



PALESTINE

UNCUT

Premier screening : 5 June 2007
Festival screenings : 16-17 June 2007

Special Palestine Film Festival exposing 40 years of occupation

Speech given at ACMI Cinemas by journalist Maher Mughrabi to introduce two films shown at a Special Palestine Film Preview to mark 40 years of Israel's occupation of the remaining Palestinian lands on Tuesday, 5 June 2007.

Assalam aleikum and good evening ladies and gentlemen.

Before I introduce tonight's films there are a number of people and organisations I need to thank for making this event and the events that will follow on June the 16th and 17th possible. Thanks go to Nick Collecchi of AFD and Typecast for allowing us to show *Until When...*, tonight's second film, and to Irit Neidhardt and Sabina Rolle for allowing us to show our first film, which in Arabic is called *Ka-annana Ashroon Mustaheel*, or in English *Like Twenty Impossibles*. I would also like to thank Pina Virtuoso and Madeleine Hodge from the Australian Centre for the Moving Image for their role in hosting tonight's presentation.

For the whole Palestinian film series which begins tonight and continues on June 16 and 17 at the State Library, I would like to thank Women for Palestine, Australians for Palestine and the Palestinian Community Association of Victoria for their resources and work and last but by no means least I should like to thank my friend Ayman Ouda, whose vision underpins this project and who selected and sequenced the films you will see as part of this event.

Tonight's event marks the day - June 5, 1967 - when the Six-Day War began. At occasions like this, we usually say that this war marked the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip

as well as the Golan Heights and, for a time, the Sinai desert. But like so many historical turning points, those six days in June 1967 point beyond themselves, to the past and the future.

In relation to the past, 1967 marked the culmination of the displacement and loss that began with the UN General Assembly's vote to partition Palestine in November 1947 and the Nakba, or catastrophe, of 1948. As one Palestinian, Emile Safieh, put it:

"Fi a'am thamanya wa arbaeen diya'ana bilaadna wa fi a'am saba'a wa sitteen diya'ana awladna" (In the year 48 we lost our country, and in the year 67 we lost our children)

Tonight's first film, *Like Twenty Impossibles* by Annemarie Jacir, is about what remains beyond loss. In Damascus after the June War, the Palestinian leader George Habash declared that everything was lost, to which the late Yasser Arafat replied that this was not the end but the beginning.

Yet what began? In 2004, I told an audience at Melbourne University that 1967 was a "moment of shattering" but also one in which Palestinians – wandering invisible among the nations of the world for 20 years – began to see each other again.

Very near the beginning of this film, Rami (played by Ismail Dabbagh) scolds Annemarie (Reem Abu Sbaih) for not staying in touch – you could have written to me, he says, but it is like a dream that you are here now.

Both of tonight's films were directed and produced by Palestinian women – Annemarie Jacir and Dahna Abourahme – who together were instrumental in establishing the production company Philistine Films for independent Arab and Iranian cinema and the Dreams of a Nation project to create a physical archive of Palestinian cinema. What you are about to see is not a documentary, though at times it feels like one – it is the dramatisation of a dream and a waking nightmare, but above all it is about keeping in touch.

In this dream that is also a reality, we see the Palestinians as they are today – on an interrupted journey, starting from very different points. Rami is the Palestinian of the occupied territories, the nervous subject of oppression by an alien power, self-taught in the language of silence and secret signals. Annemarie is the Palestinian of the diaspora, confident and quick to voice her outrage, speaking English and travelling in the same world as the Israelis themselves. Finally we have Mohammed the

sound man (Ashraf Abu Moch), the Palestinian who remained in 1948, who grew up a citizen of Israel, speaking Hebrew and entitled to the state's protection - but only within certain strictly defined limits.

What happens when these travellers encounter the "flying checkpoint" of the Israeli military? In a word, disintegration. At several points in the film, Annemarie reminds the soldiers, her film crew and herself that "we're all together". This is not something you have to say unless your togetherness - your integrity - is questioned and threatened. So it is with the film crew, with the dream of a nation, and with this film. We gradually lose sound, we lose sight, we lose touch - and there is no punctuation at the end, because after 40 years there is still no punctuation in that situation.

As the film ends, Annemarie's words - "we're all together" - remain as a challenge to Palestinians and non-Palestinians. It is a challenge that the film's title seeks to answer in the affirmative, by referring to the defiant poem of the late Nazareth mayor and Knesset member Tawfiq Ziyad:

*Our roots are entrenched
Deep in the earth.
Like twenty impossibles
We shall remain.*

But that word "impossibles" reminds us that - as with all dreams - there is still the crucial question of will. Can we maintain sight of each other? And what will become of these people?

When I was a boy, my father would often play cassettes of the Egyptian singer Abdel Halim Hafez in our car. A particular favourite of my father's was a hit Abdel Halim had in the 1960s which most Arabs here will know - *Sawah*, or "Wanderer".

