

LANDSCAPE: Palestine, Venue: Boston A Nascent Festival Makes a Big Impact

The mood at the opening reception of the 2nd annual Boston Palestine Film Festival was mixed. Attendees mingled with filmmakers, artists and organizers who relished the triumph of having pulled this event off for the second year in a row. If the growth of the Festival since its first year is any indication, the event will be a mainstay in the city for a long time. The space, Harvard's CGIS building on Cambridge Street, was the perfect venue for a hip crowd to dance to live Arabic music, take in delicious middle-eastern food (donated by Casablanca), and view original artwork by international artists.

Still one could not forget that the boisterous Arabic music celebrated the heritage of a people dispossessed. In fact, turning from the dance floor, one was immediately drawn into a series of photos. Part of the Expressions of Nakba art exhibit, "Jerusalem Dispossessed," witnesses the tragic circumstances for Palestinians who try to remain in their homeland. (Nakba means "catastrophe", and refers to the expulsion of over 800,000 Palestinians from their homes and land in 1948.)

Ryan Brooks, a photographer from Brooklyn, attended both Friday's opening reception and also Saturday's film screenings at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA). His reaction to the Expressions of Nakba exhibit was positive. "It was an introduction to the culture and the lifestyles and the key issues and some of the movements that are starting to take shape," he said. Brooks especially appreciated the text accompanying the images. "There are a few photos where the conflict is more obvious, but across the exhibition I found myself wanting to read my way through to understand it fully."

Hubert Murray, a Cambridge architect originally from England, attended the opening reception. "It is a great coming out of the tragedy. It's an awakening, a coming of age of a social movement as much as a political movement to celebrate the culture of the Palestinians and their great loss." Murray noted that the Nakba has been commemorated in Europe for years, but this is the first time it has been so memorialized in the United States.

Nasser Rabbat, Director of the Islamic Architecture program at MIT, is on the board of the film festival. He remarked that the organizers had achieved much in making this happen, pointing to his own difficulties in the last ten years trying to present any cultural event with the word Palestine attached to it.

"They have 15 more films than last year," he said. "The organization of the art exhibit is excellent. The people [attending] are very positive." Rabbat credited not only the growing Palestinian community in Boston but also the progressive film community in the area, and cites the support of the MFA and the Harvard Film Archive as examples.

Rabbat explained that both Palestinian cinema and the Boston Palestine Film Festival are important because they recognize the "original voice" of Palestinians. In the 1960s and 1970s, films about Palestine were made by non-Palestinian Arabs. Seminal films such

as *THE DUPES* (Syria, 1972) began to raise awareness and stand out as great pieces of work. However, when Palestinians began making films themselves, the works were generally more "revolutionary" than artistic. "It took some time for Arab parents to send their kids to study cinema in Europe or the U.S.," says Rabbat. "Now we have the distillation of skills and acquisition of a voice and it shows. The artistry of Palestinian films now is ten times better than what it used to be."

Nitin Sawhney, co-founder and organizer of the Boston Palestine Film Festival says the filmmaking community in Palestine is still nascent. "I wouldn't characterize it as an industry, but it tends to work. There are two or three small production houses in Ramallah and a lot of really great indie Palestinian filmmakers who are struggling to work in this medium. The infrastructure is missing, but yet you see really incredible films coming out of Palestine today."

Prior to co-founding the film festival, Sawhney established "Voices Beyond Walls," a summer film school for kids living in Palestinian refugee camps. Sawhney, with a team of local and international volunteers, runs workshops that engage youth in narrative style filmmaking almost exclusively. "They quickly learn how to become good journalists," he says. "But I think narrative skills are essential."

(This year, the Boston Palestine Film Festival will show a collection of films produced by kids in the 2008 "Voices Beyond Walls" program. If the short films on the 2007 "Voices Beyond Walls" DVD are any indication, Wednesday night's screening of the 2008 works is not to be missed. Sawhney will present the films with his team at 6pm at the Harvard Law School.)

Note that the Festival is not the "Palestinian" film festival, but the "Palestine" film festival. The ten-day event includes works by Palestinians living in Palestine, as well as works from filmmakers in the Diaspora who go home to make films, despite restrictions for entry by Israel, often with bigger budgets resulting from collaboration with international filmmakers. Additionally, the festival is screening works by international directors whose only tie to Palestine is their concern over the human rights situation there. Also included are films by Israeli directors that touch on the subject in a sensitive way. Sawhney says connecting filmmakers and audiences is another role of the festival. "The Festival brings these people together in a way that they don't have an opportunity to connect."

One of the directors featured this year is Palestinian filmmaker Buthina Canaan Khoury, who studied filmmaking and photography at the Massachusetts College of Fine Arts. At Friday's reception, Khoury appeared relaxed as she mingled with the crowd and discussed her work.

