

## Salt Of This Sea (Milh Hadha Al-Bahr)

BY LEE MARSHALL | 18 MAY 2008

*Dir/scr. Annemarie Jacir. France-Palestine-Switz-Belgium-USA-UK-Neth-Spain. 2008. 89mins.*

**A Palestinian woman agonises over her roots and national identity in Annemarie Jacir's much-anticipated but disappointingly minor *Salt Of This Sea*. The director's feature debut is clearly made with passion and fuelled by a keen resentment at the plight of the Palestinian people. And the film has an authentic, colour-saturated sense of place. But this is not enough to turn an overlong travelogue-cum-manifesto with a flat romantic subplot into a convincing drama.**

With no less than seventeen sources of finance, *Salt Of This Sea* was always going to be a commercially fragile prospect. In the end, it will play best to indulgent liberal audiences and the Palestinian diaspora in Europe, but seems headed more for filmclubs and themed seasons than for significant arthouse exposure. The fact that Danny Glover is one of ten co-producers may help the film to a little more stateside attention that it might otherwise have received.

The film starts where its heart lies - in documentary mode, with black and white archive footage of Israeli tanks and bulldozers knocking down Arab homes. But we're soon back in colour and the present day, as feisty politicised Soraya (Hammad) arrives at an Israeli airport on her first visit to what she considers her homeland - only to be interrogated and strip-searched at customs, despite her US passport, when she reveals her Palestinian origins. Arriving eventually in Ramallah, she tries and fails to recover money left in a bank by her grandfather in 1948. Adrift in the city, Soraya meets an intense, bitter young Palestinian, Emad (Bakri), who is working as a waiter while he waits for his Canadian study visa to come through.

The idea is that Soraya is looking for a Palestine that no longer exists while Emad has had enough of the exhausting present-day reality of the place. But surprisingly little is made of this, perhaps because Jacir finds it difficult to distance herself from Soraya enough to view her idealism in a critical light. In fact, the only real conflict in the film comes from relentlessly unsympathetic Israeli officials and a stereotyped British regional bank manager. Such cliches impoverish the film, whose best moments consist of what look like stolen footage: especially a

brief glimpse of a small baby being passed over a barbed wire border fence from father to mother.

The tension is suddenly upped when Soraya, Emad and their film-maker friend Marwan (Ideis) rob the bank to get back what she feels is hers. But the pace soon drops again as the threesome escape into Israel.

Benoit Chamailard's carefully-framed photography gives the film's handheld aesthetic a tonal richness and depth, and the use of popular Palestinian music is nicely judged. But there's still a sense that Annemarie Jacir would have done better to make the serious full-length documentary that her fine early shorts seemed to herald.

#### Production companies/backers

JBA Production

Philistine Films

Thelma Film AG

Tarantula

Louverture Films

Clarity World Films

Augustus Film

Mediapro

#### Worldwide distribution

Pyramide International

(33) 1 42 96 02 20

#### Producers

Jacques Bidou

Marianne Dumoulin

#### Cinematography

Benoit Chamailard

#### Editor

Michele Hubinon

#### Music

Kamran Rastegar

Main cast

Suheir Hammad

Saleh Bakri

Riyad Ideis