

The Guardian

Annemarie Jacir: an auteur in exile

Palestinian film-maker Annemarie Jacir lives in Jordan and can see her homeland but cannot go there. Like the protagonist of her film, *When I Saw You*, she is an outsider - with a clear view



When I Saw You ... Annemarie Jacir's second feature.

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Annemarie Jacir recently developed a crush on Hugh Grant. The reason? His tweet about her new movie, *When I Saw You*. "Astonishing Palestinian film," he wrote. "Have discovered Arab cinema." Jacir laughs. "He is now very popular in some Palestinian circles," she says, her low, serious voice broken by a bright-toothed smile.

When I Saw You is the tale of a 12-year-old boy and his mother - though comparisons to *About a Boy* stop there. Set in the aftermath of the 1967 Israeli invasion of the West Bank, the film follows Tarek, a refugee living in a UN camp within sight of the land he and his mother have lost. The boy is shocked to learn that many of his fellow refugees have been homeless since 1948. He tails these men on a long trek into Jordan's hills and is soon adopted by the fighters and their laconic, chain-smoking commander.

"On the surface, the film could be read as a homage to that generation," says Jacir. "They chose to stop sitting round in a refugee camp, waiting for food donations from international organisations, and to instead rise up and take their lives into their own hands."

There's a deeper agenda, too. "Tarek witnesses hints of inner fighting, of rising egos. Finally, there's the fact that he is still waiting to get back to Palestine, just as he was in the refugee camp. The last word in the film is 'wait' - a word Tarek rejects. He is the only person who remains on track with what he wants. It's my question to my leadership: why didn't you stay focused like Tarek?" For Jacir, theirs was a generation characterised by splits and rhetoric, who lost sight of the need to return home.

When I Saw You is Jacir's second feature. Like 2008's *Salt of this Sea* - the first feature directed by a Palestinian woman - it was her country's official entry at the Oscars. She's in the pioneering habit: at 29 she became the first Arab to have a short at Cannes. Her work bears comparison to that of her contemporaries in Iran - deceptively casual, studied cinematography, realistic performances and an eagerness to push the dramatic envelope. "I like to be rooted in real people and real situations," she says. "Yet at the same time indulge in the freedom of what cinema is about: our dreams, our ability to change or escape. I always say *Salt of this Sea* is about dreaming. What if a Palestinian refugee could go to the bank that froze her family's account [in 1948] and reclaim what was stolen?"

In that earlier film, the main character, Soraya, reclaims her money at gunpoint, robbing the bank, taking only the exact amount she is owed. Soraya is from Brooklyn and scraped together the air fare to visit Palestine after her father's death. Like Tarek, she is an outsider - someone empowered by a different perspective, and a clear vision of freedom. It's a very romantic view of the outsider, I suggest. She ponders, then nods. "They decide not to live by this bullshit any more."



Different perspective ... Palestinian film-maker Annemarie Jacir. Photograph: Mano/Photo Numerique

Of her two protagonists, Jacir would superficially seem to have more in common with Soraya. She, too, has "lived in many places - always moving, like many Palestinians". She was born into one of the oldest Christian families in Bethlehem; the Jacir Palace is the grandest of the city's mansions. The Jacirs lost their fortune in the crash of the 1930s and the home was sold; it has been a prison and a school and now forms part of the Intercontinental Hotel. Her father grew up modestly, worked for UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for the refugee camps, then moved to Saudi Arabia. The family lived as alien outsiders in Riyadh's closed society; their mother rebelled by decorating

her hijab with appliqué flowers. At 16, Annemarie was sent to a private girls' school in Dallas that George W Bush later chose for his twin daughters. She went to college in California, then applied to Columbia film school in New York. "When that acceptance letter came, I packed all my things up into a car and drove across the country. I've never been back."

After New York, she returned to Palestine and met her husband on the set of *Salt of this Sea*. They now live in Jordan, following a period in 2008 when the Israeli authorities denied her re-entry to the West Bank. Her first apartment was close to Amman's fashionable Rainbow Street, the equivalent of London's Hoxton. "Then one day my landlord turned up and said he was tripling my rent. He said: 'I've already found someone who will pay that.' So I had to move out."

If *Jacir* began as Soraya, the immigrant in America who returns east, she perhaps now feels more kinship with her second protagonist - the boy in the camp, close yet exiled. She can see her homeland from her flat. "I always had the privilege to go back and forth before," she says, "and suddenly I couldn't. I was standing there, like Tarek, looking at Palestine."

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