

# MIDNIGHT TRAVELER

A film by Hassan Fazili and Emelie Mahdavian

87 min. | USA, Qatar, Canada, UK | 2019

Official Selection

Sundance Film Festival 2019

Berlin International Film Festival 2019

**Publicity:**

Susan Norget Film Promotion  
publicity@norget.com  
212-431-0090  
c: 917-833-3056

**Int'l Sales:**

Doc & Film International  
Daniela Elstner  
d.elstner@docandfilm.com  
33 1 42 77 56 87

**US Sales:**

Cinetic Film Sales  
Jason Ishikawa  
jason@cinetic.com  
212-204-7979

## **LOGLINE**

When the Taliban puts a bounty on Afghan director Hassan Fazili's head, he is forced to flee with his wife and two young daughters. Capturing their uncertain journey, Fazili shows both the danger and desperation of their multi-year odyssey and the tremendous love shared between them.

## **SYNOPSIS**

In 2015, after Hassan Fazili's documentary *Peace* aired on Afghan national television, the Taliban assassinated the film's main subject and put a price on Hassan's head. Hassan looked at his wife and his daughters, and he knew they had to flee their home. Over the course of their multi-year saga in search of safety, the family grasped onto the only means they had to assert control over their situation: their camera-phones.

Hassan and his wife Fatima are both filmmakers, and they are educating their daughters and encouraging them to be artists. The whole family shot this autobiographical film, which began when they sought and were rejected for refugee protection and follows them along the notorious Balkan smuggling route. As they experienced increasingly degrading circumstances, the family latched on to filmmaking as a way to not just survive, but retain their humanity.

*Midnight Traveler* is a gripping vérité story made by a family on the run. Their unique access and artistic vision provide an intimate portrait of a loving family and the myriad fellow travelers they meet on their odyssey.

## FILMMAKER STATEMENTS

### Hassan Fazili

The film is made in the space of emigration, but it does not impose any genre or style. Working with the mobile phones, we discovered a style of framing and camera movement that captures the experience our family on the run. At the same time, we are working to intertwine our reflections on the journey in order to expand the interiority of the characters.

My family, like leaves ripped away from a tree in a storm, was taken from our land and thrown in every direction by outside forces. As a father, I am tired from the strain of protecting my family from threats we encountered on this route. But as a filmmaker, these wanderings and troubles are appealing to me, so we all became the subject of this film. Still, I struggle to make the film realistic and engaging because sometimes I am a father, sometimes a husband, sometimes a director, and sometimes all three roles at once. And sometimes I become one of the characters as well, because at the same time I'm behind the camera, I am in the scene.

My wife is also a filmmaker and my older daughter has acted small parts in films. They participate in the filmmaking, conveying their personal experiences in ways that I could not have captured myself.

When I was a teenager, I lost one of my eyes working in a machine mechanical workshop. When I discovered cinema a few years later, I felt that my sight had been restored to me, and I had a new way of seeing the world. But with this film, the more problems my family has and the more pain and suffering my eyes see, the better the film becomes – and I do not know what my responsibility is at that moment: father or director?

Finally, this film was possible because of the hard work and experience of the other people on the team. Emelie was with us from the beginning, and I felt that she was very close to us, although we worked together in person for the first time in Serbia. Emelie was very sensitive and careful about the details of the film. With many hundreds of hours of footage, I was nervous about how to create a beautiful storyline from so much material. Emelie would send me scenes, and although I was still struggling because I was living in poor conditions in a camp with bad internet, we would discuss the cuts. When I saw the edits, I always felt that she made the best choices of what to include. She wrote our story beautifully, and she always gave me good advice on directing.

Emelie also introduced us to Su. We were happy Su agreed to produce the film with Emelie. Su brings extensive professional experience to the project, ensuring that we made the best decisions about funding, producing, finishing the film, and releasing it into the world. Su also arranged for herself, Emelie, Dan, Gretchen, and Kristina to come and work with me in Germany. This way, although I could not travel, the picture lock, sound design, and music were brought to me.

