

## VARIETY review of Stolen

(Documentary -- Australia) A Screen Australia presentation, in association with New South Wales Film & Television Office, of a United Notions production. (International sales: BIC Prods., Sydney.) Produced by Tom Zubrycki. Co-producers, Violeta Ayala, Daniel Fallshaw. Directed by Violeta Ayala, Daniel Fallshaw.

**With:** Faitim Sellami, Leil Baba Hussein, Deido Ambark Omar, Matalaould Moloud, Hamadoune, Fatma Sellami, Jueda, Mohammed Reda.

Narrators: Violeta Ayala, Daniel Fallshaw.  
(English, Spanish, Hassaniya dialogue)

By [RICHARD KUIPERS](#)

**The potential of documentaries to turn out very different from what was originally intended is controversially demonstrated with "Stolen." Begun by the Aussie team of Violeta Ayala and Daniel Fallshaw as a record of a feel-good family reunion in a Western Saharan refugee camp, the docu suddenly about-faces into an expose of slavery. Guaranteed to spark intense debate about the relationship between documakers and their subjects wherever it's shown, this compelling item is ideal for willing fests and pubcasters.**

The main subject of the film, Faitim Sellami, has since denounced Ayala and Fallshaw, claiming they falsely portrayed her as a slave. She became front-page news Down Under when flown in by supporters to attend the docu's world preem at the Sydney fest, monitored by security guards and with police stationed in the lobby. Fiery post-screening Q&A drew roughly equal parts praise and condemnation. Docu is all smiles at first. A Saharawi refugee who lives in a camp in supporter state Algeria, Sellami is about to be reunited with the mother she hasn't seen since Morocco's 1975 invasion of Western Sahara. Ayala and Fallshaw have been invited to cover events by Polisario, the Western Saharan independence movement responsible for administration of the camps.

Barely five minutes into the film, the good vibes turn bad. Sellami's 15-year-old daughter, Leil, says she has a "white grandmother" who lives with them. The woman in question is Deido, an Arab who brought Sellami to the camp and is said to have owned the family 30 years ago but has since liberated them. Statements by Leil and other family members and friends appear contradictory and leave no doubt they believe officially outlawed slavery continues here and elsewhere in the region. Following the arrival of Sellami's mother, Embraka, and sister Fatma, the filmmaking duo bury what they've shot in the desert and hotfoot it out of the camp.

The second half plays like an espionage thriller. Detained briefly in Algeria by the Polisario, Ayala and Fallshaw fly to Paris, where Mohammed Reda, a mysterious Moroccan, sets up an operation to smuggle the buried tapes to Casablanca. The road also takes them to New York and Geneva to fire questions at the U.N. High Commission for Refugees.

Using news coverage of talks between Morocco and the Polisario to emphasize the delicacy of everyone's PR machines at the time (mid-2007), Ayala also fields a frantic call from Leil. She reports police have come calling, and she accuses the filmmakers

of coming to do good but doing bad instead.

While most viewers will need to Google plenty of names, histories and official reports to get the bigger picture, what's onscreen is pacy, exciting and hugely engrossing. Ayala and Fallshaw have done the right thing by including a Polisario-supplied video statement by Sellami in the final cut.

Tech credits are pro. Camera (color/B&W, HD), Ayala, Fallshaw; editor, Fallshaw; music, John McDowell; sound, Ayala, Fallshaw; associate producers, Justine Moyle, Ellen Peck. Reviewed at Sydney Film Festival (competing), June 11, 2009. (Also in Melbourne Film Festival.) Running time: 76 MIN.

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