On its face, *Sawah* is a love song, but for Palestinians it has always had an extra layer of meaning. "Wanderer, I walk between the lands/Wanderer, the distance between me and my beloved is vast", the song begins. But it was a line in the chorus which would make my father sing along: *Taminooni al-asmarani/Amla 'eh al-ghurba fih?* - "Tell me of the dark one/what has exile done to him?"

Tonight's second film, *Until When . . .*, is a documentary about the answers to this question. When Emad tells the camera "we are all

refugees”, he is not speaking technically or legally about displacement or dependence on aid agencies. He is reminding us that the state of mind of a refugee - of a wanderer - can only end when we feel at home and connected to all those who matter to us.

At the beginning and end of the film and at moments throughout we are shown a ruined home and stray vines that stand for the vision of this home and connectedness as it existed in the past - a pastoral, “natural” vision that the elderly Ahmed Khalil Hammash and his wife Safiya Awad and Fadi, a child who is effectively father to his four brothers, invoke and insist upon again and again. “Who can describe Lydda for me?” Fadi asks, talking about a place he never laid eyes upon. “I want to see it in front of me.”

As Ahmed and Safiya's son, a middle-aged man with children nearing adulthood, reminds us, in the present *fishi dawla, fi thawra* - there is no nation, there is struggle, or revolution. Even inside the land of historical Palestine, even in the “Area A” created by the Oslo accords of 1993-4, in the Dheisheh refugee camp between al-Khalil and Bethlehem in the southern West Bank, the relationship between people and land, people and water, people and the road, people and authority is, to use a word used by the young activist Sana Salameh, *mahdoudeh* (limited, bordered), or to use a phrase from old Safiya when she talks about her grandchild's wedding, *misheh kamil* - not complete.

This incompleteness is not simply a matter of freedom denied - freedom to build, to plan, to move, to speak, to work - it is also a matter of brutal injury. As the young restaurateur Jamal puts it, to grow up Palestinian under occupation is to inhabit a world of arbitrary imprisonment, random torture and violence and immanent death, a world where the young mother Hanan can only look anxiously at her little daughter when she wishes she had a tank to put the Israeli army to flight, and where boys talk about living and dying and martyrdom in their earliest years.

The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip has become something quite unique and unparalleled in 21st century life - not only because it has lasted for 40 years but because it has involved the occupier trying to settle the land and claim “eternal” ties to it as the ties of the Palestinians are eroded, severed and demolished.

This film gives you a chance to see that the wall which exists and expands in the West Bank today and is the focus of so much humanitarian campaigning is nothing new, that Dheisheh knew such barriers and observation posts 20 years ago. But above all it shows you

that Oslo, which to those of us “outside” - those unaccustomed to occupation and to exile - seemed such a breakthrough was in fact a breakdown, not a liberation but a further sectionalisation. For the activist Sana, who is proud to identify as a woman of the left, Oslo was a moment of disenfranchisement; “we were split up”, she recalls. If we are to understand the absence of peace today, we must grasp that this was the experience not just of individuals but of the many - we must grasp what Ahmed Khalil Hammash's son is talking about when he says that Oslo has given him a state “two kilometres wide”.

The Palestinian writer Mourid Barghouti has said that exile transformed us from “children of Palestine” to “children of the idea of Palestine”, but more than this he laments not that Israel has taken away our past - though it has done that - but that it has blocked off our future. I think that many of those interviewed for the film understand this and do their best to set out a vision of relation and completeness, of real peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, when I first thought about what I was going to say tonight, the indigenous people of this land were very much on my mind. For them, May of this year was the 40th anniversary not of a defeat but of a victory. Yet even victory has not given them that completeness they sought, the full citizenship that in this film the teenage Majd and her sister Sana understand to be their best hope of deliverance from being a refugee and all the uncertainty that entails.

It is customary at events such as this to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Wurundjeri of the Kulin nation, on whose territory we stand. As a Palestinian, I will confess that this acknowledgement has always left me unhappy and uncomfortable, for it costs us nothing. It is, as Emad puts it in the film, peace that is said, and then *khalas* - finished - it is not peace on the ground.

It is not enough to know and to acknowledge - we must also act. For those we acknowledge, in this land and in the Palestinian camps, are dying while we talk, their lives and their hopes shrivel and turn to dust while we visit the world and place our faith in tomorrow. Plaques and memorials will not save them.

So tonight I hope that this film and those that follow on June 16 and 17 will put your feet on the road to action. And I dedicate my meagre words to those who lit a sacred fire in the King's Domain, to those thousands who flee from the shelling of the Nahr al-Bared camp and other camps like it, those detained in the Guantanamo Bays of Israel, 10,000 strong, and last but not least to a people many of you might never have heard of,

the people of the Chagos Islands, the *ilois*, who beat the British Government in its own courts to win the right to go home, a right that Lord Justice Stephen Sedley called “one of the most fundamental liberties known to human beings”.

It is this commitment that Annemarie made in tonight's first film when she said “we'll be back”. It is a commitment that still hangs in the air. We are the ones who can and who must anchor it in the land.

Maher Mufid Mughrabi
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