

Acropolis Cinema  
presents:



August 28 - September 3, 2020 – Acropolis Virtual Cinema

# ABOUT THE FILM

*Ghost Tropic* follows Khadija (Saadia Bentaïeb), a fifty-eight-year-old Maghrebi cleaning woman living in Brussels in the wake of the 2016 bombings that shook the city. After work one night, she falls asleep on the last subway train, wakes up at the end of the line and has no choice but to make her way home—all the way across the city—on foot. Along the way, she has a series of encounters: with a security guard, a convenience store clerk, a group of teenagers. She asks for help and she gives it and slowly, steadily makes her way.

Director Bas Devos's lightness of touch combines with the richness of Grimm Vanderkerckhove's 16mm images to create a small wonder of humanistic storytelling. *Ghost Tropic* is a testament to the everyday drama of immigrant life and insists on the possibility of goodness and beauty, even in the dark of night.

85 min. | Belgium/Netherlands | 2019

## Ghost Tropic by Glenn Kenny

*The following article was originally published by the New York Times, August 27, 2020*

This new movie from the Belgian filmmaker Bas Devos opens with a static shot of an apartment's living room and its window. No one is there. The shot holds as the room goes from fully lit to completely dark. "I see the time that has gone by," a woman says in voice-over. "How would a stranger feel here?"

The woman is Khadija (Saadia Bentaïeb), a middle-aged Maghrebi immigrant living and working in Brussels. She's part of a corporate cleaning crew, on the night shift. We see her operating machinery in a building lobby and laughing with co-workers over coffee in a conference room. On the metro home, she oversleeps and is stranded at the end of the line.

This movie — the story of how she returns home — beguiles and fascinates on several levels. Devos and the cinematographer Grimm Vandekerckhove, working in 16-millimeter, capture the sleeping outer portions of Brussels with visionary skill. The focus is often skewed so that streetlights and traffic lights grow and dance before the viewer's eyes. (Some sequences are reminiscent of the underseen 2007 feature "Quiet City," an overnight pastoral of normally noisy Brooklyn from the American director Aaron Katz.)

There's more than an inspired impressionism at work here. Khadija encounters a

a homeless man and his dog. She gets help from a young woman running a gas station convenience store. These exchanges, and others, contain resonant observations of life as it's lived by people who are, to varying degrees, disenfranchised — like immigrants and single moms. “Everybody needs a place to rest,” Bruce Springsteen sings in one of his 1980s hits. This movie is a strong depiction of people who've richly earned such a place.



## Ghost Tropic by Ben Driscoll

*The following article was originally published by Sight & Sound, May 30, 2019*

Early on in *Ghost Tropic*, a travel agent's advert taunts cleaner Khadija (Saadia Bentaïeb). GET LOST, it says. The ad is backlit and garishly illuminates blue sky and white sand. It's an alluring fissure in the grey and dim Brussels night through which the middle-aged woman is walking. She stares at it blankly and moves on; she's tired after a long shift of cleaning and wants to get home. Yet, falling asleep on the last subway home, Khadija does indeed get lost. With out-of-service buses and insufficient funds her first barriers to an easy remedy, she sets off on a long, cold walk home – a curious, peaceful odyssey that fills this gorgeous, slender movie.

The film is writer-director Bas Devos's third feature, his second in 2019 after a film made in response to the 2016 attacks in Brussels. That film's name, *Hellhole*, certainly implied its mood, and *Ghost Tropic* is a powerful change of tone for Devos. As a nocturnal city film, it sits well next to the near-silent, wholesome *Toute une nuit*, by fellow Belgian Chantal Akerman, yet its concept is closer to Mike Leigh's *Naked*. Instead of David Thewlis rasping lyrical in a decaying London, we have kind, quiet Khadija, glancing with her big Studio Ghibli eyes at a near-magical Brussels. Devos ensures there is no reason for us to feel scared for this exposed Muslim woman.

We follow Khadija as she forges fleeting bonds with Edward Hopper figures of the night, captured in a nearly square 4:3 frame. But these lonesome people are no nighthawks: they're awake out of necessity – for work, or lack of shelter – and *Ghost Tropic* gives them the visibility they deserve through earnest portraiture. Helping a homeless man inside, then hitching a ride from a checkout woman, Khadija begins to take part in a city of unassuming kindness.

Thankfully, Khadija brusquely moves on before any encounter has a chance to start cloying, sometimes with a funny abruptness. She carries a saintliness about her, and the camera remains with her companions for a few moments after her departure, as they soak up the gentle wake of her miraculous meander home.

The film is mostly grounded in Khadija's subjectivity, but sometimes something distracts it. The camera spots images – a figure smearing across a CCTV monitor's LCD, a security

guard's vape cloud – that take on the film's titular spectrality. It zooms so far into raindrops on a windscreen that you experience an abstract minute of rotating geometry, like an Alexander Calder mobile. Most effectively, eerie tropical bird call sometimes overwhelms the sound design – as if a wormhole has opened and the sound is leaking from the GET LOST tropical island.

Through these hypnotic digressions, Devos invokes an unplaceable, mystical presence that accompanies Khadija along her way. As her journey draws to a close and the next working day looms, though, the film sinks back down to earth: we recognise that Khadija can only get so lost during her commute between A and B. Thankfully, an unexpected, optimistic coda (involving her daughter) ruptures the film's sense of mundane, life-long routine, as if lifting a family curse. It's a magical off-axis end to the near-symmetrical, patient *Ghost Tropic*: a witching hour-and-a-half that unfurls as gradually and unthreateningly as the sky lights up during dawn. ♦



@AcropolisCinema



/AcropolisCinema



@acropoliscinema

[www.acropoliscinema.com](http://www.acropoliscinema.com)