

Amid Turmoil, Mideast Cinema's Subtle Shadings

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A clutch of new movies from the Middle East being shown at this year's Tribeca Film Festival delivers some unexpectedly cheering news from that beleaguered region: that despite the ravages of war and displacement, cinema cultures from North Africa to Lebanon to Israel to Iran are eminently capable of producing vibrant, subtle work.

It is particularly fitting that these films are making their American debuts at Tribeca, which was founded in 2002 largely as a response from downtown Manhattan to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. In the aftermath, with diplomacy often taking a back seat to military action and belligerent grandstanding, films play a commensurately important role in fostering understanding across cultures. "Fate had a little bit to do with it," Tribeca Executive Director Peter Scarlet said of the more than a dozen films from the Middle East that are being shown this year. "I've always believed in the importance of international films being shown in a country where, for all our great blessings, we tend not to pay much attention to other parts of the world."

Some of the movies, like Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi's "Half Moon," will be showing up in theaters later this year; others will play the festival circuit, looking for a distributor. One that viewers will want to look out for is "Making Of," which won the Gold Tanit award earlier this year at the Carthage Film Festival. Directed by Tunisian filmmaker Nouri Bouzid, the fictional film chronicles the radicalization of a 25-year-old break dancer living in Tunis who comes under the sway of Islamic jihadists. The film combines the verve of a dance musical with the street reality of the 1945 classic "Rome, Open City."

Bouzid makes things even more interesting by eventually smashing the fourth wall and having his lead actor, Lotfi Ebdelli, break character to ask the director where the story is going. Reflecting many of the questions, anxieties and dead ends that fuel fundamentalist conversions -- but also subverting the stereotype of the terrorist as a heartless automaton incapable of ambivalence -- "Making Of" exhibits the sophisticated self-consciousness that characterizes the work of the Iranian directors Abbas Kiarostami and Moshen Makhmalbaf.

If "Making Of" displays unabashed artiness, two much more rough-edged documentaries exemplify another part of the cinematic spectrum. Yael Luttwak's "A Slim Peace" is a cinema verite account of a group of Israeli and Palestinian women who find common ground in -- where else -- losing weight. After organizing a group of women interested in losing a few pounds, the filmmaker, the women and two dietitians get together for weigh-ins that inevitably become political consciousness-raising sessions.

Some encounters are predictable (Jewish settlers meeting their first West Bank dwellers), but there are some unexpected twists: a Sephardic Jewish woman reveals that, as an indigenous Arab, she feels much more akin to the Palestinian women than the American settlers. A Bedouin woman breaks out of that tribal stereotype -- of a deeply sexist and insular culture -- and turns out to be the film's most self-empowered feminist.

Inadvertently true to its title, "A Slim Peace" offers a relatively slender sampling of the myriad issues and histories that weave through contemporary politics in Israel. And although it suggests the possibility of communication within that freighted context, it also hits obstacles, such as when one of the Jewish settlers suspects one of her new Palestinian acquaintances of destroying an Israeli playground. Despite the obvious optimism of Luttwak's enterprise, her film ultimately suggests that the hardest habits to break aren't about food, but the psyche.

"A Slim Peace" touches on the migratory nature of identity in Israel; that theme also suffuses the heartbreaking documentary "9 Star Hotel," which provides an intimate look at migrant workers in that country. Filmmaker Ido Haar, using a hand-held camera, followed a group of Palestinian laborers as they slip across the Israeli border to work illegally on an Israeli construction site. Conveying the camaraderie and intense physical danger faced by these resourceful outlaws, "9 Star Hotel" resists casting them as victims, or their unseen Israeli employers and security forces as demons. Rather, it presents -- without rancor and with deep pathos -- the irony of dispossessed young men who would normally be lauded for eschewing violence and striving to make a living, but find themselves building someone else's future.

At least two films set out to put the region's disputes into a somewhat lighter context (until things inevitably get dark). Israeli filmmaker Eytan Fox ("Yossi & Jagger," "Walk on Water"), perhaps the most commercial filmmaker of the group, has a new film, "The Bubble," that follows a young, gay Jewish reservist who, when he's off duty, runs an alternative record store in Tel Aviv. Shot through with the pop sensibility of a Nick Hornby novel, "The Bubble" is part romantic comedy (he becomes involved with a Palestinian guy he meets during a stint at a checkpoint) and part political meditation, as the main character tries to transcend the bitterness and retribution that engulf Arab-Israeli relations.

While portraying an often unseen, left-leaning aspect of Israeli politics -- the characters at one point attend an anti-occupation rave, and one has a mother who's involved with the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian activist group Women in Black), "The Bubble" sadly succumbs to hopelessness in the end. (The Arab-Israeli dispute has been the context for inventive cinema in recent years; two standouts are "Divine Intervention" [2002], Elia Suleiman's visionary tragi-comedy, and "Paradise Now" [2005], Hany Abu-Assad's affecting portrait of two terrorist recruits, which was the first Palestinian film ever nominated for an Oscar.)

Of the Middle Eastern films playing Tribeca this year, a group of digital shorts made in Lebanon during the conflict with Israel last summer deals most directly with politics, but

more personally and obliquely than op-ed tracts. (Another intriguing film from Lebanon, "Falafel," described in program notes as the Lebanese "After Hours," was added too late to be screened for this article, as were "My Father My Lord," about an Orthodox Jewish man struggling with his spirituality, and "The Last Jews of Libya.") "We Are Here," a group of film essays from seven filmmakers, shows young people from Beirut to the Beqaa Valley coping with the daily realities of war, from the extreme (director Wael Nouredine turning the camera on himself as he snorts drugs) to the mundane (Ziad Antar's candid portrait of a woman waiting in her car for hours because of a gas shortage).

The most arresting film in the lineup is also the most unsettling. At once an apolitical thriller and tone poem to a lost city, "The Last Man," by Lebanese filmmaker Ghassan Salhab, features Carlos Chahine in a mesmerizing performance. He plays a physician living in present-day Beirut, who in the midst of a mysterious outbreak of murders realizes he may be a vampire. Like Peter Lorre in the German expressionist classic "M," Chahine is a transfixing, haunting screen presence, and as he makes his way through the sinuous Beirut streets, he reinvests them with the cosmopolitanism for which they were once famous.

"The Last Man" may mark something *of* an artistic turning point, as a film that isn't necessarily *about* politics but inextricably of it. With luck, Salhab and his fellow filmmakers will have a chance to find wider audiences, and break through the narratives that have long dominated Western ideas about the Middle East to create deeper and more lasting understanding.