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Movies

MOVIES

Identity lost and found at Boston Palestine Film Festival

By **Loren King** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 14, 2011



IFC FILMS

From left: Zuhair Abu Hanna, Samar Tanus, and Saleh Bakri in "The Time That Remains."

Explorations of identity - personal, cultural, historical - weave through many of the films in the fifth annual Boston Palestine Film Festival, which runs Friday through Oct. 30 at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and other venues. While a fractured sense of self and divided loyalties may not be surprising themes for Palestinian filmmakers, what is striking is how deeply personal many of these films are, with tones more contemplative than didactic, more ironic than angry.

Elia Suleiman, the award-winning Palestinian director whose absurdist, mordantly humorous features have



earned him comparisons to French comic actor Jacques Tati and silent film legend Buster Keaton, is represented by three works. Suleiman's "The Time That Remains" (2009), winner of numerous international film festival awards, is the opening film Friday at 6:30 p.m. at the Museum of Fine Arts. His first film, "Chronicle of a Disappearance," winner of the best first film prize at the 1996 Venice Film Festival, screens Saturday at 2 p.m. and "Divine Intervention" (2002) shows on Sunday at 7 p.m., both at the MFA. Suleiman will be present for discussions after all three screenings.



SEVENTH ART RELEASING

Osama Zatar, left, and Jasmin Avissar in "Love During Wartime."

"Anyone with an interest in cinema, not just Palestinian cinema, will want to see these films and hear Suleiman discuss them," says Salma Abu Ayyash, festival cofounder and curator. "He's an artist with a unique voice and this trilogy is very important to the development of his career."

Each film in Suleiman's trilogy is semiautobiographical and explores the condition of Israeli Arabs with characteristic satire and surrealism. "The Time That Remains," subtitled "Chronicle of a Present Absentee," is divided into four vignettes spanning 1948 to the present. Shot in Suleiman's boyhood home of Nazareth, the stylized visuals depict Suleiman's family, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and are inspired by his father's diaries, his mother's letters to family members who fled the Israeli occupation, and the director's own recollections.

"Chronicle of a Disappearance" may be Suleiman's first feature but his distinct style is already evident. He casts himself as a deadpan observer who returns to Palestine from abroad. Silence is as important as dialogue - characters are alone, both inside and out. Genres are blended, from slapstick to thriller, and fact mixes with fiction as the film pushes the boundaries of autobiography.

Suleiman's second feature, "Divine Intervention," subtitled "A Chronicle of Love and Pain," won the Jury Prize at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. Suleiman again plays the central character who cares for his ailing father in Jerusalem while romancing a Palestinian woman living in Ramallah. Since they're barred from moving between the two cities, the lovers are forced to meet in the shadow of an Israeli army checkpoint,

where they observe the daily clashes between soldiers and civilians.

Women's documentaries

Young women direct an impressive number of films in the festival. Ibtisam Mara'aneh will attend the screenings of her two, "77 Steps" and "Paradise Lost" (Oct. 26, MFA), companion documentaries that offer moving testimony to the filmmaker's coming of age as a Palestinian citizen in Israel.

"Paradise Lost" (2003) is Mara'aneh's autobiographical quest to understand her own identity as she examines the revisionist history in her hometown, a small fishing village near Haifa, one of the few Arab villages Israel spared in 1948. In her follow up documentary, "77 Steps" (2010), Mara'aneh has taken an apartment in Tel Aviv and begun a relationship with Jonathan, a Jew from Canada. The film chronicles the couple's polarizing discussions about family ties, community, identity, and politics, a divide that widens as Israel invades Gaza in 2008 and Jonathan's Zionist grandfather arrives from Canada.



LAMA FILMS

Razi Shawahdeh (foreground) and Bassem Loulou in "Man Without a Cell Phone."

The travails of a real-life Jewish-Arab couple are also explored in Gabriella Bier's intimate documentary, "Love During Wartime" (Oct. 28, MFA), which asks the universal question: Can love overcome religious, social, and legal barriers? Israeli law forbids Osama Zatar, a sculptor from Ramallah, to live in Israel with his Jewish wife, Jasmin, a dancer. But Jasmin faces constant harassment by police and threats from extremists when she tries to live in Ramallah. They decide to move to Germany, but Osama must endure a bureaucratic labyrinth to get a visa - their Israeli lawyer tries to reassure them by quoting Kafka - as well as blatant racism against Arabs. Zatar will attend the screening.

The closing-night film, "Man Without a Cell Phone" (Oct. 30, MFA) is the feature debut of Palestinian director Sameh Zoabi, who will attend the event. Zoabi's darkly funny film is about the generation gap between two Arab Israeli citizens: an elderly father, Salem, who thinks the cellphone tower atop land taken by Israel is poisoning his olive trees, and his son, Jawdat, whose social life revolves around his ubiquitous

cellphone. Salem orchestrates a standoff between the community and armed Israeli police who guard the tower. Rich with satire and absurdist humor, the film seems influenced by Suleiman's work, which brings the festival full circle.

The BPFf will also screen films at Harvard University Law School, Berklee College of Music, and the Cambridge and Brookline public libraries. For more information, go to www.bostonpalestinefilmfest.org.

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