



Oasis in a Troubled Land

The First Palestinian-Israeli Human Rights Film Festival

by Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow

It would have been illegal ten years ago, downright dangerous just a few years back, and after what happened on closing night, it's easy to see why a human rights film festival jointly sponsored by Palestinians and Israelis is still deeply controversial.

Basic Trust: The First Palestinian-Israeli International Human Rights Film Festival took place February 3-10 in Tel Aviv and Nazareth, Israel, and Ramallah, Palestine. It was sponsored by the Institute of Modern Media at Al Quds University in Ramallah and the Tel Aviv Cinematheque. Generally acclaimed as a historic political and cultural event, the festival's aim was "to awaken the awareness of human rights among the population of the two countries via cinema." Forty-eight narrative, documentary and experimental films and videos from nine countries were curated for the festival by an Israeli-Palestinian team, film scholar and director Judd Neeman and producer George Khleifi. A dozen foreign filmmakers were in attendance, as well as their Palestinian and Israeli counterparts and other local and foreign luminaries.

Festival organizers Osnat Trabelsi, an Israeli filmmaker and commercial TV producer from Tel Aviv, and Daoud Kuttub, a Palestinian journalist, TV producer and director of the Institute of Modern Media, worked for two years to develop the program, rejecting government support in order to maintain complete freedom in programming. With the assistance of enthusiastic Israeli and Palestinian staff and volunteers, they were able—at least initially—to deal with politically sensitive issues in a part of the world where military occupation continues, where almost everything from land to language is violently contested territory, and where human rights violations still abound despite an ongoing "peace process."

Fully half the films in the festival were by Palestinian and Israeli filmmakers, and they focused on human rights issues at home. These films were programmed with sensitivity and sophistication alongside movies about such places as

Cambodia, Rwanda and Kosovo. "Seeing human rights violations in other places is so horrifying and disturbing, how can we sit back and accept many of the same atrocities and abuses taking place in our own backyards?" asked Trabelsi.

In organizing the festival, "The devil was in the details," explained Kuttub, citing, for example, the difficulty of finding an affordable printer to produce a trilingual—Arabic, Hebrew and English—festival brochure. Equally nagging were the kind of simple questions that become major political decisions in the Middle East. "Could we use the word 'Palestine'? We decided, yes," said Kuttub. "Could we put the festival's e-mail address on the cover of the brochure even though it ends with 'il' for Israel? We put it on an inside page."

Our own 1997 documentary, *Blacks and Jews*, co-produced with Bari Scott, was the only feature-

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length U.S. film invited to screen at the festival. *Blacks and Jews* had never been shown in the Middle East, so we arrived in Tel Aviv with great anticipation. All across the city there were huge, colorful posters advertising the festival. The packed opening night audience was treated to a slew of heartfelt speeches about sensitivity and trust, and then watched the documentary *Iranian Journey*, an illuminating road movie about the first female long-distance bus driver in Iran. The film's British-Iraqi director, Maysoun Pachachi, is no stranger to the complex rendering of hope amid political oppression. Her earlier documentary work includes the award-winning *Voices from Gaza* and *Iraqi Women: Voices from Exile*, a response to the Gulf War.

Other documentary highlights included Nurit Aviv's *Makom Avoda* (*Workplace*), a visually stunning mood piece on globalization and economic exploitation. The film shows how an unsolved murder in an Israeli village became a catalyst for the expulsion of Palestinian workers and their subsequent replacement by foreign workers from Thailand. Also exceptional was *1948*, the directorial debut of Palestinian actor Mohammed Bakri. Both lyrical and defiant, *1948* examines the conditions of Palestinians who lived in exile in their own homeland after the modern state of Israel was created in 1948, an event Palestinians refer to as "the catastrophe."

The majority of programs at the festival were shot on Beta video, but there was also a sprinkling of 16mm and 35mm films. Screenings were accompanied by question and answer sessions. In addition, the festival hosted two seminars. In Tel Aviv, the seminar "Truth and Reconciliation" featured panelists Shulamit Aloni, a former Israeli cabinet minister, Sari Nusseibeh, president of Al Quds University and a leader of the Palestinian Intifada, and the co-author of this article, U.S. filmmaker Deborah Kaufman. Moderator Judd Neeman's call for a "new ritual" to replace centuries of Middle East bloodletting was met with outright rejection by both Aloni and Nusseibeh, who vociferously opposed the idea of South African-style truth and reconciliation hearings in the Middle East.

Local press coverage of the festival was extensive. Considerable media attention was given to visiting Canadian teenager Craig Kielburger, founder of the anti-child-labor organization Free the Children and subject of a festival documentary, Judy Jackson's *It Takes a Child*. Our film, *Blacks and Jews*, which examines five episodes of strife and reconciliation, was promoted with clips and interviews on Israeli State TV's prime-time Saturday night news magazine show.

After three days in Tel Aviv, the festival relocated for one day to Nazareth, the largest Palestinian Arab town in Israel. We were hosted by the Arab Association for Human Rights, which is fighting widespread discrimination against the twenty percent of Israel's population that is Palestinian Arab. The evening screening featured what was possibly the festival's most controversial film, Kasim Abid's documentary *Naji Al-Ali*, the story of a scathing Palestinian political cartoonist who was assassinated, the film suggests, by elements in the Palestine Liberation Organization. Some Palestinians in the audience objected to airing dirty linen in public, but the film went on to win the festival's top prize.

