In line at cinema’s soup kitchen

Two new films attempt to render experience of homelessness in America

BY NICOLAS RAPOLD

It’s a curious fact that one of the most popular characters in motion-picture history is homeless: Charlie Chaplin’s Little Tramp. Although Chaplin’s creation took root in a life of his own, he set the tone for the complex interplay between art and authenticity in the depiction of homelessness. In the decades since, the portrayals have been a decidedly mixed bag (or berdine).

A frequent subject in the years after the Depression, hobos were depicted with sympathy in films like “Wild Boys of the Road,” about homeless children.

For “Shelley,” Ms. Connolly and Mr. Mackie also threw themselves into characters in the lower depths. Ms. Hannah is a heroin addict; Mr. Tahir, an African immigrant, opens the film bloody from a beating in police custody. Their developing bond is driven not just by their need to eat, get a fix and find a place to sleep, with dialogue gleaned from interviews with homeless people.

“I was looking for how they got to where they were, and the nuts and bolts of it: how things work, and how you survive, and how you make your money, how much money you make, how your days go and how you make choices,” Ms. Connolly said.

But if the films depict their hardships — including trading sexual favors for lodging — it also embraces the beauty of their romance.

“I didn’t want to make a film that or drug addiction being bad,” said Mr. Mackie. “I wanted to feel the film studio for me, that it was a dark place and just dump you in a dark place and you think, Why am I in this dark place?”

The Coalition for the Homeless vetted the script for Ms. Bettyann, and the “Time Out of Mind” team also worked with the organization — a preparation reflecting an urge to get things right. But what “right” means is another question.

Charles Lane’s “Sidewalk Stories,” a 1989 update of Chaplin shot without dialogue in New York, offers an example in portraying the homeless experience faithfully and creatively.

Mr. Lane’s story of an indigent street artist who falls into taking care of a little girl. For the filmmaker, there is no “com

“From ‘Boulevard Savu Saved From Drowning’ to ‘Olive Twist’ to ‘Down and Out in Beverly Hills’ to ‘What About Bob?’ to ‘The Pursuit of Happyness’ — these films did not get the homeless issue right nor did they get them wrong,” Mr. Lane said in an email. “Mainly because individually, these motion pictures were not about the homeless issue. Rather, each premise was in the service of a greater, entertaining story.

That, Ms. Lane suggested, it not a problem, since “one should never assume a position to attempt to legislate Art.” But “Sidewalk Stories” complicates its portrayal with a surprising ending: The sound of homeless characters is a park is suddenly heard on the soundtrack.

It’s an eloquent expression of what “Time Out of Mind,” “Shelley” and many films before them try to do: give a
Shanghai
TWINS TRACKING: YANG FUDONG SOLO EXHIBITION | YU MUSEUM
Through Nov. 26.
The Chinese artist Yang Fudong's elegant movies have the look and pace of French New Wave classics, but focus on China's rapid-fire transition from an agrarian society to a highly developed urban economy. This solo exhibition is comprised of five works the artist has created in the past decade, including "East of Qing Village," a six-channel video that juxtaposes images of burning dugis with clips of Chinese villagers and "The Colored Sky: New Women II," which shows young women frolicking on a beach that looks like a soundstage.

Paris
FESTIVAL D'AUTOMNE À PARIS
Various venues, Sept. 9-Dec. 31.
This festival takes place over four months in venues across the French capital. Its major aim is to add a more international flavor to Paris's autumn performance season. The program includes several concerts by the South Korean composer Unsuk Chin, and mythic dance works by leading choreographers like Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker and Magdy Maria. Above, an image from the choreographer Lloyd Newson's "Job's," a theater piece based on duets of interviews conducted with men who frequent sex shows. The work will appear in December at the Grande Halle de la Villette.

Toronto
TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL | TIFF Bell Lightbox
Sept. 10-20.
The Toronto gathering signals the unofficial start to the Oscar season. This year's festival includes the usual slate of anticipated new movies, like the Boston-made "Black Mass" starring Johnny Depp; the new documentary on James Hepha, "Sisters: Little Girl Blue"; and the latest project from the "Being John Malkovich" creator Charlie Kaufman, "Assemble." This year, for the first time,