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Palestinian director overcomes politics to screen love story

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By Nour Merza
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(Reuters) - It took Palestinian director Susan Youssef 10 years to overcome a political obstacle course before she was able to screen her heart-wrenching tale of doomed romance in Gaza at the Dubai International Film Festival this week.

"Habibi" (My Beloved) retells in a modern Middle East setting the ancient Arabian story of "Layla and the Madman," a tragic romance similar to that of Romeo and Juliet.

The film tells the tale of two students in the relatively liberal West Bank who are forced to return to their homes in Gaza, stronghold of conservative Islamist group Hamas. There they try to continue their love affair in defiance of tradition.

Youssef, a Palestinian-American who moved to Gaza to write the script, told Reuters in an interview that the project ended up taking so long to complete because of local politics, which sometimes required great sacrifices for people to support the film and at other times made production impossible.

"On different trips to Gaza between 2002 and 2005, I felt everyone wanted to help me. I felt unity, hope, love. I had no political problems from Palestinians," she said. "But in 2007 when I returned to Gaza, I couldn't get back in. For the first time, people on the inside were telling me I shouldn't come."

In 2007, a year after Hamas eclipsed the dominant Palestinian nationalist movement Fatah in parliamentary elections, the two groups waged a civil war for the control of the Gaza Strip.

Hamas won out and ousted Fatah from the area, but in 2008-2009 Gaza faced an Israeli military offensive triggered by rocket attacks into Israel. About 1,400 Palestinians, including hundreds of civilians, and 13 Israelis died in the conflict.

Youssef, unable to continue her project, bided her time doing small jobs outside the region. In 2009, she went to the mountainous West Bank, where she decided to continue shooting in locations that she felt resembled Gaza, with its markedly flat landscape and overcrowded urban centres.

The West Bank's film industry produces about one feature film a year -- a lavish number by Gazan standards, which hasn't produced a full-length feature in 15 years -- Youssef said.

Films in the West Bank, unlike Youssef's, rely completely on co-production with European or Israeli companies -- part of the reason why the number of features coming out of the region was so limited, she said.

The few available opportunities available to actors and filmmakers created a ruthlessly competitive environment that Youssef said stunned her.

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A DIFFERENT ENERGY

"In the West Bank it was really about the job. It became an industry there," she said. "It was a different energy. I went in with an activist mission, and they went in with a professional mission."

She said the experience made her reevaluate her position as a Palestinian activist in the Palestinian Diaspora. "For me (the Palestinian issue) was a luxury passion. I had distance. But they lived it," she said.

To overcome the logistical difficulties of making a film in the West Bank, Youssef's main actors had to be from the territories annexed by Israel in 1948, which meant they were Palestinians holding Israeli passports and so could pass through Israeli checkpoints into the West Bank with less hassle.

The film's crew also had to import equipment from Belgium because the film was not an Israeli co-production, an issue Youssef said hampered producing and distributing "Habibi."

"I don't know if I will ever be able to make another film in Palestine again. It is extraordinarily difficult if you don't have Israeli co-production. Working within Palestine, making anything there, involves Herculean effort," she said.

Even after completion, Youssef struggled to promote the film as many distributors avoided the film over perceived political sensitivities.

"Habibi" finally made it to the big screen through the Dubai and Venice film festivals.

"After the film was accepted, I cried. It was as if I had released or lost something and it was finally given back to me," said Youssef.

"Two ladies at one screening got my feelings perfectly. They said, 'this is a love letter to Palestine.' It is. Absolutely."

(Reporting By Nour Merza; Editing by [Andrew Hammond](#) and [Paul Casciato](#))

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