

\* Runaway success: A scene from Yuval Adler's *Bethlehem*, which has invited rave reviews.

# Middle Eastern moods at Venice

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**T**he Middle East is now in turmoil. Called West Asia in India, the Middle East sent three variedly different movies to the just concluded 70<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival. Though not quite a take on the current political imbroglio in the region, the movies, nevertheless, were engaging studies of life and living.

Israeli director, Amos Gitai's *Ana Arabia* (Me, The Arab), would steal most of its credit for having been shot in an 81-minute single take. Nothing very unique about this, though, for Russia's Alexander Sokurov made *Russian Ark* in a 96-minute single unedited take in 2002. Probably, this was far more difficult than Gitai's effort, for Sokurov's camera wandered through the huge Winter Palace of St. Petersburg, a journey undertaken by the narrator and his European companion, who passed by many, many people, sometimes stopping by to have a conversation.

In comparison, Gitai's film is far less complicated for he has to deal with just about four or five people. A 20-something Jewish Israeli journalist, Yael/Yuval Scharf (who looks more like a model), arrives at a dilapidated house in the predominantly Arab settlement of Jaffa, close to Tel-Aviv. She is doing a feature on a Jewish woman, born in Auschwitz and who converts to Islam to marry a Palestinian. She is called Hanna, who is dead when Yael starts gathering material for her write-up.

Yael meets Hanna's husband, daughter and daughter-in-law, who is still bitter over her failed inter-cultural marriage.

Gitai's chooses minimalism, doing away with too many characters or too many angles to his plot, which necessarily makes it wafer-thin, and the camera, operated by Nir Bar, floats along taking advantage of the magic hour of sunset. Apparently, nine takes had to be discarded before Gitai could be satisfied with the 10<sup>th</sup>.

Even then, unlike Sokurov's grand work, Gita's appears dull, the leanness of the story showing all too prominently. Somewhere, the helmer, who gave us splendid cinema in Kippur, Kedma and so on, appears to have lost his touch.

The question here is why Gitai went in for a single-take movie. He said during a press meeting that he did not want any breaks in "the connection between the Jews and the Arabs, between the Palestinians and the Israelis."

Based in part on the true account of a Jewish woman born in a concentration camp, *Ana Arabia* was inspired by an article the auteur read about her. Also, Gitai has been documenting for the past 30 years a small community of Arabs and Jews who live together peacefully, and the study also came in handy for the film.

"We have to find a way to coexist. It's not about do-gooding, we are all about contradictions. But peace is not a perfect equation, it is a personal choice taken by people who want to resolve conflicts without killing," Gitai said.

The director, well known for his movies based on the Middle Eastern conflict, added:

"We must, at a given moment, put an end to this infinite fight which no-one even understands any more...Cinema must play a part in that dialogue, and ask the necessary questions."

In a way, Yuval Adler's *Bethlehem* reinforces and reiterates what Gitai averred. This work does ask questions — about the futility of war, of enmity and about a relationship that is both selfish and selfless.

*Bethlehem* is a tense work which unfolds on the streets of the city, a street-view (as one writer described) of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Here the "war" is fought between a young Palestinian, who is hired as a spy, and an Israeli intelligence officer.

"People are going crazy for this film," Adler said in a recent interview. "A lot of people say to us, even young people, that 'This is the first time I see a movie that doesn't preach to me, that doesn't take sides, that doesn't show us as bad or them as bad.'" The reception for the film has been amazing in Israel, though it is yet to screen in Bethlehem.

Despite the wide media coverage of the animosity between the two groups, the movie finds gap to tell a new tale, which is how Israel recruits Palestinians to serve as spies. *Bethlehem* goes even further, and it draws an extremely moving portrait of a relationship between an Israeli agent and a young Palestinian informant, a boy really, who eventually is thrown into a tragic dilemma. Razi is the agent and Safur is the spy and whose brother is a Palestinian militant leader. The film etches the relationship between Razi and Safur, in what looks like a father-son tie. *Bethlehem* turns out to be a neat thriller and

presents a picture which is admirably fair to both sides. "That is the heart, the key thing we wanted to explore in this movie, the duality that is so intense," Adler said.

Admirable as the helmer's debut work, *Bethlehem* has an uncanny resemblance to Hani Abu's *Omar*, screened at Cannes in May. The two films rely on an identical plot, though detailing in different ways. However, both end on a note of despair, which re-emphasises what Gitai remarked: the utter pointlessness of war and killing.

After all this heavy stuff, Cheria Dabis' *May in the Summer* came as whiff of fresh breeze. It was sunny and sparkling. A lighthearted drama about a 50-something mother and her three daughters, *May in the Summer* has Hiam Abbass in a gripping performance (as ever) as the older woman. Separated from her husband of 20 years, who has taken a younger woman from India, Ritu Singh Pandey (!), and also unsure of her eldest New York-based daughter, May, all set to marry a Muslim, the mother is miserable all right.

Dabis — who steps before the camera for the first time — plays May, a conventional woman who comes to Amman to get married, but appears to be developing cold feet. In any case, her mother, a devout Christian, does not think that the guy is right for May.

*May in the Summer* is often a hilarious look at girls and their many anxieties. May herself is a successful author, and when the movie begins, she is about to write a novel set in the 1940s Palestine. But as the marriage approaches — the would-be husband is a respected American Academic — May starts to dither.

There are sub-plots galore. May's younger sisters, Dalia and Yasmine, are on their own trips, and what shocks all three is when they find that their mother is up to her own little trick. Adding to this is May's own attraction for a local Jordanian.

*May in the Summer* may be spring and sunshine, but somewhere it fails to connect with the viewer, leaving him/her a trifle dissatisfied with the conclusions offered.

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