The sound and music were especially important in this film, because we were only able to record with our mobile phones and there was lots of work to do to correct and build upon the sounds we had recorded ourselves. When I heard the first rough cut of the film, which

had music by Gretchen in it, I felt that this was a person who knew us well. Dan corrected and rebuilt the sound of the film. Gretchen listened to me about every scene, so I felt she knew my thoughts well. Without the sound and music, the film was like a raw fruit, but the addition of their work, it comes alive. When I see the film in its final format, I feel as if those who have done the work of making the music and sound were alongside us on the journey and have been able to transfer the feelings of the characters to the viewer.

*(The Fazili family is presently appealing to remain and live in Germany.)*

### **Emelie Mahdavian**

Hassan Fazili and I met through a mutual friend and shortly thereafter I programmed his short film *Mr. Fazili's Wife* in the Davis Feminist Film Festival. I am a Persian-speaker with a Ph.D. in the film and media of Central Asia, and I was impressed by his work. Before the idea of *Midnight Traveler* emerged, during the period that the family was trying to avoid having to take the smuggling route, I tried to organize a letter-writing campaign in support of the family's case. When their situation deteriorated, I agreed to help Hassan in documenting their life. We did not know what the end product would be at that stage, but we felt it was worth capturing and preserving. So from day one of the filmmaking journey, I was there to provide logistical support and to collaborate with Hassan to tell his family's story.

Hassan was unable to travel with his laptop, so he captured the footage on SD cards that he guarded until I was able to arrange local contacts in each country to copy and ship the original footage to me in the US. Once the footage was with me, Hassan could wipe his SD cards and keep shooting new material. This way, the production of the film was lightweight and mobile.

At the outset, none of us fully understood the duration of the journey the family was embarking upon. Over the course of the two years of shooting the film, his daughters grew up, he and his wife Fatima were both evolving in their hopes and fears, and every member of the Fazili family participated in shooting some element of the film. Much of the insider perspective and humanity of the film emerges as a consequence of this multi-perspectival approach.

While they were in Serbia, Hassan and I spent a month together working on story development and recording voice-over. In the end, we had over 300 hours of footage and 25 hours of voice over from which we edited the 87-minute film. I brought on a co-editor and a consulting editor because both Hassan and I had been immersed in the material for eighteen months by the time I began the first assembly. In this process, having trusted fresh eyes was incredibly useful.

We took the title of the film, *Midnight Traveler*, from a book that is read by the older daughter Nargis in the opening minutes of the film. *Ego Monster*, a great work of Afghan postmodern literature, was written by Said Bahodine Majrouh – a politician, ethnographer, and author who spent the last years of his life living as a refugee before being assassinated. The book is a testament to the often-forgotten existence of Afghan intellectuals and artists – many of whom have a unique way of intertwining the French, Persian, and other other

cultural traditions that have shaped their worldview. Never before translated into English, Majrouh's allegorical work has deep resonances with the themes of this film.

*Midnight Traveler* re-frames an important current event from a unique viewpoint: the perspective of a filmmaking family on the run. What they capture has an incredible intimacy that pushes the film beyond the "refugee film" genre. We aimed to make something that was cinematic, not simply a work of reportage. In the edit, I avoided all establishing shots as a means of keeping the audience immersed in the family's journey. I often included elements that would normally be trimmed from a shot: the refocus, the reframing, and the visual glitches of the mobile phone camera. Throughout, we embraced the aesthetic messiness of the journey and the mobile phone footage as an integral part of the nature of this story, while also seeking out moments that celebrate the unique artistic perspective of the Fazili family.

## PRODUCER'S NOTE

**Su Kim**

I first encountered *Midnight Traveler* as a part of the Bay Area Video Coalition National MediaMaker Fellowship program. Within an hour of screening the work sample, it was clear to me that I wanted to work on the film. The work and approach shows that human life is precarious. The filmmakers aim straight at the heart of cultural conditioning, especially the images and ideas that the west has about asylum seekers and migrants. *Midnight Traveler* undermines this mainstream gaze.

