

Nobody Loves Anyone as Much as CNFW Loves Caveh Zahedi

In March, the Creative Nonfiction Film Weekend (CNFW) was involved in a UK tour with Caveh Zahedi. In June, they hosted a WIP screening of his Ulysses film, which is where Caveh and Adelaide met. Now, festival co-directors Kimia Ipakchi and Orla Smith give their accounts of their year working with Caveh.

Working with Caveh has taught me a lot about honesty: its virtues, its limitations. There's being honest to other people about your own truth, and then there's being honest with yourself about a more objective truth, or the truths of others. The process of putting together this reading has come with its share of disgruntled moments. Like when I read Caveh's text claiming that he had come up with the idea to do a work-in-progress screening of *Ulysses & I* in June and "organised" it, when that idea was one that Kimia and I pitched to Caveh entirely on our own, and did the bulk of the legwork organising. Or when Caveh proposed the title *Adelaide Faith Loves Caveh Zahedi* and I tried to argue that a one-sided name like that doesn't make sense for a reading where the entire point is that, for once, one of Caveh's romantic partners gets equal authorship over the telling of their shared story. Instead, his response ignored that and doubled down: "As for a title, we had also liked *No One Loves Anyone As Much as Adelaide Faith Loves Caveh Zahedi*". At this point—and in begrudging appreciation for the amusing extremity of this new suggestion—I said fuck it... why try to correct the *Ulysses* innaccuracy or push back on my weird feelings about the title, when that's Caveh's (and Adelaide's) truth. My truth can be expressed in the programme notes.

Caveh and Adelaide met at our *Ulysses & I* screening on June 29th. I had been considering breaking up with my boyfriend of six-and-a-half years at the time, and about a week later, I did. In August, Kimia and I had a Zoom call with Caveh, and he opened with, "I heard you broke up with your boyfriend". It amused me how the tables had turned. "Now you're the one who's lucky in love, and I'm unlucky", I laughed, and I got a warm "we've all been there" back. But on reflection, I don't actually feel unlucky. Since we first worked with Caveh on a UK tour back in March, I've become an immensely different person—or perhaps I'm becoming more myself, and I think it's because I'm not consumed by someone else. Caveh speaks of love as this all-consuming obsession. It's a value Adelaide, from what I've read in her account, seems to share too, which is perhaps what makes them suited to each other. It's like worshipping romantic love as a religion; treating your partner as a deity. I might have left my relationship earlier if I didn't feel so devoted to it. I remember wishing I was with someone who appreciated me differently, but never following that to the conclusion that I could leave, because in my head, this was the person the universe had assigned to me. Devotion fossilised into obligation: emotional, social, financial. I bristle now when I hear romance described in obsessive terms, especially on behalf of the women in the relationship: romantic devotion so often evolves toward men receiving benefits and women sacrificing them.

Caveh's account begins with a notion that I agree with: "the purpose of life is to join with others." But through being 'alone' romantically I have felt myself join with others more profoundly, replacing one relationship of unquestioning obligation with dozens of deep and complex friendships, developing different sides of myself through each one and becoming a freer and braver person in the process—more myself. I'm struck by a story he tells of initiating things with his ex-girlfriend Kate, who came to him in the hopes of being a mentee, with only a vague interest in a sexual or romantic connection. She was told by Caveh that if they kept things platonic and only read poetry together, his attention and interest would be limited. It's a story that makes me sad when imagining myself in either position, because it's so far from my new ideal for love: as essentially exactly the same as a friendship, with a little extra flavour of romance and sex. Perhaps romantic relationships should be less devotional, and friendships should be more, and somehow those two ideals will meet in the middle and level out into something that makes everyone feel a bit more whole and stable in themselves. It makes me sad to think that your desire to be around a person could be dependent on whether the nature of your relationship is romantic or platonic, because of an urge to find *that one person* who stands above all others. It makes me think of all the people you could miss out on truly knowing.

Orla

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It's weird to think that the first Caveh Zahedi event we programmed was just earlier this year. The grand UK tour in March spanned a week of back-to-back screenings in London and other cities. I aged significantly. It honestly feels like years ago. And here we are months later, putting on yet another Caveh screening...

Why do we keep programming Caveh Zahedi? This is a question I find myself asking a lot in the run up to this event in particular, as we come towards the end of the year, and my personal motivation and morale are running extremely low. I think about the repeated lines of questioning and interrogation from the multiple Q&As in March. I think about Desiree Akhavan, who moderated the Season 3 Q&A, asking why we as programmers who are also young women feel the need to platform his work. I think about why so many people, despite outright disagreeing with him and even disliking him, find his work valuable beyond just entertainment value. (I also think about the fact that our audiences must think we're genuinely obsessed with him or something... which isn't exactly the branding I was going for... no offence Caveh.)

In a weird kind of mirroring, I too find myself in a new relationship since our *Ulysses* screening. I showed my boyfriend *The Show About The Show* quite recently, eager to see his reaction and realising I had been somewhat hesitant to show him it—was I nervous to watch it back with him after all this time and think *what the fuck were we thinking programming this?* His reaction was very similar to many I had shown before: intrigue, a good amount of schadenfreude, and ultimately, an inability to completely see Caveh Zahedi as a trustworthy narrator.

Something that occurred to me the first time I watched *TSATS* and still to this day, is at a very basic level, the reason why people who disagree with and/or dislike Caveh and still find value in the show, is because of the catharsis that comes from his self-destruction. That is the closest thing to justice we get. But upon personal reflection, and discussions we've facilitated over the course of our events, including our interactive screening in Leeds where an audience member memorably called Caveh a misogynist, this does not feel like enough. I still crave to hear Mandy's uninterrupted account of the events, Ashley's thoughts outside the decisions of the editing room, a more critical acknowledgement of why his female partners are always women in their 20s with mental health issues, etc.

Which brings us to this event and why we think it is particularly special. Aside from the full-circle moment of Caveh and Adelaide's first interaction at a CNFW event, we were finally able to put on a screening where we felt it was a bit more balanced. Where Caveh's romantic partner gets an equal voice and the truth that is presented to us feels closer to something that is objective and trustworthy. And I can finally reach a level of catharsis in terms of programming his work. So now I can retire.

This will be a one of a kind evening. I hope you Caveh Zahedi freaks enjoy it x

Kimia

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