



# GOODBYE SOLO

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## Review by A. O. SCOTT, *New York Times*:

The story told in "Goodbye Solo," Ramin Bahrani's wonderful third feature, is moving and mysterious, and you may find yourself pondering its implications for a long time after the film's simple and haunting final images have faded. But it all begins matter-of-factly enough with a conversation between a taxi driver and his passenger, who proposes an unusual business arrangement.

Solo (Souleymane Sy Savane), the driver, is a Senegalese man living in Winston-Salem, N.C., working and charming his way toward a share of the American dream. His demeanour is effortlessly warm and disarmingly friendly. He wears down resistance or suspicion with an incandescent smile and affectionate teasing: every male customer or colleague is "big dog"; the unseen and impatient female dispatcher is "pork chop." Solo's hardy, at times almost inexplicable optimism makes him a kindred spirit to Poppy, the London schoolteacher played by Sally Hawkins in Mike Leigh's *Happy Go Lucky*.

And though Solo's world — the night-time streets and rough edges of a small American city — is in some ways more somber than Poppy's, he too must face, largely within the confines of a moving car, a profound challenge to his sunny view of it. The man in the back seat in that first scene is William (Red West), a white Southerner at least 30 years older than Solo, who wants to arrange a trip to a place called Blowing Rock. It's a long drive into the mountains, and William is offering a lot of money.

"What are you going to do, jump off?" Solo asks jokingly. William's silent response unnerves him, even as it inaugurates the movie's subtle and lucid exploration of a human connection that seems at once startlingly new — at least as a subject for a movie — and bracingly real.

Mr. Bahrani's first two films, *Man Push Cart* (2005) and *Chop Shop* (2008), both take place in New York and focus on the struggles of immigrants to get by and get ahead. But while that description is accurate enough, it is also a little misleading. Mr. Bahrani is not interested in serving up warmed-over multicultural sentiment or in delivering lessons on social problems, nor in staging encounters between uptight, privileged white Americans and earthy, sensitive Others.

What he is after is at once more straightforward and intriguingly elusive. His motive seems to be a basic curiosity about what people do and how they live, and his method — placing non-professional actors (Mr. West, with a long television and movie career behind him, is an exception) in real-world settings and embedding them in small, powerful stories — allows for both a richly detailed sense of life and an intimation of unspoken meaning.

*Goodbye Solo* does note the particulars of Solo's situation: his warm relationship with his stepdaughter, Alex (Diana Franco Galindo), and his more contentious dealings with her mother, Quiera (Carmen Leyva); his wary camaraderie with the drug dealers who use his services; his determination to become a flight attendant. But he is no more a case study than the grumpy, taciturn William, about whom we learn almost nothing. And while the temperamental differences between them could not be clearer, the film is grounded in their adamant, fine-grained individuality. It's not interested in what they are like, but rather in who they are.

And this basic, bottomless question is more than enough to sustain a story that quietly and entrancingly transcends its anecdotal beginnings. Mr. Bahrani (who wrote the script with Bahareh Azimi, his collaborator on *Chop Shop* and his director of photography, Michael Simmonds (who also shot *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop*), coax a rough beauty out of Winston-Salem and its environs, capturing the lonely, slightly menacing feeling of a city at night. Solo's good cheer is an antidote to this atmosphere, a way of filling the void that exists between people and beyond their strivings.

Mr. Bahrani and Mr. Simmonds create a mood that keeps us conscious of that emptiness, aware of the abyss that William appears to be seeking. Mr. West's face, pouched and weary, makes a back story superfluous. And William's reticence, more than his occasional show of warmth or generosity, provokes in Solo a defiant, insistent compassion. For some reason — it's not clear that he understands it himself — Solo is driven not only to try to save William, but also to know him. And this, in turn, infuriates William, who at one point punches his would-be savior in the face.

That is not the only blow Solo absorbs, and it is not entirely unmerited. His decency can seem like a form of aggression, and it can make him look foolish as well as saintly. Mr. Bahrani has cited Roberto Rossellini's *Flowers of Saint Francis* as an influence on *Goodbye Solo* and while Solo is hardly without sin, he does seem at times to be in possession of a quality that can be described only as grace.

William has it too, but in a more melancholy form. The two men, though they seem to share a destination, in fact cross paths going in opposite directions. Solo, a fairly new arrival in a strange land, is working his way up and in, toward the bright promise not only of material comfort but also of belonging. William is in flight, seeking the outer edge of experience and the oblivion that lies beyond it.

What each one takes from the other is not spelled out and does not need to be. Because grace is also what defines Mr. Bahrani's filmmaking. I can't think of anything else to call the quality of exquisite attention, wry humor and wide-awake intelligence that informs every frame of this almost perfect film.

