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Winnaar Gouden Luipaard voor Beste Film Festival Locarno 2004
Luipaard Beste Acteur Mohammad Bakri Film Festival Locarno 2004

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PRIVATE - synopsis

Mohammad is een professor Engelse Literatuur in Palestina en woont met zijn vrouw en vijf kinderen in een dorpje tussen een Palestijns stadje en een Israëlische basis. Wanneer er vuurgevechten uitbreken, wordt het dorpje een strategische locatie voor het leger. Ondanks de gevaarlijke situatie en de constante dreiging van een Israëlische inval door soldaten, weigert Mohammad te vertrekken, omdat hij overtuigd is van zijn eigen geloof in vreedzame oplossingen.



Het huis wordt daarop verdeeld in drie delen: de woonkamer, waar de familie 's nachts slaapt, de begane grond, waar de familie overdag kan verblijven, en de eerste verdieping, waar het hoofdkwartier voor het leger verblijft. Elk familie lid reageert anders op de angst die deze situatie met zich meebrengt. Alleen Mohammad's oudste dochter Mariam accepteert de situatie meteen, al vindt ze, in tegenstelling tot haar vader, dat de soldaten wél met geweld mogen worden bestreden. Mohammad's beslissing lijkt te werken, maar hoe lang houdt de familie stand onder de druk?



Regisseur Saverio Costanzo heeft de jarenlange confrontatie in het Midden-Oosten teruggebracht tot een kamerspel, waarin het gevecht en de belangen van beide partijen op een paar vierkante meter plaatsvindt. Gebaseerd op een waar verhaal, probeerde Costanzo de situatie zo nauwkeurig mogelijk weer te geven. Hij ging vier maanden op zoek naar zowel Israëlische als Palestijnse acteurs, die, vrij uniek, samen durfde te werken. De briljante cast bestaat dan ook uit sterren uit beide landen.

PRIVATE

97 min / Kleur / 35 mm / Dolby SRD / Arabisch, Hebreeuws, Engels gesproken / Italië 2004

Filmnummer: 707

Kijkwijzer:

Nederlandse theatrale distributie: Cinemien www.cinemien.nl

Belgische theatrale distributie: ABC Distribution www.abc-distribution.be

DVD uitbreng : Homescreen www.homescreen.nl www.homescreen.be

PRIVATE - crew

Regie : Saverio Costanzo
Scenari : Saverio & Camilla Costanzo, Alessio Cremonini, Sayed Qashua
Camera : Luigi Martinucci
Montage : Francesca Calvelli
Muziek : Alter Ego
Producent : Mario Ferdinando Gianani



PRIVATE - cast

Oficier : Lior Miller
Mohammad : Mohammad Bakri
Soldaat Eial : Tomer Russo
Samiah : Arin Omary
Mariam : Hend Ayoub
Karem : Karem Emad Hassan Aly
Jamal : Marco Alsaying
Sarah : Sarah Hamzeh

PRIVATE - over regisseur Saverio Costanzo

Saverio Costanzo is in 1975 in Rome geboren waar hij afstudeerde in Media aan de La Sapienza Univeristeit. Eerst werkt hij nog als radio-presentator, voor hij in 1997 twee anti-drugs campagnes voor Benetton's La Fabrica regisseerde. In hetzelfde jaar schreef hij de korte film *Il Numero*, en een door Rai 1 geproduceerde TV-film *Una famiglia per caso*. In 1998 werkte hij als cameraman mee aan een documentaire, waarna hij in 1999 zelf ging regisseren: *Caffe Mille Luci, Brooklyn, New York*, een documentaire bestaande uit 60 episodes, welke verhaalde over de meningen van klanten van een klein café over de Italiaanse-Amerikaanse gemeenschap. In 2001 volgde hij met *Sala Rossa*, een 6-delige documentaire over de gevechten en tragedies die plaatsvinden in de afdeling noodgevallen in een ziekenhuis. Deze documentaire won een prijs op het Torino Festival. Toen Saverio Costanzo tijdens een bezoek aan Israël een nieuwsbericht zag, kwam hij op het idee van de film *Private*. Zes maanden lang verbleef hij in Israël om het script te schrijven met Sayed Qushua.



Filmografie Saverio Costanzo

1999 CAFFE’ MILLE LUCI, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK (doc)

2001 SALA ROSSA (doc)

2004 PRIVATE

***Private* is based on a strong and original idea. How did it start?**

It started from a true story. When I was in Palestine a journalist talked to me about an Arab, whose identity I cannot disclose, who still today lives with Israeli soldiers on his roof. He is the principal of a school who loves Shakespeare, prays five times a day and observes the Ramadan. He lives five meters away from the wall of the Israeli military base: he opens the door of his kitchen and here it is. Recently they shot at his son but luckily he was hit only in his foot.

How long has this forced living together been going on?

Since 1992. Nobody leaves the house. There is nothing around it because usually the Israelis destroy the surrounding houses so to be able to have an unhindered view.

Can't the Israelis evict him and his family?

No, they can't because of two reasons: he is not a terrorist and has become famous. The media know and back him. What struck me is that within the occupied house one does not perceive hatred or anger, from neither party.

