



Getting Into the Emotional Space

Israeli filmmaker Ada Ushpiz has depicted female lives inside different closed communities with great success. Her most recent film *Desert Brides* is currently touring international festivals.

By Bernard Dichek

Telling the story of closed communities usually off-limits to outsiders characterises the work of Israeli filmmaker Ada Ushpiz. Her most recent film, *Desert Brides*, (2008) presents a candid look at polygamy among Bedouin families living in the Negev Desert. *Blood Engagement* (2004) explores domestic violence within the Ethiopian immigrant community and *Detained* (2001) portrays a group of Palestinian widows living together in a house in the city of Hebron. She uses a 'fly-on-the-wall' observational style, without narration, tracking the lives of her protagonists as critical events unfold in front of the camera. "The way I make films could easily lead to them ending up as anthropology films, but I try very hard to make sure that they don't," said Ushpiz in an interview with DOX. "What I try to do is get under the skin of the characters in order to get at the inner reality that makes them tick."

The way in which *Desert Brides* gets under the characters' skins was neatly summarised by the panel judges at DocAviv, the Israeli documentary film festival. "*Desert Brides* takes us deep inside a closed society and also into an emotional space that is rarely revealed," noted the judges who selected the film as the Best Israeli Documentary. The emotional space in the film comprises the feelings expressed by three Bedouin women in polygamous marriages about the circumstances of their lives.

Polygamy Increasing

Miriam El-Kwader is a wedding photographer living in fear of her husband taking a second wife. Her fears are kept on edge by her regular photographing of weddings where men are marrying second wives. Miriam El-Nimer, university-educated and the manager of a community centre, is the second wife of Yusef Abu Gazda. The polygamous way of life distresses her, but she is unable to envision a life outside of the polygamy framework. Alia is getting married to Bassem El-Abed clinging to the naïve hope that he will divorce Rasmia, Bassem's first wife, and have him all for herself. Alia's hopes are poignantly juxtaposed with the fears and jealousy expressed by Rasmia. The women's emotions are contrasted with the light-hearted attitudes about polygamy expressed by their husbands.

The film shows the 170,000 Bedouin inhabitants of Israel's Negev desert, many of whom live in unrecognised towns without running water or electricity, as a society in transition. They maintain age-old traditions such as slaughtering rams on traditional holidays yet they

frequent modern shopping malls and watch contemporary TV programmes. It is contact with the permissive attitudes of Western society, Ushpiz points out with irony, that has led to an increase in the rate of polygamy. She notes that an estimated 30 to 40 percent of Negev's Bedouins live in polygamous families compared with only 14 percent of the Bedouins in countries like Iran where there is far less contact with the Western world.

"Polygamy ends up giving Bedouins an outlet for fulfilling certain fantasies and desires that are stirred up by TV and, as a result, polygamy is really taking off," observes Ushpiz. She suggests that Bedouin men, by taking additional wives, are emulating the act of their Western counterparts having an affair or taking a mistress. The women, unable to change the framework of the ancient polygamy tradition, try to internalise the images of women living in modern nuclear families by adapting their self-perception of events.

Living in Denial

In one strikingly cinematic scene that looks very much like it is part of a maudlin telenovella, Yusef and his second wife Miriam go on a Valentine's Day trip to a beach on the Mediterranean coast. They draw hearts in the sand and write their names inside, they tease each other and they talk about the movie *Titanic*. "I think the power of this scene is derived from the expressions on Miriam's face, something that you could only get in a documentary film. It is all there on her face. She is a very independent person with aspirations to be a liberated woman even though as a second wife she is in the most repressive kind of situation, yet she has this romantic fantasy. In another scene she says she is against being a second wife but that she 'chose to do so against her own will.' And later on she says 'I know I am lying to myself when he goes to his other wife and I just say that he has gone to work.' In that scene (on the beach) all of these conflicting feelings are visible in the expressions on her face."

