



# Salt of This Sea

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By [JAY WEISSBERG](#)



**The seductive scent of political correctness apparently overwhelmed judgment when "Salt of This Sea" began looking for coin, not to mention a festival berth. That the taste of Annemarie Jacir's feature debut should be bitter is completely understandable given the untenable Palestinian situation, but the heavy-handed, excessively didactic script plays like a primer for people only vaguely aware of the issues while overly confirmed in their righteousness. This story of an American woman reclaiming her past in Ramallah and Israel lacks the power and nuance of so many recent Palestinian productions, though pic will undoubtedly see healthy art house play.**

The range of international co-producers — including Danny Glover's Louverture Films — attests to the well-intentioned multinational desire to support Palestinian cinema, and "Salt" has received numerous pre- and post-production grants, including funding from San Sebastian's Cinema in Motion 3 and the Hubert Bals Fund. Too bad Jacir's characters are written to explain a situation rather than enjoy an independence of personality.



Brooklyn-born Soraya (poet Suheir Hammad) arrives in Israel and faces the usual cold humiliation at passport control once they learn her family came from Jaffa before 1948. She's come to reclaim her heritage, both on a spiritual and financial level since her grandfather left a bank account there with the equivalent of \$15,572.16. Her destination is Ramallah, where she's welcomed by a woman she knew from New York (though the character is dropped almost as quickly as she's mentioned).

At the bank she's told all Palestinian deposits before the formation of Israel have been wiped clean, plus she's unable to apply for a Palestinian passport since she has no connection to the Occupied Territories. Determined to remain, she meets waiter Emad (Saleh Bakri), a young man whose future should be bright, but despite a full scholarship awaiting him in Canada, he can't get a visa out. Frustration grows for them both, her naive returnee playing against his jaded resident.

Blocked at every turn ("All we have is the truth — I'm not giving up"), Soraya decides to take her grandfather's money from the bank by force, assisted by Emad and his filmmaker friend Marwan (Riyad Ideis) in a scene that should have been comical, or at least tense, but is neither. After priding herself on taking only what is owed to the family, she grabs extra wads of cash "as interest." The bandits disguise themselves with yarmulkes and pass through roadblocks into Israel, where Soraya and Emad, fugitives both from the robbery and as visa-less Palestinians, visit their ancestral homes.

"Salt" isn't lacking in some fine moments, especially when Soraya and Emad locate the ruins of his family village of Dawayma: one of the few times that Jacir allows emotions to exist without the need to overly explain. Not so the scenes in Soraya's grandfather's home, now owned by a sympathetic Israeli (Shelly Goral), whose welcoming attitude ("I think everyone wants peace, except for the leaders") is ultimately treated with patronizing contempt.

Part of the problem lies in the conception of Soraya as a character, maddeningly naive and at times just plain stupid but obviously written that way so no opportunity will be lost to explain the history. Of course such lessons are important, but superb films such as "Rana's Wedding," "Private" and "Paradise Now" succeed in saying far more about the situation on the ground without the need to pontificate.

Dialogue flow is also a problem, though Bakri ("The Band's Visit") holds every scene he's in, furthering the sense of separation between himself and the non-professionals in the cast. Overall visuals are clean and straightforward, though editing drags and extraneous scenes (such as at a nightclub in Ramallah) should be cut to reduce the overlong running time.

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France-Palestine-Switzerland-Belgium-U.S.-U.K.-Netherlands-Spain

PRODUCTION: A JBA Production (France)/Philistine Films (Palestine)/Thelma Film AG (Switzerland)/Tarantula (Belgium)/Louverture Films (U.S.)/Clarity World Films (U.K.)/Augustus Film (The Netherlands)/Mediapro (Spain)/Television Suisse Romande (Switzerland) production. (International sales: Pyramide International, Paris.) Produced by Jacques Bidou, Marianne Dumoulin. Co-producers, Annemarie Jacir, Pierre-Alain Meier, Joseph Rouschop, Danny Glover, Joslyn Barnes, Sawsan Asfari, Maya Sanbar, Bero Beyer, Philippe Berthet, Jaume Roures. Directed, written by Annemarie Jacir.

CREW: Camera (color, B&W), Benoit Chamillard; editor, Michele Hubinon; music, Kamran Rastegar; production designer, Françoise Joset; costume designer, Hamada Atallah; sound (Dolby Digital), Eric Vaucher. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard), May 16, 2008. Running time: 109 MIN.

WITH: **With:** Suheir Hammad, Saleh Bakri, Riyad Ideis, Shelly Goral. (English, Arabic dialogue)