



The Electronic Intifada

الانتفاضة الإلكترونية

Art, Music & Culture

Film review: Gaza love story triumphs over Israeli obstacles

Sarah Irving

The Electronic Intifada

29 March 2013



Maisa Abdel Hadi and Kais Nashif in *Habibi*.

More than 1,000 years ago, in the middle of the Arabian peninsula, Qays ibn al-Mulawwah fell in love with Layla bint Mahdi ibn Saad. He recited poetry expressing his adoration of her, but in naming her continuously and publicly, convinced Layla's father that he was mad, and so lost the opportunity of her hand in marriage. Layla was married to another man, and theirs became one of the great tragic love stories, a Middle Eastern *Romeo and Juliet*. It became known as *Majnun Layla* (*Possessed by madness for Layla*).

In *Habibi* (*My beloved*; the full Arabic title *Habibi Rasak Kharban* translates as *Darling there's something wrong with your head*), the American-Syrian-Lebanese filmmaker Susan Youssef transfers the *Majnun Layla* tale to Gaza in 2001, near the beginning of second intifada. Qays and Layla, both from Khan Younis, have met at Birzeit University in the West Bank. When the Israeli occupation revokes their permits, both have to return home to Gaza and the watchful eyes of their families and community.

Layla's mother is keen for her to marry Ward, an ambitious young doctor recently returned from America and in the process of setting up his own clinic. Her father, a quiet and religious man, is at first sympathetic to Layla's passionate desire to finish her engineering degree.

But when Qays — like his ancient namesake — starts spray-painting classical Arabic paeans to her on the walls of neighboring shops and houses, the family becomes worried for their daughter's reputation, and the business of getting her respectably married becomes all the more pressing. The modern-day Qays has grown up in a refugee camp and is a casual laborer on Gaza's many building sites — not what Layla's middle-class family had in mind for her.

Running away

At the same time, a family friend has been killed by a sniper from an Israeli settlement, not yet removed from Gaza at this point in the intifada. Layla's brother and his friend make their first appearance in a comic scene, hanging out in the street, commenting on the *niqab* and *abaya*-clad "hotties" as they walk past, swathed in black cloth. But grief for his companion drives Walid to take comfort in religion and Hamas activism, and in his new-found conservatism he will not countenance the idea of his sister having a boyfriend or, indeed, leaving the house unaccompanied while she is under suspicion.

As they finally realize the magnitude of the obstacles facing them, Qays and Layla decide that if they want to be together, they will have to run away — not only from Khan Younis, but from the increasingly besieged Gaza Strip with its closed borders and close-knit society. But in 2001, this still involved having to cross an Israeli-controlled border. So they fall into the hands of interrogators who, grasping their vulnerable position, try to force them to become collaborators. From here on, we can only watch as their bid for happiness and freedom unravels.

Deft handling

This could easily have become a film of clunky stereotypes and obvious moralizing. But with Youssef's deft handling of the story, it takes on an emotional depth and poetic subtlety which has earned it awards at film festivals in Venice, Dubai, Toronto and elsewhere. Layla's father, for instance, is no "strict Muslim parent" straight from central casting. He is depicted as an affectionate father, trying to balance the demands of an increasingly conservative society and the diminishing choices available as the occupation makes education and movement more and more difficult and dangerous.

But it is the central characters — Qays, played by Kais Nashif, and Layla, played by Maisa Abdel Hadi — who carry the weight of the film. Nashif is a poet and a dreamer, wandering the bombed-out buildings of Khan Younis and daubing verses to his love. His plans for the future are as vague and imprecise as might be expected from this Byronic-looking former literature student with his shock of ringlets and worn suit jacket.

Layla, meanwhile, is a vivacious young woman, convincing as a would-be engineer with her cleverness and practicality. But Abdel Hadi's portrayal of her is also warm, moving and vulnerable, and her pain

when the Israeli interrogators try to force the names of resistance fighters from her is palpable. The performance richly deserves the best actress award Abdel Hadi received in Dubai, alongside a best film prize.

Poetic

Habibi is a film that has been ten years in the making. Stemming partly from Youssef's own experiences of love and heartbreak, its story bears the familiar stamp of the Israeli occupation. Initial footage filmed in Gaza had to be trashed after Youssef was denied re-entry, and in the end the look and atmosphere of Khan Younis and Gaza City had to be reconstructed in the West Bank and other locations.