In Ramallah, the festival began with the seminar "Media and Human Rights," with panelists Professor Said Zedani of Al Quds University, Amira Hess, West Bank correspondent for Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, and Bill Omre of the *New York Times*. Hess described the negative effects of Israel's "neo-occupation," particularly the travel restrictions, area closures and humiliations of everyday life. We had acquired our own sense of the on-the-ground realities of the current political dilemma during the drive from Nazareth to Ramallah. Over and over again we encountered the detours, roadblocks and special "bypass roads" that carve up the West Bank into enclaves governed by the Israeli military, the Palestinian Authority or a combination of the two.

Ramallah's two small theaters were packed for festival screenings. The theaters are notable in themselves. Al Mattal is a bohemian hookah bar and cinematheque run by Palestinian filmmaker Rashid Mushrawi, and Al Ashtar is a theater for

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From left to right: Festival director Osnat Trabelsi, filmmaker Alan Snitow, festival producer in Ramallah Walid Batrawi, filmmaker Deborah Kaufman.

contemporary drama specially outfitted with state-of-the-art video projection for the festival.

During the Ramallah screenings, we could sense that the mood at the festival was changing. The human rights issues in the movies hit close to home. The festival's foreign guests had witnessed the Israeli military in an "operation" immediately outside our hotel in Ramallah. One of the invited participants from Gaza had been unable to get a permit to travel to Ramallah. And Druse filmmaker Qasem Sabagh, born in the Golan Heights with Israeli citizenship, and an optimist about a peace settlement with Syria, was harassed by Israeli military. Meanwhile, the final status negotiations between the PLO and Israel had just broken off, and Israel was bombing power stations in Lebanon in retaliation for recent Hezbollah attacks. Festival organizer Kuttab responded to these twin breakdowns in the peace process in a *Jerusalem Post* column during the festival. "Keeping the Lebanese in the dark and the Palestinians in ghettos," he said "is not a recipe for lasting peace in the region."

By the second night in Ramallah, some Palestinians in attendance were grumbling about "too many Israelis" at the festival and about the degree to which the festival was promoting a false sense of "normalization" between the two peoples. On the festival's final day, a full-scale boycott by militants against the "peace process" was underway, and Al Mattal owner Mushrawi was pressured to shut down the screenings at his theatre. At an afternoon screening of Hans Fels and Eitan Wetzler's *Ansar 3* (Fels is from the Netherlands and Wetzler is from Israel), a stirring and troubling documentary about an Israeli detention camp set up during the Intifada, foreign guests were the only ones attending. All of this set the stage for an unforgettable closing night.

About 100 protesters were chanting angry slogans outside Ramallah's Evangelical Hall, the site for the closing night festivities, demanding the closing of the event and threatening to storm the building, which was filling up with Palestinians, Israelis, foreign guests and journalists. The situation became more tense as heavily armed Palestinian police, soldiers, "intelligence services" and the Palestinian Governor entered the room. Amid the growing tension, organizer Trabelsi nervously quipped, "This must be the first time Israelis are under curfew in Ramallah!" In a surreal moment, the Israelis breathed a sigh of relief when they realized that the PLO had come to protect them and escort them to safety.

The Governor then began an apparently well-practiced ritual of appeasing everyone by arresting the Palestinian leaders on both sides—the protestors and the festival organizers—canceling the festival's closing event, and forcing everyone inside to leave. Festival organizer Daoud Kuttab and curator George Khleifi were "invited for coffee," as they say, and led away by armed men. The ironies continued when a journalist asked the Governor why he was canceling the event but not the demonstration outside. "You're human rights activists," the Governor answered. "You'd accuse us of human rights violations."

The festival staff and the foreign guests spent the remainder of the evening at the hotel, waiting for the release of our hosts. Finally, in the middle of the night, Kuttab and Khleifi arrived in boisterous spirits, vowing that the festival would continue next year. The filmmakers themselves had written a statement of thanks and solidarity, which was supposed to be read at the closing festivities, but was now read to the rowdy, enthusiastic, exhausted but relieved group gathered in a crowded, steamy hotel suite.

The festival was clearly a major watershed for the area, and an unforgettable experience in cultural and political exchange for those of us who attended. Upon our return to Berkeley, we found an e-mail from festival co-organizer Osnat Trabelsi, ruminating on this "amazing period," expressing simultaneous "satisfaction and confusion," and proclaiming an eagerness to start working on next year's festival. Given the ongoing political challenges facing the Middle East, this eye-opening festival, truly an oasis in the desert, is likely to remain a touchstone of controversy and a wellspring of hope. □

For information about the Palestinian-Israeli Human Rights Film Festival, visit: <http://go.walla.co.il/humanrights>.

Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow are currently producing a documentary about human rights issues in the new high tech economy of Silicon Valley.



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Festival host Daoud Kuttab announces that the closing night ceremonies in Ramallah, Palestine, are being shut down by the authorities.



Maysoon Pachachi's *Iranian Journey*



Makom Avoda by Nurit Aviv



1948 by Mohammed Bakri