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A political act on film



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Filmmaker Gabriele Del Grande arranged a fake wedding to smuggle a group of Syrians out of Italy to asylum in Sweden, writes **Stephen Applebaum**

After highlighting the issue of illegal migration from parts of the Middle East at the 71st Venice Film Festival, the brave and poignant documentary *On the Bride's Side* will this week return to the city where it was conceived when it screens at the Milan Film Festival.

A fusion of journalism and activism, the crowd-funded film focuses on the plight of Syrians and Palestinians fleeing the conflict in Syria. With their passports worthless in European embassies, many pay smugglers to take them across the Mediterranean in makeshift boats. If they survive the voyage and reach Milan, they have no choice but to turn to other smugglers to continue their journeys.

"Last year, 11,000 Syrians arrived in Italy," says the Italian filmmaker Gabriele Del Grande, a journalist and creator of the migration-watch blog *Fortress Europe*. "This year, until now, it's maybe double."

In September 2013, Del Grande was working in Syria as a freelance reporter. Soon after coming home, two vessels carrying migrants from Libya sank off the Italian island of Lampedusa, killing dozens.

Suddenly, "hundreds of Syrians arrived in Milan", says Del Grande. "There were no reception centres. All the people were living on the street and in the central station."

Del Grande and a friend, Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry, a Palestinian-Syrian poet, went to see what was happening and were approached by Abdullah, a young survivor.

"We were talking in Arabic and he came and asked us if we knew the platform for the train to Sweden," says Del Grande. "I said: 'My friend, there's no train to Sweden. Sorry. But come with us and we'll drink a coffee.'"

Del Grande introduced Al Nassiry to a Milanese filmmaker friend, Antonio Augugliaro, and the three of them decided to help Abdullah get out of Italy and find asylum.

"One night we were eating and drinking," says Del Grande, "and I said: 'Why don't we do a [fake] wedding? The police are never going to stop a wedding.'"

They would be breaking the law



Top, from left, Gabriele Del Grande, Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry and Antonio Augugliaro. Above and left, scenes from the film *On the Bride's Side*. Pascal Le Segretain / Getty Images; Courtesy Gina Films

and risking their own liberty. Nonetheless, he says: "We felt we were doing the right thing."

"Of course, we were afraid. We're not heroes. Also, we're not expert smugglers. So we were really, really afraid."

Del Grande felt, however, that he owed a debt to the people who had helped him in Syria.

"When I went last time, I was travelling with civilian activists," he says. "I didn't have the protection of the Free Syrian Army or a fixer. It's thanks to those people that I am still alive – young people like me. Activists. So then the day comes when you have to help somebody else."

In just two weeks, the three men planned the entire journey and found four more Syrians to join Abdullah in seeking political asylum. The wedding party was rounded out with like-minded activists. The part of the bride was played by a German-passport bearing Syrian-Palestinian who had fled from Yarmouk.

"We wanted to help Abdullah because he's our friend," says Del Grande. "But we also wanted it to be a political act, not only a film."

The group left Milan on November 14, unsure whether they'd be arrested before reaching Stockholm. For reasons of art and historical continuity, they completed the first part of the journey on foot, following a mountain path into France that was once used by Italians escaping fascism.

All five of the migrants eventually received political asylum. But the filmmakers are now waiting to see whether they will be charged and put on trial for assisting in irregular migration, a crime that carries a prison sentence of up to 15 years in Italy. If this happens, Del Grande says they will use the process to highlight the migration issue.

"Who is wrong? What we did or the laws?" he asks. "Who is responsible for all that death in the sea? Is it the storm or the law?"

"If you ask my opinion, I am for the freedom of movement of everybody. You don't need to come from the war – but it's even stronger if you do."

● *On the Bride's Side* will screen at the Milan Film Festival on Saturday

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