Typically for films about Palestine, it is also a low-budget affair, although skillful camera work means this isn't an obvious drawback. Youssef's direction maintains a tight focus on her main characters, often just their faces, and makes clever use of lighting, color contrasts and angles.

In doing so, she creates an emotionally complex and poetic film, much richer than its simple plot would suggest. *Habibi* looks set to become a stalwart of film festivals focusing on Palestine or on Arab or women directors, so hopefully it will be able to reach the audience it deserves.

Habibi screens on 10 April at the Birds Eye View festival in London and during the Chicago Palestine Film Festival on 28 April and 2 May.

Sarah Irving is a freelance writer. She worked with the International Solidarity Movement in the occupied West Bank in 2001-02 and with Olive Co-op, promoting fair trade Palestinian products and solidarity visits, in 2004-06. She is the author of a biography of Leila Khaled and of the Bradt Guide to Palestine and co-author, with Sharyn Lock, of Gaza: Beneath the Bombs.

Tweet 133

Aanbevelen 286

Verzenden

7

Comments

Sounds great!

Permalink Submitted by John Tomato (not verified) on Sun, 03/31/2013 - 12:55

Sounds great!

Add new comment

More like this



Ali Abunimah

Susan Youssef's Habibi, a Gaza feature film a decade in the making, wins major award

21 December 2011



● **Diaries: Live from Palestine**

The trials of making a film in Gaza

22 March 2010

|

Susan Youssef

|

the Netherlands,

Amsterdam



● **Maureen Clare Murphy**

Palestine cinema showcased in upcoming Toronto and Boston festivals

26 September 2012



● **Art, Music & Culture**

A war against art and culture

21 August 2006

|

Samia A. Halaby



● **Maureen Clare Murphy**

Palestine film festivals to open in Chicago and London, plus other cinema news

19 April 2013

Latest Articles

- **Art, Music & Culture: Palestinian children unite in song (26 April 2013)**

- [Human Rights: Hunger strike marks "turning point" in fight against Israel's deportations, says rights group](#) (25 April 2013)
- [Opinion/Editorial: Internal documents show Canadian tax agency protected Jewish National Fund from scrutiny](#) (24 April 2013)
- [Opinion/Editorial: Apologists for Israel take top posts at BBC](#) (23 April 2013)
- [Activism News: Map of destroyed villages aims to teach Israelis about Nakba](#) (22 April 2013)
- [Opinion/Editorial: When Israeli denial of Palestinian existence becomes genocidal](#) (20 April 2013)
- [Activism News: Think before you "take part in occupation and war," says jailed Israeli refusenik](#) (19 April 2013)
- [Art, Music & Culture: Vandalism of Christian sites in Palestine inspires London art show](#) (18 April 2013)
- [Opinion/Editorial: Was Israel's flotilla apology really a triumph for Turkey?](#) (17 April 2013)
- [Human Rights: Risking their lives to save lives: Gaza's first responders](#) (16 April 2013)

[more](#)

Latest blog posts

- [Arts and Culture: Honoring Palestinian history: filmmaker Annemarie Jacir on "When I Saw You"](#) (29 April 2013)
- [Activism and BDS Beat: Morgan Freeman and Jian Ghomeshi, say no to Israeli apartheid on May 6!](#) (28 April 2013)
- [Maureen Clare Murphy: Postage stamps and onions the latest threat to the State of Israel, writes Palestinian political prisoner](#) (26 April 2013)
- [Rights and Accountability: Amnesty calls on Israel to release Palestinian academic jailed "to deter left-wing activists"](#) (26 April 2013)
- [From the Editors: Podcast: Youth in West Bank village under constant attacks by Israeli army, settlers](#) (26 April 2013)
- [Jalal Abukhater: Why I support Scottish independence](#) (26 April 2013)
- [Asa Winstanley: Newly declassified documents give insights into last days of British occupation of Palestine](#) (25 April 2013)
- [Ali Abunimah: Medical racism: Israel hospital director complains that too many African babies are being born](#) (25 April 2013)
- [Activism and BDS Beat: Israel invades privacy of campaigner Frank Barat](#) (25 April 2013)
- [Nour Joudah: Finding our voices in the Palestinian stories we tell](#) (24 April 2013)

[More](#)

Secondary menu

- [About EI](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Submit to EI](#)

© 2000-2013 electronicIntifada.net