

Contemporary Film Gems from Palestine

Despite its precarious conditions, cinematic work in Palestine is on par with the world's best. Swiss audiences had a chance to experience it firsthand with the first Swiss Palestine Arts Film Festival, which took place in Zurich with immense success at the beginning of September. A look back at «Hummus und Popcorn».

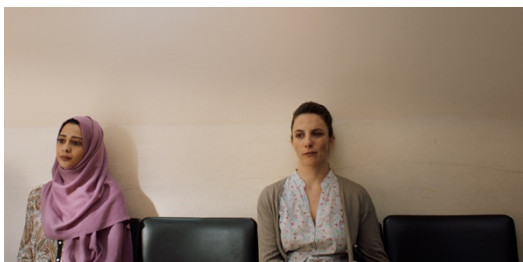
To create cinematic art despite the endless problems arising from a stifling occupation, and simultaneously telling stories about and within it, is very telling of the Palestinian cultural landscape. The films for this year's Palestine Arts Film Festival, which took place in Zurich's KOSMOS, draw a complex image of Palestinian everyday life through a handful of stories.



Together with Filmlab in Ramallah, an organization founded in 2014 supporting film, members of the committee curated the following films:

When a love affair becomes a state matter (Director: Muayad Alayan; Screenplay: Rami Alayan)

The movie «The Reports on Sarah and Saleem» is about an extra-marital affair between an Israeli café owner and a Palestinian man employed as a bakery delivery man. Their passionate encounters unfold regularly in the back of Saleem's delivery van, on the outskirts of a divided Jerusalem; fleeting moments of freedom amid the weight of daily life. To make matters worse, Sarah is married to an Israeli colonel. Saleem and his wife are expecting their first child. In a terrible twist of fate, an out of the ordinary trip to Bethlehem blows the cover off the illicit affair. Muayad Alayan illustrates how this story goes far beyond a lover's betrayal and



turns into a bureaucratic nightmare. Only in a country like Israel can an affair have such devastating consequences. A society is depicted where distrust between the different groups of the population has become institutionally fixed. The scenes rapidly shift from intimate realms to badly lit impersonal police headquarters. In the case of Sarah and Saleem, no hint of hope is fathomable. Only tragedy awaits them, as the wedge between Israelis and Palestinians emerges as a collective duty, a stabilizing cornerstone of state order. Sarah is considered a traitor in her circles, and Saleem, as a political prisoner, is a hero, whose posters adorn every wall in the West Bank. One can only speculate on how the affair would have developed without the political circumstances, but the sobering reality swiftly puts the renegades back in their official places.

In «The Apollo of Gaza» Realities turn into Myths (Director: Nicolas Wadimoff; Screenplay: Béatrice Guelpa, Nicolas Wadinoff)

The tale of a modern legend: The amazing story of Gaza's spectacular find of a more than 2,000-year-old bronze statue of Apollo - and its subsequent disappearance – makes international headlines once again. The documentary by Nicolas Wadimoff portrays not only the fisherman, who was said to have salvaged the 750-

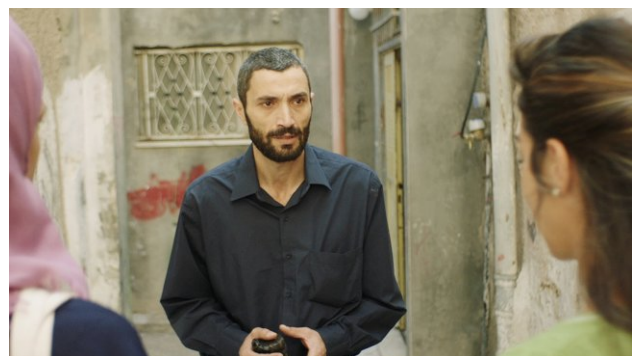


kilogram figure from the sea in August 2013, but also tens of other «insiders»: from friendly neighbors to local clerics, from enthusiastic historians to skeptical researchers. A slew of contradictory statements and rumors ensue about the discovery, the preservation, whereabouts, even the material of the statue, which can't help but make one smile. Whether Apollo is owned by Hamas remains unclear. The power of this film, which sits between investigative research and mystery,

lies in its symbolic weight and reminds us at times of the confusion and strain of the truth of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's «Nathan the Wise».