Khoury now resides in her homeland, where she makes films about Palestinians facing humanitarian and women's issues. Researching and shooting alone with a Sony 170 MiniDV cam, Khoury relies on help of

an editor and a composer to complete her films.

Although Khoury prefers working in 35mm, she lacks adequate funding. Still Khoury does not take her limited resources into account while planning her films. Her first concern is making the film. "In the end, I find it works for my benefit, maybe not the best quality of image, but there's this intimate relationship that is not broken when I'm just alone with my camera and the subject."

Khoury described the Boston Palestine Film Festival as, "a very healthy environment," for filmmakers. Her short documentary *TASTE THE REVOLUTION* was screened at the MFA Monday. Khoury's 50-minute film *MARIA'S GROTTTO* screened at the MFA Saturday alongside *FIRST PICTURE* (Akram Al-Ashqar, Palestine, 2006).

From the moment the 26 minute *FIRST PICTURE* opened, the audience was silent, taking in the story of a toddler released from the prison where he was born and raised, into the arms of the loving father he has never known. Combining straightforward interview techniques with the adult subjects, with tracking shots of the very quiet and disturbed toddler going about his daily life, and photos of the prison and the mother trapped there, Al-Ashqar tells a story that is both tragic and hopeful.

Khoury's award winning *MARIA'S GROTTTO* was followed by a Q&A session with Khoury and one of the stars of her film, Palestinian Hip-Hop performer Abeer. Documenting the practice of "honor killings" in Khoury's hometown of Taybeh, *MARIA'S GROTTTO* both inspired and upset viewers, who pep-

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from top to bottom
Abeer and filmmaker Jackie Salloum sit front row of the MFA's packed theater at the BOFF's opening night screening of *SLINGSHOT HIP HOP*. Photo by Anne Paq.

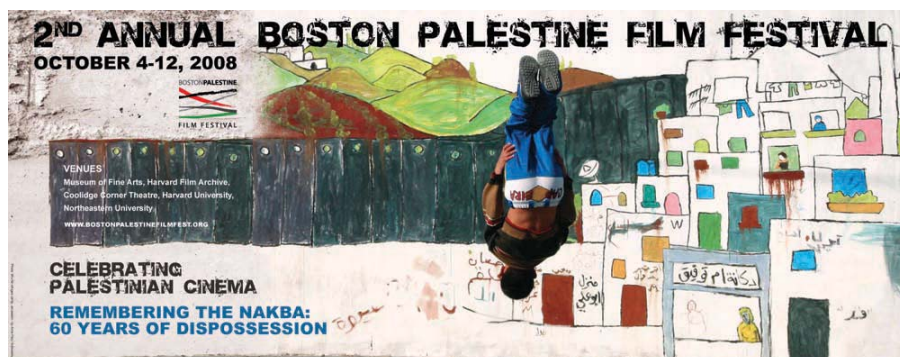
Attendees at Friday's opening reception take in the disturbing photo exhibit, "Jerusalem Dispossessed." Photo by Rebekah Fraser.

Abeer and Salloum answer audience questions after the screening of Salloum's film, *SLINGSHOT HIP HOP*, in which Abeer stars. Photo by Anne Paq.

Filmmaker Buthina Khoury addresses the crowd at Friday's opening reception. Photo by Rebekah Fraser.

Nitin Sawhney introduced Buthina Khoury after the screening of Khoury's film, *MARIA'S GROTTTO* at the MFA on Saturday. Photo by Anne Paq.

Poster for the Palestine Film Festival, which closed in Boston on October 12th. Poster courtesy of the Palestine Film Festival.



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Maine, however, and says he would love to be able to work more in his home state. His and Russo's comments were given on the Maine Public Broadcasting Network as reported by Radio News Producer Tom Porter.

It's interesting to note that M-3, the Maine Media Mentorship Program dedicated to industry workforce development by matching industry professionals with Mainers seeking specific instruction, insights and contacts in the industry has already begun.

Meanwhile Desi and Sean have high hopes for making their script "Tumbledown" into a motion picture in Maine. Good research, good intentions, good leadership, and a good deal of desire may well prevail as New England looks forward to adding Maine to its very impressive list of states with outstanding incentive attractions. I predict New England will be the third most important Mecca for film production in the United States, but then, I've been doing that for a very long time. That's why this magazine is called IMAGINE.

Desi Van Til and Sean Mewshaw are editing a promo of their work at their downtown Portland, Maine office keeping their hopes high to make her script "Tumbledown" in Maine.

Carol Patton publishes IMAGINE and wrote the definitive early eye opening piece about the importance of film incentives for New England in October of 2004 titled "Incentives that Work Take Work." You can Google it at www.imagineews.com.

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and grip equipment, and contract production services from them.

