

# Can cinema take us to ‘promised lands’?

## Screenings & Meanings

Gerald Schmitz



It may be the summer doldrums but on this ides of July as I travel by train through Siberia (I'm currently in Irkutsk), more sobering reflections seem appropriate when I think of the former Soviet Union and how many political prisoners ended their days here. For many Russian Jews, getting to Israel promised liberty from persecution.

Peace has proved more elusive in that biblical land, perhaps more distant than ever as the surrounding region roils in extremism and violence. Where politics has repeatedly failed, one bright spot is the flourishing Israeli cinema which continues to produce high quality work that doesn't hesitate to expose inconvenient truths about the country that has become one of the most highly militarized in the world, controlling a large, and largely hostile, non-Jewish population for whom European history's oppressed have become the new oppressor.

The Israeli-European co-productions discussed below illuminate the Israeli past, present and future — in the first instance through the remembered perspectives of former soldiers; in the second through the eyes of young citizens separated by ancestral divides. The third feature follows the journey of Middle Eastern illegal migrants, Palestinian refugees from Syria, who risk all to get to a European promised land — following a 21st-century “underground railroad” northward.

Director Mor Loushy's **Censored Voices** (<http://www.censoredvoices.com/>), a Sundance/Berlin/HotDocs selection, retrieves testimonies from a suppressed past that belies the mythologies of heroic victory in the June 1967 “Six-Day War” when Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. According to official propaganda this Jewish David vs. Arab Goliath blitzkrieg — which seized the Sinai, Old Jerusalem, the West Bank and Golan Heights — was a glorious triumph and celebrated as such. But only a week after the war author Amos Oz and editor

Avraham Shapira discovered another reality when they visited some kibbutzim to tape-record the thoughts of soldiers returned from the battlefield. These recordings — 70 per cent of which were censored until now — show little evidence of pride, much less nationalist or religious fervour, even from those who believe the war was a just response to an imminent existential threat. Rather, the subdued voices are almost confessional as they recount a disorienting and dehumanizing experience that included war crimes against civilians as well as wounded and captured enemy soldiers. As one says: “In the war, we all became murderers.”

Oz, Shapira and some of those interviewed, old men after nearly half a century, listen quietly with us as the tapes are played, and in breaking the silence, reveal a country's ongoing challenge in coming to terms with the full truth and consequences of its conquests and occupations.

\*\*\*

Israel also faces a demographic dilemma. The fact that 1.7 million citizens of the Jewish state are of Arab origin is underscored in Eran Riklis's **Dancing Arabs**, superbly adapted for the screen by writer Sayed Kashua from his own semi-autobiographical novel. The “dancing” is of the metaphorical kind, between two entangled yet conflicted cultures as experienced by the central character Eyad (played by Razi Gabareen as a young boy, later by Tawfeek Barhom).

In the village of Tira, Eyad grows up in the shadow of warfare (the 1982 invasion of Lebanon) and civil unrest. He's doted on by his parents and pious Muslim grandmother. He's proud of his father Salah (Ali Suliman), a fruit seller whose university dreams were dashed when imprisoned for political activities. Indeed he defies the prejudiced stereotypes that prevail in his Israeli government-controlled school, taking the punishment meted out by an exasperated Hebrew teacher for insisting that,

instead of a lowly fruit seller, “My father is a terrorist!” In another scene a naive American visitor to Eyad's class representing “Children for Peace” has his words mistranslated instead into praise for the Israeli state.



Avner Shahaf

**CENSORED VOICES** — Director Mor Loushy's **Censored Voices**, a Sundance/Berlin/HotDocs selection, retrieves testimonies from a suppressed past that belies the mythologies of heroic victory in the June 1967 “Six-Day War” when Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, writes Gerald Schmitz.

Eyad is such a bright boy that when accepted into Jerusalem's best boarding school as an adolescent in 1988, Salah insists he must go. He embodies the family's hopes for a better future. It's a difficult adjustment as Eyad (Ayid in Hebrew) feels like a fish out of water, teased for mispronouncing certain consonants (though that proves to be an advantage at one point), at times a target of anti-Arab slurs. He gets by with the help of increasingly close classmate friends — the lovely Naomi (Danielle Kitzis), and Jonathan (Michael Moshonov), a fellow “misfit” in a wheelchair who suffers from muscular dystrophy but maintains a sharp sense of humour.

Complications arise when Eyad and Naomi develop romantic feelings, because her traditional Jewish parents consider having an Arab boyfriend as worse than the plague and pull her from the school.