An Eye for an Eye in «Mafak (Screwdriver)» (Director and Screenplay; Bassam Jarwabi)

Bassam Jarwabi's fictional narrative tells the story of Ziad, who as a teenager is sentenced to 15 years in prison for the shooting of a Jewish settler to avenge his murdered childhood friend Ramzi. The fact that Ziad ends up shooting not a Jew but an Arab is, after the fact, a minor matter: the Israelis hold the adolescent Ziad in solitary confinement for a long time and the Palestinians in his city celebrate him as a hero when he is released. Even the wounded Arab testifies to journalists of Ziad's integrity and honest intentions. What follows after the release is the effort of a now grown man, who has to find his way between isolation and numerous attempts at social connection. The film does not seem to move linearly but through cycles: from the recurring visualization of Ziad's post-traumatic disturbances and the feeling of being lost up to the very last scene, in which a Jewish settler offers Ziad a ride in his car. The story comes full circle and the film ends in the same way Ziad's journey began; namely with an Arab who is mistaken for a Jew.



A girl lives the suffering of several generations (Director and Screenplay: Mats Grorud)

«Wardi (The Tower)» impresses visually with the use of beautifully designed puppets and wondrous animation. The film by Mats Grorud illustrates the life in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon through the eyes of an 11-year-old girl named Wardi and tells of the intergenerational impact of the «Nakba» (catastrophe) of 1948, when 700'000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes. In contrast to the innocent-looking aesthetics, somber individual experiences and the burden of trans-generational traumas on the shoulders of a little girl are illustrated. Grorud succeeds in making the audience aware that the expulsion more than 70 years ago of her people is just the beginning of what Wardi needs to grapple with to understand her life circumstances today. Wardi receives the old house key from her dying great-grandfather - the last witness of the homeland – and is thus tasked to keep the hope alive.



Short Films

Short films in their form are originally an expression of economic scarcity; in the context of Palestinian filmmaking, we come straight to the point with matters of the heart. An overview:



Oceans of Injustice (Director and Screenplay: Farah Nabulsi)

Farah Nabulsi uses fictional images to illustrate how the Palestinians are literally washed away by injustice and through her story appeals to the world to take the matter to heart



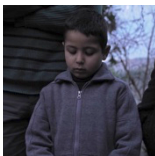
Memory of Land (Director and Screenplay: Samira Badran)

In a disturbing animated film, Samira Badran manages to reduce the passage through a checkpoint to its bare essentials: the human body is dissected, the senses are driven mad and the head cannot seem to grasp any of it.



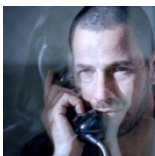
The Chair (Director: Laila Abbas; Screenplay: Rasha Sansour)

Arranged marriages are still commonplace across the Middle East. The whole affair gets very complicated when a woman wants no part in it. But things can still be jovial, as this short film shows.



Area C (Director and Screenplay: Salah Abu Nima)

Filmmaker Salah Abu Nima is still a student, but his craft already holds high promise: Through original and clever tactics, a small boy scares away the settlers who want to drive his family away. He will not be occupied.



Bonboné (Director and Screenplay: Rakan Mayasi)

Despite a physical contact ban, a Palestinian prisoner in an Israeli jail and his wife manage to get pregnant in a very original way.



Ayny - My Second Eye (Director and Screenplay: Ahmad Saleh)

The love of music connects two children of war. In order to buy an enchanting Oud (Levantine stringed instrument), the children put everything on the line to play their story together.

The Audience and the Atmosphere

Honey Thalgeh opened and thrilled the film festival with a refreshing and hope-giving talk. She is the founder and was captain of the women's football national team of Palestine. Today she works as a communications manager for FIFA and encourages women around the world to stand up for their rights.



Various discussions and talks took place during the festival; and the audience had the opportunity to interact directly with the directors of the films. Numerous other guests such as the Parisian artist Shadi Alzaqzouq and Irit Neidhardt, an expert on both cinema and the Middle East, enriched the exchange with the festival guests.



With almost all performances being sold out, The Zurich Komos achieved a resounding success with this program. The audience took part in inspiring discussions with the invited artists, expressing their fascination for the stories while showing their support and concern for the people and situation. With overwhelming positive feedback, the Palestine Arts Film Festival Committee will be back: we can look forward to 2020 when it's time for a second round.

Shamiran Stefanos, Geri Müller