



COURTESY BRIDGET FOLMAN FILM GANG / ILLUSTRATION DAVID POLONSKY

## How Ari Folman turned his army stint in Lebanon into Israel's Oscar nominee

Bernard Dichek

**“W**ALTZ WITH BASHIR” BEGINS WITH A pack of menacing wolf-like hounds racing down Tel Aviv’s trendy Rothschild Boulevard wreaking havoc as they knock down café tables and scare bystanders. They end up growling viciously below the Bauhaus-style balcony of the apartment where Boaz Buskila, whose recurring nightmare this is, lives.

Cut to a bar, where Buskila and his friend Ari Folman sit and ponder the meaning of the dream. The two served together in the first Lebanon war in 1982 and speculate that the nightmare is in some way connected to what happened then. But Folman is perplexed when Buskila asks him about his memories of the war. Folman realizes that he doesn’t remember anything at all. He decides to set out on a journey to discover what happened to him during that war.

His journey into his past accounts for the rest of Folman’s “Waltz With Bashir,” an animated documentary-feature film that has become the most widely acclaimed Israeli movie ever made. It has already won the U.S. National Society of Film Critics Best Picture Award, the Golden Globe Best Foreign Film Award, the U.K. Best Foreign Independent Film Award and 6 Israeli Academy Awards. And on January 22 it was nominated for Best Foreign Film in this year’s Academy Awards. Many industry observers expect it to be the first Israeli film to win an Oscar.

The awards have been backed up by lavish critical praise. Dan Fainaru in Screen Daily declared that the film “will leave its mark forever on the ethics of war films in general,” while The Guardian’s Xan Brooks described it as “an extraordinary, harrowing, provocative picture. We staggered out of the screening in a daze.”

Based on its subject matter alone, “Waltz With Bashir” would seem to be an unlikely contender in feature film competitions facing entries from the world’s leading film directors. The film is at its core a docu-

mentary about the Middle East conflict – arguably the most exhaustively studied subject in world media – and filmmaker Ari Folman’s previous works received little attention outside Israel.

Why has it been so successful?

“First of all, stylistically, it’s a cinematic breakthrough,” says Yair Raveh, a Tel Aviv film critic in an interview with The Jerusalem Report. “The innovative combination of documentary, animation and dramatic elements sets it apart from any other film made not just in Israel but anywhere in the world.”

Folman uses animation to depict himself and the people he interviews, along with the real and imagined events that they describe. In the final climactic scene, actual newsreel footage is used.

Folman himself explains that he began to work on the film as a conventional documentary with talking-head interviews but realized that the only way that he could convey the essence of the interviews was through animation. “Animation gave me freedom to go from one dimension to another. There are a lot of fragile borders between reality and dreams and sub-consciousness. If you draw, it’s easy to go from one dimension to another,” said Folman in an interview with reporters in Los Angeles, where he is now promoting the film.

**H**AIFA-BORN FOLMAN, 46, HAS MADE SEVERAL documentaries exploring political and psychological themes, and his two previous dramatic feature films are both characterized by motifs of fantasy. “Saint Clara” (1996) portrays a girl with paranormal powers who can predict the future, while “Made in Israel” (2001) deals with the pursuit of the last remaining Nazi at a time when there is peace between Israel and Syria.

The animation used in “Waltz With Bashir” is based on an original hand-drawn format developed by Folman working with art director David Polonsky and animator Yoni Goodman. The result, though lacking the smooth flow of Walt Disney-style animation, conjures vivid,

moody and surreal images that, in combination with the eerie soundtrack composed by German composer Max Richter, give the film a texture with the look and feel of dreams and disquieting memories.

The connection between the malleability of animation and the mercurial nature of memory is underlined early on in the film, when Folman is depicted talking with Ori Sivan, a longtime friend. Sivan tells him about a scientific experiment in which psychologists proved how shaky the foundations of memory can be. In the experiment the subjects were shown actual photos from their childhood along with fabricated photos, showing them in situations that never happened. Some of the subjects came to believe that the fabricated photos showed true events and, later on, began to discuss the events as though they were part of their memories. "So you see, memory is something that is really quite dynamic," says Sivan.

As Folman starts to delve into his wartime experiences, he becomes aware of the pitfalls involved with dealing with memories. He suddenly has a bizarre flashback, remembering himself and his comrades wading in the sea in the Beirut harbor. The 19-year-old Folman and his fellow soldiers are all completely naked and have rifles slung over their shoulders. Did this really happen? To find out, Folman travels to Holland where Carmi, one of the soldiers standing beside him in the flashback, now lives. Carmi says that it never did.

