



**THE THREE HIKERS** was screened recently by Kino Ken at the Manor Theater in Squirrel Hill, Pennsylvania as part of the 2016 Pittsburgh Jewish Film Festival. Below is his review of that documentary film.

**4 of a possible 20 points**

**\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\***

**Kurdistan / United States / Oman 2009-2015 color 96 minutes live action feature  
documentary in English The Three Hikers Film / Anarchy Post / Pierce Law Group  
Producers: Natalie Avital, Charles Bender, Denise Bohdan, Geoff Emery, Bobby Field,  
Jason Gurvitz, Christian Johnson, Sarah McCabe, Yasmin Naficy, Katy Thomson, Jeremy Ward**

**Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance**

**Points:**

- 0 Direction: Natalie Avital**
- 0 Editing: Mo Stoebe, Paul Crowder, Colin Hawes, Matt Michael**
- 1 Photography: Natalie Avital, Peter Buntaine, Joe Dietsch, Brooks Ferrell, Bobby Field, Michael Ojeda, Jordan Tremayne, Zach Voytas  
Additional Photography: Dustin Pearlman**
- 1 Lighting: Brody Culbertson, Samuel Kleim, Andy Kuester (Washington, D.C.), Austin Michaels**
- 0 Music: Frederik Wiedmann, Axel Tenner, Hyesu Yang**
- 0 Production Design: Mark Davis, Jr.  
Storyboard Artist: Eli Park  
Makeup: Tina Shults**
- 1 Supervising Sound Editors: Tom Boykin, Eric Lalicata Sound Supervisor: Dan Snow  
Sound Effects: Kyle Lane, Ryan Maguire, Tara Blume  
Dialogue Editor: Dhyana Carlton Tims  
Sound Recordist, Washington, D.C.: Andy Kuester  
Sound Rerecording Mixer: Tom Boykin**

0 Acting  
0 Creativity  
4 total points

**Cast: Sarah Shourd, Shane Bauer, Joshua Fattal, Nora Shourd, Cindy Hickey, Laura Fattal, Al Bauer (Shane's dad), Jacob Fattal, Alex Fattal, Shannon Bauer (Shane's sister), Nicole Lindstrom, Shon Meekfessel, Tegra Fisk, Ben Rosenfeld, Natalie Senske, Jenny Bohrman, Muhammed Ali, Lonnie Ali (Muhammed's wife, nee Yolanda Williams), Reza Aslan a.k.a. El Pinguino, Richard Kim, Livia Leu, Sean Penn, Faraz Sanei, Gary Sick, Stephen Zunes, Stefanie Carpenter (Sarah), Chris Manning (Shane), Mark Needle (Josh), Mehmet Edip (Iranian Prisoner), Ernesto Greenwood, Sevan Hovsepian, Johnny Knight, Vladimir John Perez (Iranian Guards)**

Though there is plenty of human interest in the movie **THE THREE HIKERS**, its cinematic execution leaves a great deal to be desired. Attempting to recount experiences of three Americans who accidentally hiked their way into Iran from Kurdistan, the docudrama fails as both documentary and drama. Encumbered with a ghastly grating musical accompaniment somewhat akin to folk music recast as lifeless pop-rock, the production immediately shipwrecks as documentary. Tunes selected display neither appropriate neighborhood color nor any direct relevance to events observed. Uninspired and unpersuasive acting by cast members simulating three captive subjects of the movie completely sinks what remains. With annoying interjections of flash editing destroying any ambience which might have been developing, **THE THREE HIKERS** seems bent nearly from the start on self-destruction. Only about ten percent or less of scenery is actual footage from Iran. Night episodes in Oman are fuzzy and appear to be included only to provide audiences something to cheer about after spending nearly ninety minutes vaguely commiserating with Josh, Sarah, and Shane. Even first-person pieces of narration by the principals themselves are disappointingly low-key, diplomatic, almost like recitations filtered through a censorship board before public airing. No one wants to offend anybody. So the result is a yawn-inducing politically correct bore.

Sound recording is no more polished than lighting or photography. That could be justified if engineered on location in real time. However, this is patently not the case. Occasional bits of dialogue are muffled and consequently lost.

Recurring interjections of time statistics become annoying rather than informative. There's no sense of story continuity, with cutaways to activities of family members back home diluting dramatic impact. The director seems unable to decide which tale she wants to report: what the political hostages endured, or how their families responded to a crisis. In the end, she attempts to straddle both, giving neither adequate attention.

To really grip viewers a motion picture of this type needs energetic, visible villains and endearing heroes or heroines. Anonymous forces whose decisions are only clarified by speakers reviewing past events do not qualify as dramatic heavies. People who appear placidly to accept whatever befalls them are inadequately sympathetic. Unless a screener is rabidly biased against Moslems or Iran, there is little to either cheer or boo. Iranian guards behave as expected, Americans suffer in predictably protracted suspense, the Iranian government uses misguided tourists as political pawns in a power struggle with Washington. The only novelty here is the manner in which three naive adventurers cross into Iran, proving how much simpler it is to create a problem than to solve one.

Frequent staccato editing serves to disintegrate the narrative, jumping back and forth between Iran and varied locations in the United States. Equally wrongheaded is the introduction of numerous peripheral characters whose understandable concerns impede rather than advance the story's progress. Since the movie title spotlights three hikers and not three families, director and editor should have kept focus primarily on titular individuals. This not being the case, nobody gets accorded priority. An epilogue showing Shane's marriage and Josh's expanding family, while moderately interesting, is another unnecessary tangent leading away from the picture's main focus.

Showing Iranians only as silhouetted figures or in mass protesting clusters makes the whole situation appear as Us versus Them, though the decision to insert a sidebar on Josh and Shane's Iranian defense attorney offers a tiny glimpse of foreign humanity. But an overwhelmingly lopsided presentation, relying ninety percent of the time on American points of view, deprives it of authority as a document.

Photography never elevates beyond objective observer travelogue style. Available lighting inadequacies also diminish production quality.

THE THREE HIKERS, which due to subject matter is only suitable for adult audiences, is not a good investment for anyone seeking cinematic beauty, riveting images, dramatic impact, or insight into political decision-making in Washington or Tehran. It does provide plenty of information about three individuals whose poor judgement in travelling abroad without accompanying veteran guide precipitated two years of horrifying consequences. Perhaps the movie can be most useful as a cautionary tale for exploratory types who might otherwise proceed into unknown regions without first considering local politics.