Another recent film that would have been derailed by high fuel costs was the Hallmark Channel Christmas Special Feature "Moonlight and Mistletoe," starring Tom Arnold. Because of unforeseen events, The Hallmark Channel found itself shooting one of their Christmas Special Features in Chester, Vt. in June. "We wanted to film this last winter but with the writers' strike we had to wait until the script was completed," explained Sheri Goldberg, director of network program publicity for the Hallmark Channel. The film tells the story of the aptly named Nick played by actor Tom Arnold (TRUE LIES) who operates a Christmas theme park that is threatened by a real estate developer. Through movie magic the production transformed the late spring town green, surrounding bed & breakfasts, and storefronts of Chester into a winter wonderland called "Santaville."

The one thing movie magic couldn't change was the cost of diesel fuel which by June had reached \$4.85 a gallon. The film was originally budgeted to be shot in January when diesel fuel was only \$2.48 per gallon. But, because of the Writers Guild strike the script wasn't ready and the production had to postpone to June. Production Manager Dave Giancola anticipated and budgeted for the additional expense of making artificial snow, but he hadn't anticipated that the cost of bringing in the production equipment package from North Carolina was going to double. Caught in a bind, Giancola turned to SL&G for help. SL&G provided a complete lighting package consisting of a 48' Production Trailer, a 10-Ton Grip Truck with onboard Crawford 1400Amp Generator, a Crawford 1200Amp Tow Generator, a 1-Ton stake bed truck, and a 1/2-Ton pick-up truck. In addition to competitive pricing and better support, SL&G was able to save the producers of "Moonlight and Mistletoe" the thousands of dollars they would have spent on drivers, road accommodations, and fuel to bring the lighting package in from outside New England.

What the producers of "Moonlight and Mistletoe" and TELL TALE have in common is that, with the high cost of fuel, it was only economically viable for them to shoot their films in New England if they rented their production equipment package from a local vendor. These two films were fortunate to find local support - not every film was. Just three days before the commencement of principle photography THE WOMEN still had not been able to find a rigging electric's trailer package in the northeast. In the eleventh hour, they had to bring one

up from Florida. "When there were six major motion pictures filming simultaneously in April, I know first hand that there were days when equipment orders weren't able to be filled," maintains Guy Holt.

This last spring clearly demonstrated that more local production infrastructure is needed for the New England region to become a vibrant production market in the era of over \$100 per barrel oil. For more detailed information on what ScreenLight & Grip has to offer, including their sound stage, visit www.screenlightandgrip.com.

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pered the director and star with questions and praise. Both women put their lives at risk by making the film. (Abeer has since moved to the United States, where she finds more support for women who want to speak out and express themselves through music.)

Festival goers responded on a visceral level to the films, and expressed interest in Palestinian culture and practices rather than simply the filmmaking & storytelling techniques employed by Ms. Khoury. The audience was so engaged in the dialogue that it ran over schedule. Organizers had to end the discussion in order to show the next films on the docket: two documentaries, TERRITORIES (Mexico/Palestine/Canada, 2007) and POWER (Israel, 2006), and A DAY IN PALESTINE (Palestine/Canada, 2007), an experimental short shot on super 8.

Outside the theater, people were still talking about FIRST PICTURE and MARIE'S GROTTTO. Robin, a woman from the Boston area expressed shock and outrage that a woman couldn't do something that a man could do without having her life put at risk. Elizabeth flew in from the Bay Area to attend the festival for the weekend. "I'm just seeing the opening, and am very, very moved," she said. Elizabeth took time to speak with Abeer, who was signing CDs (her Witche's Intifada was recently released), and said she was looking forward to seeing SLINGSHOT HIP HOP (Jackie Salloom, Palestine, 2008) a documentary about Abeer and other Palestinian Hip Hop performers at the MFA Saturday evening.

Ryan Brooks described both FIRST PICTURE and MARIA'S GROTTTO as important but very difficult to watch. "I find that my knowledge is even more limited than I thought it was. It's been eye-opening." Brooks also explained his reaction as a photographer, "To see those places aside from the actual issues... visually it's all new to me, so it's kind of getting familiar with the landscape, I guess."

For organizers and filmmakers alike, familiarizing American audiences with the landscape is a step in the direction toward understanding a people and preserving a culture, and a major factor in creating the Boston Palestine Film Festival. Khoury praised festival organizers, saying, "They're getting people to support Palestinian lives, and the cause in general. It's very essential." Sawhney hopes to see additional Palestine film festivals spring up around the world. "It's really part of our mission to make Palestinian film a much more viable enterprise to be working on."

The Boston Palestine Film Festival ran from October 4-12, with films screened at seven venues around the greater Boston area. For more info: www.bostonpalestinefilmfest.org

A graduate of Yale University and a former high school Film teacher, Rebekah Fraser has written, directed and produced screenplays and stage plays for adults and children of all ages. Her scripts have received attention from numerous international competitions, including American Gem, Scriptapalooza, and FADE IN Magazine. Fraser's first children's musical, The Tree & the Village, will be published in the anthology Eco-Theater for the Global Village this year. For more information, see www.rebekahfraser.com