Inequality in the world has become normalized by the public's bombardment of news and other media, reinforcing our expectations. Stories are recalled using old frames of reference with familiar emotional results. Even truth in a visual formula can become a visual cliché adding stereotypical imagery to fill in the gaps. *Midnight Traveler* goes beyond conventional news footage that narrow our ideas about asylum seekers and migrants.

The project was co-initiated by Hassan Fazili and Emelie Mahdavian. Hassan's years of experience as a writer and director of television and theater in Afghanistan aided in depicting this contemporary Muslim journey to Europe. He effortlessly captures moments of great beauty, waiting for the events to unfold spontaneously. The camera is an extension of his body and gives the film intimacy. Emelie brings experience as a visual storyteller with over ten years of experience working in Central Asian arts. She also provided the infrastructure and support to allow the Fazili family to film their unfolding personal story and crafted and edited the story structure.

In April 2018, Hassan and his family arrived in Germany. They are still waiting for a decision on their asylum claim and cannot travel outside the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia. To enable the story collaboration between Hassan Fazili, Emelie Mahdavian and the rest of the team, we traveled to Germany and built a mobile sound and picture editing studio to lock picture, record voice-over and material for the sound score, and sound design. Together we built a hybrid soundscape and music score that intertwines ambient sounds with layers that emerge from the family's memory. The sound design and composition is a vehicle for the layering of time of the story itself: the real-time events captured on mobile phones, the sound effects that build a sense of subjective space, and the affective response that invokes their memory and reflections.

*Midnight Traveler* reinforces a new way of looking at the refugee and migrant communities by using a non-traditional style that allows the viewer to be immersed in a contemporary Muslim journey to Europe. Audiences will have a chance to encounter a series of new cultures through the eyes of a "Midnight Traveler" from Afghanistan.

## FILMMAKER BIOS

### **HASSAN FAZILI – Director/Camera**

Hassan Fazili has developed theater plays, documentaries, short films, and several popular television serials in Afghanistan. In 2011, he was selected by the British Council to attend Sheffield/DocFest for documentary filmmaking networking and training. His films *Mr. Fazili's Wife* and *Life Again!* both push the envelope on issues of women's, children's and disability rights in Afghanistan, and have won awards at numerous international festivals. He also worked as a Location Manager for Feo Aladag's *In Between Worlds*, which premiered at Berlinale 2014, and as a Camera Operator for the IDFA selection *Voice of a Nation: My Journey Through Afghanistan*. His documentary *Peace in Afghanistan*, made for national television, profiled Taliban commander Mullah Tur Jan, who laid down arms in favor of a peaceful civilian life.

### **EMELIE MAHDAVIAN – Producer/Writer/Editor**

Emelie Mahdavian is a Persian-speaking filmmaker and Fulbright scholar who has spent over ten years working in Central Asian arts. Her feature documentary *After the Curtain* premiered at Lincoln Center as part of the 44th Dance on Camera series. Her experimental motion capture dance film *Intangible Body*, exploring censorship of women's dance in Iran, was exhibited at museums and international festivals. Emelie studied filmmaking at London Film School, and has a Ph.D. from the University of California, Davis, where she also teaches Film Studies and Cinema and Digital Media. She lives off-grid in the mountains of Idaho where she is developing her debut feature.

### **SU KIM – Producer**

Su Kim is a documentary producer in New York City and a 2015 Women at Sundance Fellow. Currently, she is producing *One Bullet Afghanistan* with director Carol Dysinger and *Sanson and Me* with director Rodrigo Reyes. Her recent film *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*, with director RaMell Ross and producer Joslyn Barnes, premiered at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival and won the U.S. Documentary Special Jury Award for Creative Vision and the prize for Best Documentary at the 2018 Gotham Awards.

