empire: yes, it is the end, whichever side wins..."⁴

Thus empires come and go, and people make lives in the spaces allowed them. At the tail of the 20th century, poet Paulann Petersen began a series of visits to modern Turkey, the large nation poised between Europe and Asia that emerged post WWI through an extended era of ethnic turmoil to become largely Islam with vast secular ambitions. She captures this tension in the first half of "Moonrise, Adiyaman":

Six thousand year old city
in motion, it's torn up, torn down,
rebuilt again. Great hammers and picks
seize chunks of pavement,
grind a roadway into bits—

the air spread with dust so thick
that when risen from behind
an obscured horizon,
the full moon is a colossus...⁵

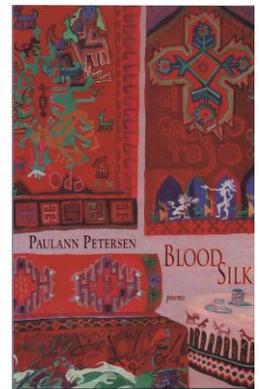
Observations large and small emerge from her travels across the twice-Texas-sized country. It's a world that fascinates her and she finds welcome from those eager to forge reciprocal connections. She makes herself at home "In a Kurdish Village":

In afternoon's lull, she points
to the journal page where I write,
then to her yemeni's intricate trim,
explains to me in Kurdish,

calls to her son to explain for me
what she means. I can write
and she can't. She crochets,
I cannot. Simple. We are alike.⁶

Petersen's journeys have yielded her a keen appreciation of this rich foreign culture's depth –its similarity and remove from our own. Her gift to us is the unveiling of its dreams and disappointments.

Penny Allen takes an indirect route to the kingdom, but finds her way there no less inevitably. Her 4th film follows in tracks laid by *The Soldier's Tale* (2007), her documentary account of one man's experience in George W's Iraq War, hatched after an opportune conversation with a US soldier on a transatlantic flight.



³ excerpt – *The War in Eastern Europe*, pg 272

⁵ excerpt – *Blood Silk*, pg 40

⁴ excerpt – *The War in Eastern Europe*, pg 292

⁶ excerpt – *Blood Silk*, pg 58

A screening of that film results in an encounter with Paris partisan Abdeljalil Zouhri, thoroughly embroiled in the twisted remnants of French post-imperial relations and their impacts on neighboring North African nations. After a year of less-than-engaging polemical talks, this man seemingly defined by the impersonal reveals to Allen the resounding impact of his mother's sudden passing in Western Algeria.

The massive absence in the wake of this powerful Moroccan-Algerian matriarch famed for her gold and jewel smuggling propels Allen into the creation of a familial portrait in the round and ethnographic adventure. One of ten adult offspring, Abdeljalil's return to his estranged family thrusts him full blast into grief, intrigue, litanies of unfulfilled expectations, and each sibling's ongoing obsession with Zineb Zouhri, their larger-than-life mother.

The film begins in flight, as the family had swept, and been swept, repeatedly across the border separating Morocco and Algeria. Their rights in Algeria have always been thin and suspect. Zineb simply made her place in the world by practicing personal *force majeure*. Her enigmatic absence produces an existential crisis for several family members, which to astute viewers' fortune plays out on the screen.

Like the core cast of Allen's first films *Property* (1978) and *Paydirt* (1981), a crisis precipitates linkage among 'family' members. Reverberant events largely spinning beyond anyone's control sweep each of them far beyond their initial expectations. In *My Mother's Funeral*, then again, Zineb or her vacuum might fittingly claim deft orchestration.

Allen employs a simple, highly effective 'device' to give all eight of the ten siblings who play themselves a medium to serve, well, as their mother's medium. Throughout the film, each in turn wears a strikingly patterned red dress they fondly remember as one of her favorites. Every time they don the garb, a virtually alchemical transformation takes place. Zineb has "really got a hold on" them.



wedding portrait – Souaad Zouhri



our daunted host – Abdeljalil Zouhri

Such scenes often revive pent-up frustrations, including Abdeljalil playing Zineb opposite perhaps a nephew playing Abdeljalil as a boy. It reprises a childhood memory exposing her potent power and a grown man's unyielding sense of inadequacy in his mother's timeless presence.

Late for My Mother's Funeral darts between standard definitions of documentary and narrative fiction film. It's the kind of stretching-the-boundaries film that another famed Northwesterner, photographer and filmmaker Edward Curtis, made with all-Kwakiutl cast – *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914). Alison Skinner of the American Museum of Natural History wrote to Curtis at the time, "I think you have made ethnology come alive."⁷

No less can be said for Allen's germinal work that opens real doors to a world at the edge of our consciousness. Much of it was filmed under severe restraints in Algeria, with powerful scenes also shot in Morocco and France. Like her peer's work cited above, this film commands attention and deserves revisiting.

Those infested with modern impatience might find some of it a bit slow going, as real life and even verisimilitude often take their own sweet time. So gear yourself down, linger in the *hammam* – community baths in the family residence, watch the wedding unfold over its several days, absorb some real grief and life transformation, and partake of what an Algerian critic wrote Penny Allen of *Late for My Mother's Funeral*, calling it "the most intimate portrait of Algerian culture I've ever seen."

⁷ excerpt – *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher*, Timothy Egan, pg 239