

Movie discussion resource Limbo (2020)
Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: Comedy/Drama

Stars: Amir El-Masry, Vikash Bhai, Sidse Babbett Knudsen, Ola Orebiyi, Kwabena Ansah, Kenneth Collard, Kais Nashif

Rating: M

Director/Writer: Ben Sharrock

Length: 103 minutes



Synopsis

Limbo is a wry and poignant observation of the refugee experience, set on a fictional remote Scottish island where a group of new arrivals await the results of their asylum claims. It centres on Omar (Amir El-Masry), a promising young Syrian musician. Separated from his family, he is stuck on a remote Scottish island awaiting the fate of his asylum request. He is burdened by his grandfather's oud, the king of Arabic music instruments, which he has carried all the way from his homeland. (IMDB)

Reflecting the complexity of the movement of people across borders has been a long-held passion for director and writer Ben Sharrock, who spent time working for an NGO in refugee camps in southern Algeria and living in Damascus in 2009 shortly before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. There, he formed a network of friends whose personal stories inspired the film. (<https://www.movieinsider.com/m19138/limbo>)

General questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the documentary?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ What resonated with your own experience?
- ❖ Who have been significant influencers for you, and in what way?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

Culture

The opening scene with the cultural awareness class is absurd, something straight from a Monty Python movie. It is trying to educate the refugees about cultural differences. The refugees themselves carry their own cultures with them - Omar (Syria), Farhad (Afghanistan), Abedi (Ghana) and Wasef (Nigeria), who all have to share a pretty basic run down house together. What might it look like for the small local community on the island to learn about the cultures of the refugees while at the same time sharing their own Scottish culture? => *There is an insistence in Australia that those emigrating to Australia must become 'Australian', and yet there is such rich culture that refugees bring which can be share with reciprocity, and hospitality. Discuss.*

The Oud

Omar is an acclaimed oud player back in Damascus, and carries the oud in its case with him everywhere, like a suitcase of (unfulfilled) dreams. He uses his mobile phone to play videos of his oud concerts back home. to remind himself of who he once was. Omar is unable to play due to a hand injury. He carries the oud, a material connection to the life he once knew, a symbol of hopes and dreams - and loved ones left behind. The oud belonged to Omar's grandfather. It could also be a symbol of loss - lost dreams, exile, trauma, homesickness, as well as people who have died in Omar's homeland Syria. Someone comments, "You walk around like that case is a coffin for your soul". Perhaps an apt description?

=> *What did you make of the oud as an ever present symbol in the story?*

Casual racism, casual concern

There is often a gap between the aspirational nature of relating to refugees and the racist reality. A flag on a house says 'refugees are welcome', while at the same time the refugees are subject to racist remarks, like the ones directed at Omar (is he Al-Qaeda? Does he make bombs? Rape women?) - before he is offered a lift into town because no-one wanted him to get cold. Kindness interspersed with suggestions about terrorist tendencies.

=> *Australians have reacted to refugees in much the same way - with groups and individuals very concerned for their welfare, and others who demean and denigrate them. Discuss.*

Landscape

Those bleak windy remote Scottish landscapes (filmed on the Uist islands) serve as a perfect backdrop for the movie - sub-zero temperatures, inadequate clothing to keep out the chill, sparsely furnished rooms in dilapidated housing, empty shelves in the 'supermarket' (and 'no halal'), cut off from family and friends, not allowed to work. The one and only phone box on the island is Omar's connection to family. It is the one place where there is respite from the ceaseless wind. Omar's family ask him if it's like Guantanamo. In fact, the refugees are able to roam on the island as they wish, unlike in Australia, where many refugees have been detained in purpose built immigration detention centres, sometimes for years at a time. Their world is limited by the room they are in, in contrast to the refugees in the movie who are able to move in the community - limited and desolate as it is - while their visa applications are processed. The scene where the recorded voice on the phone says, 'if you are calling about an asylum claim, please hang up' is particularly poignant, with the long shot of the phone booth in the snow laden landscape. There is pathos in their plight - so few options available to them, and yet on the other hand the landscape stretches to the far horizon, seemingly limitless, with many camera shots of the one single track road on the island stretching out to the horizon.

=> *What did the landscape add to the movie that made an impression on you?*

(Could be worth discussing the Novak Djokovic episode in Melbourne - his parents said he was 'tortured' in immigration detention. Actually the refugees in the Park Hotel where Djokovic was detained are being emotionally tortured by their endless detention, some for 9+ years)

Humour

The movie incorporates humour as part of the narrative, in a way that is not normally associated with stories about refugees - a chicken named Freddy Mercury. Binge watching the Friends box set and arguing about the plot (is "break" the same as "break up"?). Tips on how to behave in a disco - in the unlikely event they should find themselves in one - to the tune of Hot Chocolate's It Started With A Kiss.

=> *What did you think about humour as part of the narrative in this movie?*

Real people - more than a passing news story

The film humanises the refugees with humour and pathos. We see them as real people, not statistics, who have carried their 'suitcase of dreams' with them, risking their lives on the ocean and on land to seek safety. Omar's parents have fled Syria and are now having a hard time adapting to life in Turkey, while his brother is back in Syria fighting the Assad regime. One refugee would be unable to return to his home country because he is gay. The refugees are portrayed as people deeply connected to home and family and culture. traditions and music. People who show courage as they cope with the challenges, people prepared to learn new language and cultural traditions of their adopted country.

=> *What stood out to you in this fresh way of telling the story of the refugee experience?*

Change your perspective

The director says he filmed in the narrow Academy ratio (1.37:1) to remind us how we tend to put refugees into boxes. The visual imagery makes everything feel even more restricted. The movie ends with a visual twist - the ratio changes to widescreen. It seems to be saying - change your perspective, there are fresh ways of seeing life's circumstances.

=> *What did you take from this visual twist?*

Physical and spiritual displacement and disorientation

The refugees are left to fend for themselves while they wait, and wait, and wait. They may have managed to escape their (unsafe) homelands or left to pursue a better life, but the cost is often family, identity and autonomy. One comment: "You know why they put us out here in the middle of nowhere - to try and break us". It's a political strategy adopted by many countries, including Australia with its offshore detention (Manus Island, Nauru, Christmas Island, isolated detention centres onshore). The refugees are living in 'liminal' space - between 'here' and 'there'. Their situation is deadening, perhaps best summed up by Samuel Beckett's phrase: "I can't go on, I'll go on". Omar's parents make him feel guilty for leaving them, and lazy because he is not playing music. Omar deals with anxiety and guilt not just for having borrowed money from his parents but also for having left Syria without saying goodbye to his brother who chose to fight. Alex Godfrey comments: "He's stuck in all senses of the word, creatively crippled, spiritually struggling, a shell of a man, near breaking point but holding on". This is a film that explores how people survive without family support structures, about determination when hope seems lost.

=> *Discuss.*