### **FATIMA HUSSAINI – Co-Producer/Camera**

Fatima Hussaini was an actress on Afghan television before her family was forced to flee. Her short film, *Screaming Silence*, has won awards at international festivals. She is married to Hassan Fazili.

### **AHMAD IMAMI – Co-Producer**

Ahmad Imami is an Afghan filmmaker based in Kabul. He graduated with a degree in film from Kabul University and works in regional news and television.

### **GRETCHEN JUDE – Composer**

Gretchen Jude is an experimental musician, improviser and vocalist with experience in many genres and world traditions. Her musical collaborations have been released on Edgetone, Full Spectrum and Susu Ultrarock Records. Gretchen works extensively on music for choreographers and created the digital soundtrack for Emelie Mahdavian's *Intangible Body*. She holds an MFA in Electronic Music and Recording Media (Mills College), a PhD in

Performance Studies (University of California, Davis), and certificates from the Sawai Koto Institute (Tokyo) and the Deep Listening Institute (Rensselaer Polytechnic).

**KRISTINA MOTWANI – Co-Editor**

Based in San Francisco, Kristina Motwani has over 12 years of experience editing both short documentaries and features. For four years she was the Short Documentary Editor for the online arm of Al Jazeera, AJ+. Before AJ+, she was a Series Editor for PBS's Independent Lens and PBS World's Global Voices, Editor of the PBS World documentary *First Friday*, and Assistant Editor for the Emmy-winning *After Tiller* and *An Honest Liar*, which won the Audience Award for Best Feature at the AFI Docs Festival. Kristina is the director and producer of the feature documentary *What Happened to Amos?*, which received a 2017 BAVC National MediaMaker Fellowship and the 2018 SFFilm FilmHouse residency program. She is currently editing the film *Fruits of Labor*.

**NELS BANGERTER – Consulting Editor**

Nels Bangerter's work includes the critically-acclaimed film *Cameraperson*, winner of the IDA's Best Editing award; *Let The Fire Burn*, winner of Best Editing awards from the IDA, Cinema Eye and Tribeca Film Festival; HBO's *Very Semi-Serious*, News and Documentary Emmy winner; *Kumu Hina*, winner of the GLAAD Media Award for Best Documentary and PBS's Independent Lens Audience Award; and *War Child*, which premiered at Berlin and won Tribeca's Audience Award. Nels edited the Sundance short documentary *Project X*, directed by Laura Poitras and Henrik Moltke and narrated by Michelle Williams and Rami Malek. He has been nominated twice for News and Documentary editing Emmys.



## CREDITS

**Directed by**  
Hassan Fazili

**Featuring**  
Nargis Fazili  
Zahra Fazili  
Fatima Hussaini  
Hassan Fazili

**Written by**  
Emelie Mahdavian

**Produced by**  
Emelie Mahdavian  
Su Kim

**Co-Producers**  
Fatima Hussaini  
Ahmad Imami

**Original Score by**  
Gretchen Jude

**Edited by**  
Emelie Mahdavian

**Co-Editor**  
Kristina Motwani

**Consulting Editor**  
Nels Bangerter

**Camera by**  
Fatima Hussaini  
Hassan Fazili  
Nargis Fazili  
Zahra Fazili

**Supervising Sound Editor**  
Daniel Timmons

**Re-Recording Mixers**  
Tony Volante  
Daniel Timmons

**Supported by**  
Sundance Doc Fund, Sundance Film Institute

**Also funded by**  
ITVS  
Fork Films  
Threshold Foundation  
San Francisco Film Society  
Doha Film Institute  
Just Films | Ford Foundation  
Cinereach  
Bertha / Doc Society Journalism Fund  
Hot Docs CrossCurrents Doc Fund  
Tribeca Film Institute  
Neda Nobari Foundation

**The film was a part of these programs:**  
BAVC National MediaMaker Fellowship  
Points North Fellowship  
Greenhouse  
CPH:Dox Forum

**US Broadcast:** POV