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***Ajami*: You're Not in "Exodus" Anymore**

The elderly man sitting next to me during the screening of *Ajami* at a Washington, DC movie theater last week made it known that this would be his first Israeli film, and since he wasn't fluent in Hebrew he was wondering if any of the characters would be conversing in Yiddish, a language with which he was more familiar. He had visited Israel once in the 1970's and was hoping (I think) to get another glimpse of what Americans refer to as the "Jewish State" -- a label that's rarely employed by native Israelis -- and the images they associate with that country: Jerusalem; the holy sites; soldiers; kibbutzim; Orthodox-Jews. But after watching *Ajami*, my movie theater neighbor discovered that, to paraphrase Dorothy, he wasn't in the imaginary Israel of *Exodus* anymore.

In fact, much of the dialogue this impressive Israeli-German production, which is one of this year's five nominees for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, is in Arabic, in this case, a Palestinian vernacular that is cluttered with many Hebrew words, a kind of an Arab-Israeli version of the Hispanic-American *Spanglish* that would be spoken by many Latinos in this country. So imagine a American crime film in which Latino drug dealers and small small-time crooks, Anglo cops, and the women who love them intermingle in contemporary L.A. and its multiethnic "Mexifornian" setting where third world tribalism collides with the values of an assertive modernity a la *The Shield*. And then try to superimpose this milieu and its set of characters and narrative on a present-day Israeli locale and voila, you find yourself in *Ajami*.

The backdrop for *Ajami*, the first feature film written and directed by two (and obviously very talented) young Israeli filmmakers, Scandar Copti (an Arab) and Yaron Shani (and Jew) is the neighborhood of Ajami, the poor and crime-ridden area of Jaffa, the town that is now adjunct to the city of Tel-Aviv. Jaffa was once upon a time an Arab town and most of its inhabitants had fled during Israeli's War of Independence in 1948 (or the Nakba, if you are a Palestinian) it was attached to the modern mostly Jewish city of Tel-Aviv.

And *Ajami* is one of the few places in the country Arab and Jews now (try to) live side by side, and not in separate neighborhoods. *Ajami* the film provides us with a view of demographic landscape that is bound to surprise, if not shock an American film viewer who imagines Israel to be some sort of a Brooklyn on the Mediterranean populated with bagel-eating yarmulke-wearing Ashkenazi Jews.

Instead, this Israel is a mosaic of mostly Middle Eastern ethnic/religious groups that include destitute Arab-Muslims and well-to-do Arab-Christians, Bedouin gangs and Jewish policemen as well as illegal Palestinian workers from the West Bank, a Muslim cleric and even a few ultra-Orthodox Jews. They all seem to be trying to survive, even if that leads them to resort to crime and violence, and eventually to seek revenge against those who victimized or offended them -- Bedouins who target (and vice versa) and Jews who harass and kill Arabs (and vice versa) -- and to punish those who try to transcend the suffocating confines of the tribe -- an Arab-Christian girl who falls in love with an Arab-Muslim and an Arab man who plans to live together with his Jewish girlfriend in Tel-Aviv.

Ajami is an entertaining and suspenseful crime film whose structure and storyline reminded me (and other reviewers) of *Pulp Fiction* as well as of *Crash* (expect therefore many surprising twists and turns) and is not a political film per se; it certainly lacks a coherent political message and it refrains from even trying to romanticize any of the tribal communities "represented" in the film. Most of the characters are materialistic secular types, including those who drink, take drugs and party late into the night. That many of them are played by non-professional actors makes it all look so cinema verite-style realistic and somewhat depressing. You sense that much of what you watch on the screen is not going to be "resolved" through this or that "peace process" anytime soon.

Faced with their nation's increasing international isolation, Israeli policymakers have recruited the services of major American and European public relations and advertising companies as part of an effort to improve the Israel's image abroad. I am not sure whether this film is going to make any contribution to the kind "Brand Israel" campaign envisioned by its promoters. But ironically, the film does introduce American viewers to a new Brand Israel/Palestine that seems to reflect the political, social and cultural realities of this country more than the fantasies being concocted by the pr geniuses.

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