Is it an isolated case or a widespread habit?

There are many soldiers who live in Palestinians' houses in the occupied territories. An Israeli woman made a documentary on three widows living in a building in Hebron, one of the most disputed cities because it is an Israeli settlement. These women are face to face every day with the soldiers living with them who are, in turn, very young. It is a symbolic story like that told in *Private*, in reality there are very many of them.

Has anybody ever told them in cinema before you?

The director of the Tel Aviv Cinemateque told me when he saw *Private* that up to now nothing similar had been made. In particular a movie with the participation of both parties where the word occupation is spoken by the soldiers themselves.

How did the Israeli react when they saw the movie?

They were crying but happy. We had a screening at the Tel Aviv Cinémathèque di Tel Aviv, the cultural centre of the Israeli cinema and it was touching. These young people have all been in the Special Unit, they know that what you see in the movie is true. At the beginning I heard gasping, then the second part of *Private* somehow redeems them.

When the Palestinian girl spies on them without them knowing it.

What we see through her eyes dignifies them, one understands that they are young and do not have clear ideas as to why they are there.

From fiction to reality: actors too are Israelis and Palestinians, is it often the case that they work side by side?

It is more frequent in love stories. In *Kadosh* by Amos Gitai, the chief rabbi was a very famous Palestinian actor. The difficulty is in succeeding in bringing them together against a political choice, in this case occupation.

The shooting lasted five weeks, how did they live together on the same set?

At the beginning they were separated: Palestinians on one side, Israelis on the other. Halfway in the production they were talking to each other and at the end they moved away from each other again. Some scenes were particularly difficult for them, when we filmed the first raid there was a rather fierce argument. The Arabs said: "These soldiers are kind, they generally do what they like, they come in and beat. You, too, should do the same". And the Israelis replied: "We are not like that and we are not here to be torturers".

And what did you do?

We were watching and taking notes. We tried to mediate, not stop the flow of emotions. There was no intention to capture the truth of facts like in the tradition of cinema vérité, but only its surface. It is a conflict which does not belong to us, we had to be discreet observers, to render reality through a third eye. We used only nine- ten-minute sequence shots to make them forget they are actors. Had we had just one reverse shot probably the identification power would have diminished. The same scene was shot up to thirteen times, with considerable effort, but at the end we achieved a good result. Surely, in the editing room we had to work very accurately.

While the Arab children we see in *Private* are Italian.

They are Palestinian-Neapolitan, they did not have any experience as actors. Though they had no direct experience of the events, they too were affected by the atmosphere. At a certain point the eldest started crying because he remembered what his father had experienced.

From Israel you moved to Italy, why?

The initial idea was to make a documentary. Settling in Israel and filming what was possible using non professional actors. The problem was to guarantee security to the Israeli soldiers. We had found a house at the border of the green line but had we spent a month with the actors they would have become a target. The local production proposed to use other Arabs instead of the Israelis. I thought it was too big a compromise. The film is based on a psychodrama and one cannot do without the other side. Moreover, right then Hamas had declared war also against tourists, therefore the situation was becoming dangerous for everybody. That's why we left. With Mario Gianani, the producer, we thought to do something different, completely crazy.

Tell us about the filming in Calabria, at Riace.

We wanted a third place which was neutral. Italy looks very much like Palestine, especially Puglia and Calabria. There is an area which seems the West Bank. It has the same bare, stony areas. In Calabria another strength is that the houses are unfinished like the Arabs'. They build a floor, then one of their children gets married and they build another one, they leave the outside wall in the same colour as concrete with visible iron parts. Inside, on the contrary, they are perfect. We have a lot in common with the Arabs.

Was it difficult to find the "right" house"?

We travelled thousands kilometres. It is the house of a family living in Germany which comes back there on vacation. The Arab actors themselves said it looked like being in Palestine. I hope that knowing the location will not affect the viewing of the movie.

But being in a neutral territory was also an advantage.

Today I wonder whether it would have been equally honest had we shot it in Israel. To scientifically enact a psychodrama we needed to separate Palestinians and Israelis from their respective realities. On the set they had to re-enact the dramas they had left home.

Among the four screenwriters there is also the writer Sayed Qashua. How did he participate in the writing stage?

He reviewed the dialogues. In the original script the daughter said to her father "You are a coward". But it is not like that in Palestine, it is not allowed. We changed it in "we are coward". Me, my sister and Alessio Cremonini had tried to imagine the story as if instead of the Arabs we had Italians and Germans on the roofs. We imagined we were the "occupied" in order to portray a real situation.

Music, too, plays an important role.

It was composed by Alter Ego. We did not want ethnic music, the idea underlying the film was to make the Westerners identify with the Palestinian history. All the features, from the hand-held camera to the pace, to universal feelings comply with this need. None of us could study customs and habits on the spot, therefore we focused on emotions which have no nationality but the whole world is their home.

Is this the reason why you included a piece by Roger Waters at the end of *Private*?

We felt the need for an emotional explosion within a colder music context. It is a song which seems to have been written for the movie. It says: Germans kill the Jews, the Jews kill the Arabs, Arabs kill the hostages. Roger Waters is one of the biggest pacifist artists. And he had never sold the rights in this piece.