Ushpiz points out that there are Bedouin women who have rebelled against polygamy and are actively trying to end the practice but that she decided not to include them in the film because she wanted to focus on women who represent the mainstream of what is happening among the Negev Bedouin today. "The women in this mainstream do a balancing act to live in two worlds at the same time. We can see this in the scene in which Alia's sisters tell her that there is no way that Yusef



Blood Engagement
(2004) by Ada Ushpiz.



Desert Brides (2008) by Ada Ushpiz.

will ever divorce Rasmia. At one point the oldest sister, who herself is the seventh wife of a man who after marrying her went on to take an eighth wife, turns to Alia and says 'maybe, maybe he'll get divorced but no, no he'll never get divorced'."

Rationalising

There is also an attempt to rationalise the situation as having advantages over Western practices, says Ushpiz, recalling a conversation that is not in the film. "One second wife said to me: 'What's better? To be someone's mistress or to be a second wife? My husband at least takes me with him to visit his mother on holidays. I have status. I am a wife. What is a mistress worth in your society?'"

Desert Brides begins and ends with wedding ceremonies involving second wives, a statement perhaps about the centrality and continuity of polygamy in Bedouin society. Ushpiz doesn't see change on the horizon. "The traditional patriarchal frameworks remain and polygamy is certainly an expression of male power. The entire Bedouin society supports it. When a man decides to take a second wife the first wife has absolutely no say in the matter. It's a very lonely experience for her. Sometimes the father of the first wife will even accompany the husband when he goes to ask a woman to become his second wife. And the children go along with it, too, though we do show in the film one instance where a child shows exceptional empathy for his mother, telling her not to cry. The system simply has enormous power. To us on the outside it may seem unjust, but the society as a whole legitimises it."

From Journalist to Filmmaker

Ushpiz worked for many years as a journalist and the ideas for many of her films, including *Desert Brides*, were inspired by research she did for news articles. Prior to becoming a journalist, Ushpiz studied philosophy and history at Tel Aviv University and filmmaking at the London Film School. She recently left journalism to devote herself full-time to filmmaking and *Desert Brides* is the first film that she produced as well as directed. The film was made with a budget of about USD 120,000 provided mainly by local sources (the First Israel Film & TV Foundation and the Second Television Authority). In addition to winning the DocAviv prize, *Desert Brides* also won the Best Documentary Award at the International Women's Film Festival (2008) in Rehovot, Israel.

BD: *How were you able to gain such close cooperation from the Bedouin in Desert Brides?*


AU: "I spent a lot of time with them, about a year and half doing the research and filming, and I was able to develop strong personal relationships. There's a lot of loneliness among Bedouin women. Despite the fact that they seemingly are always surrounded by their families and neighbours, they have a real need for a certain kind of friendship and to be able to talk about things that no one else addresses. But one of the biggest problems I had was in getting ahold of first wives. Their husbands did everything they could to keep me from getting to them. They didn't mind me talking to the second wives but they did everything they could to keep me away from their first wives. They are very much aware that polygamy has a negative perception in the outside world."

The Uniqueness of Facial Expressions

BD: *Is there a common denominator to Desert Brides and other films that you have made about closed societies?*

AU: "What I try to do is examine closely the personal stories of characters and see how their stories are connected to the cultural fabric of the societies in which they live. And when I do, usually a specific phenomenon emerges. The stories of the Bedouin women connect to the phenomenon of a society in transition. The stories of the Ethiopian characters in *Blood Engagement* connect to the domestic violence that stems from the culture shock experienced by immigrants. Making these connections is something that doesn't often emerge until I get into the editing room where I sometimes feel like a sculptor trying to whittle down and get to the essence of a story."

BD: *Why do you like making documentary films?*

AU: "I believe that documentaries capture reality in a way that no other medium can. I love writing, but if you put a camera in the right place, you can tell a story in a way that words never can. Documentaries also can achieve things that feature films cannot. There are scenes in *Desert Brides* in which the expressions on the faces of the women are unlike the expressions that any actor could give you because no actor could ever figure out all the social, societal and personal feelings that are coming together and find a way to express them." 

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