The visual details of every scene can speak volumes. We watch Naomi and Eyad in a movie theatre as they take in the opening prologue of Wim Wenders' pre-1989 Berlin masterpiece *Wings of Desire* (which just happens to be my favourite film of all time). When Eyad uses a phone booth to call her, it's next to a wall on which is scrawled “Arab! Don't even think about a Jewish girl!” Later on, when Naomi must consider compulsory military service and wants to serve in the intelligence service, its high security clearance requirements will force her to break off their relationship. She doesn't want to lie about having no Arab ties. Man-made walls of mistrust exist in many places.

In contrast to the circumstances pushing Eyad and Naomi apart, Eyad becomes Jonathan's biggest and only friend. As his condition worsens, he abandons his studies, becomes bedridden and is eventually hospitalized and put on life support. Over this time Eyad also becomes close to Jonathan's lonely and worried single mother Edna (Yael Abecassis) for whom he becomes an increasingly important source of support and consolation. When Eyad too withdraws from the school and takes a restaurant job among other Arab labourers, Edna invites him to live with her

and Jonathan. Indeed she treats him like an adopted son. So begins an extraordinary journey indicated by the movie's other title, **A Borrowed Identity**.

In the Jewish state, having a Jewish identity is a great advantage over being an Arab second-class citizen. I won't say more except that Eyad is no longer himself. Returning from studying abroad in Berlin, he will find a use for the treasured shrouds of Mecca contained in a blue suitcase bequeathed to him by his grandmother.

The emotionally resonant teenaged triad of Eyad, Naomi and Jonathan reminded me somewhat of *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, though in this case it's the dying boy that fulfils the story's promise. *Dancing Arabs*, which I loved even more, also evinces much deeper layers of socio-cultural and political significance in posing the question of whether a Palestinian past can be reconciled with a Jewish future.

\*\*\*

The Italian documentary **On the Bride's Side**, which won a Human Rights Film Network award at last September's Venice Film Festival, provides an intimate look at the plight that is driving desperate migrants and refugees from the Middle East to seek asylum in Europe. Co-directors/writers Antonio Agugliaro, Gabriele del Grande, and Khaled Soliman al Nassiry follow the journey five Palestinians and Syrians who have managed to survive crossing the Mediterranean to Lampedusa using Libyan and Egyptian human smugglers, and have made their way to Milan where they are assisted by some Italians, including an activist journalist and several Palestinians with Italian citizenship. Among the five, who are illegals without proper papers, are an older couple and a father and son (an aspiring rapper). Their hope is to travel 3,000 kilometres through the European Union to Sweden which is seen as the most welcoming country for asylum seekers.

The cover story involves creating a fake wedding party with two of the Palestinians dressed up as bride and groom surrounded by an entourage. As they travel across borders — first to Marseille, then through Luxembourg to northern

Germany, from there to Copenhagen and on to Malmo — they risk arrest and deportation; the supporters, who act as trouble-spotting advance scouts, risk prosecution as human traffickers. To enter France they cross a “Death Pass” mountain trail in the Alps used historically by illegal Italian migrants. At one point this involves being pulled up by rope over a cliff and sneaking through a hole in the wire-mesh border fence. Before that there's a moving scene when they stop at the walls of an abandoned structure, pausing to reflect on their own individual stories indicative of how many tragedies

**Censored Voices**  
(Israel/Germany, 2015)  
**Dancing Arabs**  
(Israel/Germany/France  
2014)  
**On the Bride's Side**  
(Italy, 2015)

lie behind the statistics. Near where someone has written “*mort aux passeurs*” (death to smugglers), the Palestinian “groom” writes the names of the dead and missing from his harrowing sea voyage. His “bride,” musing about every human's right to live in freedom, writes simply “no borders.”

At each key stop on this clandestine passage to a promised land of freedom, sometimes travelling in the dead of night, there is a support network and refugee diaspora waiting to celebrate their arrival. These are joyful gatherings that relieve the tensions of the trip itself, of the emotional burdens expressed in the refugees' prayer: “We have waited a long time, oh God. Until when, oh God?” When they finally get to Sweden without serious incident there is an understandably giddy release of jubilation at the prospect of a new life.

A 2014 update informs us that the father and son were sent back to Italy, probably because the father had been forced to give his fingerprints there, thereby giving a record of his point of entry to the EU. The couple also returned to Italy. But, even if all five are not living happily ever after in Scandinavia, all have been granted political asylum. They have found some peace at last.



**DANCING ARABS** — In the film *Dancing Arabs*, a young Jewish woman, Naomi, played by Danielle Kitzis (right), has a complicated relationship with her Arab friend Eyad, played by Tawfeek Barhom (left).