As Folman interviews his army buddies, a wide variety of wartime episodes, real or imagined, rise to the surface. Folman hears how one friend, after his tank is ambushed, escapes by floating away in the sea, and he discovers the connection between Buskila's nightmare and the dogs that guarded Lebanese villages.

Folman's own long-suppressed memories begin to appear. Some are deeply personal, such as when he recalls, in the height of battle, feeling satisfied with knowing that Ya'eli, his girlfriend who has just broken up with him, will feel sorry at his funeral.

Other memories lead Folman closer to political events, including the assassination of Lebanese president-elect Bashir Gemayel, who led Israel's Lebanese Christian allies in the war, and whose name gives the film its title. The Phalangists, inflamed with anti-Muslim feelings after the death of their leader, carry out a massacre against the Palestinians living in the Beirut refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla.

In the massacre the Phalangists killed an estimated 700-800 Palestinian civilians. The extent to which Israel's military leaders and soldiers were aware of the massacre has long been hotly debated. An Israeli commission of inquiry found that then-defense minister Ariel Sharon and then-chief of staff Rafael Eitan bore partial responsibility.

When Folman realizes that it is his personal connection to this event that has been suppressed, it is clear that the underlying cause of his blocked memory is a form of post-war trauma.

**T**HE TRAUMATIC EFFECT OF WAR ON SOLDIERS IS A theme that is common to many Israeli films, including last year's Academy Award nominated film, "Beaufort", which is also about the first Lebanon war," notes Tel Aviv University film professor Judd Ne'eman, in an interview with The Jerusalem Report.

However, as Ne'eman points out, "Waltz With Bashir" differs in a significant way.

"We are used to seeing films about war traumas but usually, like in

Beaufort, the trauma is the result of soldiers witnessing injuries or killings inflicted on themselves or their comrades. But here the trauma is about the encounter with the bodies of the enemy and not with his [Folman's] own soldiers," observes Ne'eman, who was one of Folman's university mentors.

Ne'eman believes the reason audiences tend to perceive the film more as a drama than a documentary derives from this twist. "The real victims of course are the people who are killed, but Folman himself has become a sort of victim because throughout most of the film the cause of his trauma is hidden from him," says Ne'eman. "That's the complexity of the situation. He is someone who feels guilty and takes action to find out what he did or what he witnessed on that day. For the audience it is very much a cathartic moment when you see his moment of realization. So even though the materials of the film are documentary and the costume is animation, the essence is drama. And it is the combination of the three that makes the film so unique."

Another reason for the film's wide appeal, according to Israeli film historian Pablo Tau, is the indirect and ambiguous way in which the story's political themes are presented. "It does not at first present itself as a political film," he says. "It draws the viewer into the narrative by

dealing with intriguing questions relating to memory and through highly aesthetic surrealistic images. Little by little, a political message is brought into the film, but because the message isn't made directly, people read the film differently and viewers end up interpreting the ending according to their own point of view." Tau is the author of a book that came out in Hebrew last year, "Icebergs in Hamsin-Land: The New Israeli Cinema 2004-2007."

Tau suggests that the film's dramatic ending leaves the question of the extent to which Israeli soldiers are accountable for the Sabra and Shatilla massacre unanswered. "Does he in the end admit that what Israel did, what he did, was awful and immoral?" Tau asks. "Or was there nothing that he could have done and does he cleanse himself from any guilt that he might have had about what happened there because he wasn't the one who did it and he couldn't have known what was going on?"

Tau observes, "There are those viewers who think that he does take responsibility for what happened and say this is a very frank and candid film that is critical of Israel. And then there are those who say no, there was nothing that he could have done and therefore we are not responsible for what happened and, as such, it is a film that is not critical of Israel. Viewers can watch the film and see in it what they want."

Folman himself has declined to comment on this issue. "My job finished when I completed the film – everything else is up to you. I am really tolerant of any kind of interpretation people give to the film, because it's up to them now," he said in a media interview.

The debate over "Waltz With Bashir" is likely to continue long after the Academy Award decisions are announced on February 22. To win the Best Foreign Film Award, notes Yair Raveh, it will have to set three precedents. "No Israeli film, no documentary and no animation film has ever won," he points out.

In the meantime, the movie continues to set precedents elsewhere. It was recently shown at a private screening in Beirut and Folman reports that negotiations are under way with a Gulf State film distributor. ●

**'The innovative combination of documentary, animation and dramatic elements sets it apart from any other film made not just in Israel but anywhere in the world'**

*– Yair Raveh, film critic*