Will *Private* be distributed in Israel?

The director of Film Library says that the Country is not yet ready. He promised he will screen it in Tel Aviv. I do hope he will because the movie does not issue any judgement.

However, the subject is one where it is easy to take a unilateral position.

That's a fact: a people occupying and another being occupied, the judgement is implicit in what happened. But it does not mean that there is no good in evil and vice-versa. And Israelis like it very much, they told me it is a masterpiece of sensibility towards their Country. It is like explaining a child the basic lines of a conflict which has been going on for fifty years. Without knowing history, what has happened, what will happen.

Without judgements. One part reacts to violence, the other is forced to be violent. It produces it but is it really aware of it? Soldiers are in those territories to defend the settlement. But aren't they too young? If a father convinces his daughter to look beyond the uniform of a soldier he does not convince his son who accidentally finds a bomb and builds his dream on it. Which is Hamas.

PRIVATE - internationale pers

VARIETY

By DEREK ELLEY

Political realities are a powerful bonus to, rather than the only reason for, "Private," an emotionally gripping drama about a family whose house in an occupied zone is commandeered by soldiers. The family happens to be Palestinian and the military Israeli, but this first feature by Italian documaker Saverio Costanzo could be set in any war zone where force of arms becomes rule of law and an unbridgeable gap exists between occupied and occupier. Unanimous winner of Locarno competition's top prize, the Golden Leopard, looks set for further fest billeting, though pic's noticeably DV origins will limit wider incursions.

Stern, middle-aged paterfamilias Mohammad (Mohammad Bakri) and his younger wife Samia (Areen Omari) scream at each other in opening scene shot, like the whole movie, with handheld cameras in grungy, vidvid-sourced colors. By inference from the dialogue and exterior shots of the isolated house, it's clear they're a Palestinian family in an Israeli-occupied, rural zone; however, in line with the film's semi-allegorical approach, there's never any clue as to the exact time or location.

Samia wants to move with their five children to a safer place; Mohammad, a teacher, says this is their home and they will remain come what may. "Being a refugee is not being," he states. The pull between these two arguments --Samia's emotional one, Mohammad's rational one -- informs the whole picture.

Aside from the politics, film works well as a realistic semi-thriller, with the emotionally hair-trigger Ofer instilling almost as much fear in his own men as in the Palestinians, and both Mariam and Jamal threatening the uneasy calm with small, rebellious acts. Mariam's eavesdropping on the Israeli soldiers from an upstairs cupboard is a pure script convenience to humanize the occupiers, but it also works well in cinematic terms, with several tense moments when she's about to be discovered.

Casting is tip-top, with well-known thespns Bakri, who copped the Locarno best actor prize, and Miller completely believable as the Palestinian father and Israeli officer, and other pro actors from the region filling smaller roles. Originally planned to be shot in Israel, pic ended up being entirely (and convincingly) shot in Cabala, southern Italy, for reasons of cast security.

SCREEN

Dan Fainaru

Raw, gritty and uncompromising, Saverio Costanzo's award-winning Locarno debut is a thought provoking and painfully realistic image of living under occupation. As such, it is likely to become a favourite on the festival circuit and a leading exponent of the Middle East tragedy as perceived through European eyes. At the same time, however, it is sure to rub many people up the wrong way and make them squirm in their seats.

Private looks at how an Israeli patrol take over the home of a Palestinian family in order to establish an observation point in the Occupied Territories. As such it is a devastatingly concise image of what

civilians have to undergo in a war that isn't even officially one, as Costanzo carefully sidesteps immediate ideology and politics issues, preferring instead to deal with the agonizing aspects of life under such conditions.

Although Costanzo sincerely attempts to be as impartial as possible, the picture's viewpoint is clearly that of the victims and one could easily imagine a more in-depth presentation of the Israeli side. While it is not easy to watch and certainly not pleasant, it will travel precisely for these reasons and generate lots of discussions and open-end arguments.

A tense, high-voltage scene, showing the soldiers invading the flat, sets the mood for the rest of the picture. It is followed by a number of incidents in which the occupiers menacingly face the occupied but, for the most part, it shows the family trying to handle the unbearable situation in which they find themselves.

Inspired by the true story of a Palestinian teacher which Costanzo stumbled on while researching for what was originally intended to be a documentary, the picture was shot in southern Italy, both to put a certain distance between the film and events and to prevent risk to cast and crew. All the leads, however, are played by Israeli and Palestinian actors, flown to Italy for the occasion and carrying with them the weight of their own experiences in the conflict.

Mokhammed Bakri offers a superbly controlled portrait as the Palestinian teacher and blessed with a tremendous camera presence. The rest of the cast are equally persuasive, including a heartbreaking Areen Omari as the panicked mother, Hend Ayoub as the independent daughter and Lior Miller as stiffly arrogant Israeli officer trying to hide his constant worries.

Long shots, taken by the intentionally unsteady, often jumpy camera of Luigi Martinucci, stress the almost documentary nature of this unsettling tale, that while very distinctly located in the Middle East, strangely has a universal resonance.