

Scenes from the Periphery

Facing an uphill battle to present their lives on film, few Israeli Arabs have made an impact on the burgeoning local film industry



'TWO LOVES': Almanar students Doaa Abo Ras (left) and Mona Warda at work on their movie in an editing room

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TENSION IN THE SMALL AUDITORIUM of the Jerusalem Cinémathèque was high as well-known Israeli Arab actor Mohammad Bakri walked out of a screening during this year's Jerusalem Film Festival.

"Why does everyone look so fat? I know the people in these films. They don't look like this," said Bakri, protesting the way the incorrectly calibrated projector was distorting the film clips made by young Israeli Arab filmmakers. The embarrassed organizers of the event managed to solve the projection problem and Bakri, who was serving as a panelist on a jury evaluating the films, agreed to return.

But the problems involved with getting films made by Israeli Arabs onto movie screens are not merely technical and not as easily solved.

"Israeli Arab filmmakers are very much on the periphery of the Israeli film industry," says Ziv Naveh, director of the Geshar Multicultural Film Fund. Partially funded by the Israel Ministry of Culture, the Geshar Fund supports films that reflect the pluralistic nature of Israeli society and try to correct the stereotyped images of minority groups that often appear in the mass media.

Naveh points out that with the exception of a handful of Israeli Arab filmmakers, notably Tawfik Abu Wael, whose film "Atash" ("Thirst") won the International Critics Prize at Cannes in 2004, few Israeli Arabs can be found among the ranks of Israel's burgeoning film industry.

As a result, she adds, most of the members of Israel's Arab population, totaling about 1 million, have not had a chance to tell their story through the film medium.

FAR FROM THE LIMELIGHT OF the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem film studios, in a small building in the hilly, potholed town of Taibeh, Donia Biransi, 55, an attractive, fashionably dressed woman and the mother of four, is trying to change that.

"My dream is to let people know about our world. I want people to see us," says Biransi, who founded Almanar College in order to give young Israeli Arabs a chance to study filmmaking within the setting of an Arab community and in the Arabic language.

It hasn't been an easy dream for Biransi to fulfill.

"We are trying to make movies here in Taibeh, a town of 40,000 people where there is not even one single movie theater, not to mention a single drama theater or community center," she says, speaking quietly yet passionately. "Whenever I take my students to a cinema in Herzliya, for many of them it is their first visit to a movie theater," she adds, noting that television and the Internet do not give students sufficient exposure to creative films being made around the world.

Biransi, an educator who studied at Tel Aviv University and The Hebrew University, has nurtured Almanar into a community college with a three-year program that currently boasts about 70 students. She believes that it is up to the Arab community to take the initiative.

"When I started the school nine years ago, I said that we can only blame ourselves for not making ourselves visible on the TV or movie screen. The Ethiopian immigrants are on the screen, the Russian immigrants are on the screen, everyone except us is making themselves seen," says Biransi in an interview with *The Report* during the Muslim Ramadan holiday.

She offers her Jewish visitor coffee to drink and overrules him when he declines out of respect for the Ramadan fast. "We, too, need to be sensitive to the needs of others," she insists with a warm smile.

"We eat and drink with Jews and we know the Song of Songs and Purim and all the Jewish holidays, but the other side doesn't know us. We want to use films to make them understand us. They don't have to like us, just understand us."

Examples of films that provide fresh insights into contemporary Arab society, she says, can be seen in the films that her students made for the series "Women Talking About Love."

Produced by the Geshar Fund, the series

Up Front



even much more eager to see her win this match.

Thousands of Filipinos, mainly young women, come to Israel to work as caregivers for the elderly and infirm. Technically speaking, their work consists of endless manual duties, but as I have observed from the way Pearly takes care of my parents, they provide much more than just assistance in washing and dressing.

Pearly, who has been here for more than six years, knows how to read every gesture made by my mother, whose speech has been impaired by a stroke. She knows how to smile at her and perk her up when she needs it. There is a wonderful warmth and chemistry between them. She also knows how to calm my father, late at night, when he becomes agitated by memories of the Holocaust. She does it all with gentleness and devotion, and, for her part, she has told me that she gets a great deal of job satisfaction.

Pearly's team falls behind in the first set, and I realize that the chances of a victorious outcome are now meager, both on and off the court. The ministry's rule, I have been advised by the staff at my parents' nursing home, is iron-clad. They have seen numerous applications for visa extensions like the one I am submitting for Pearly rejected out-of-hand.

Why, I wonder, as a young boy beats on a drum in the row in front of me, does the six-year rule exist at all? What risk is there to Israeli society if foreigners like Pearly spend more than six years in Israel? Indeed, what exactly is wrong with people like her being

able to get citizenship here?

My mind is wandering from the arena as Pearly's team loses the first set in the best-of-three series. Then, as I watch Pearly punch the ball into a high trajectory so that a taller teammate can spike it down on the other side of the net, I think of the Negro Baseball League that existed in the United States until the late 1940s. I'm wondering if, in her own way, Pearly can become the Jackie Robinson of Israeli volleyball and of the Filipinos' fight against the six-year rule, and do some rule-writing of her own. After trailing by ten points, Pearly's team has come from behind and the game is now tied at 24-24. The first to get 25 wins, but a set must be won by more than one point. Unfortunately the visitors take the next two points. Pearly and her team have lost.

The players hug and congratulate their opponents. There will be more games for the two teams. Though not necessarily for Pearly and some of the others who are past or approaching the six-year mark.

It's one thing to lose a volleyball game. It will be another thing, much sadder, if Pearly loses her job here and my parents lose the care they are getting from Pearly. But the real loser is a country which is excluding itself from the devotion and the skills and abilities of people like Pearly.

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