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Film Review: *Gaza Mon Amour*, 2020. This Palestinian, drama film with Spanish subtitles was directed by brothers Arab Nasser and Tarzan Nasser and written by the brothers and Fadette Drouard. Produced by Rani Massalha, Marie Legrand, Michael Eckelt. Distributed by Versatile Films.

Reviewed by Tucker Nadeau¹ and Manal al-Natour²

A humorous view on the frustrating search for love, especially in one's later years, combine with a farcical and somewhat fantastical ocean find to produce a comical and gentle romantic comedy in *Gaza Mon Amour*, the latest feature from the Palestinian brothers tandem of Arab and Tarzan Nasser. The action centers around the sixty-year-old bachelor fisherman Issa, who plies the five kilometer stretch allotted to Palestinian fisherman by Israel with little success. Issa must navigate two separate and sometimes maddening situations; the first is rather quotidian (to the viewer at least) as Issa decides that he will soon marry, with his chosen target being Siham, a single neighbor of Issa's who works as a dressmaker with her college-aged daughter. The second situation is reminiscent of a bureaucratic parody like *Catch-22*, and begins when Issa finds in his net a weighty bronze statue of the Greek God Apollo.

In Issa's pursuit of Siham, the bachelor's main problem is his own reticence at talking to Siham, heightened by her nervous changes in subject whenever Issa begins to work up the courage to ask her to marry him. These close misses in the two coming together is a constant source of both frustration and comedy to the viewer, as Siham's efforts to avoid anything awkward with become easier and easier to see through, looking for any opportunity to shift the subject of Issa's attention. Siham is a middle-aged widow who works at the market with her daughter Leila as seamstresses. Siham has been an independent, respectful woman who dedicated her life to her daughter who is dreaming of joining the local university despite the difficult financial situation. Issa finally manages to work up his courage to go directly to Siham's apartment and propose to her, though right at the moment Siham's daughter (who had been pushing her mother towards a marriage) walks up the stairs and erupts in laughter. Soon Siham joins her, and both Issa and the viewer are left uncertain whether these laughs directed at the situation's absurdity bode well for the fisherman's proposal. The final scene allays these concerns though, as the Nasser brothers present a mostly happy ending to fulfill the expectations of the genre.

Though the tone and portrayal of the "courtship" between Issa and Siham is rather conventional, the film truly shines in its other plot concerning Issa's discovery of the statue of Apollo and the numerous visual jokes surrounding the well-endowed nature of the figure. When Issa first hauls up the statue and lays it on the floor of his ship, he makes sure to throw

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a rope over Apollo's nether regions, and then when the statue falls and the penis breaks off it is the only part of the statue over which Issa maintains possession when the police arrive to confiscate the antiquity. Of course, the missing organ is the part of the statue that the authorities most want, and their reluctance to directly address the blatant sexuality of the statue provides several instances of humor in the film. Interestingly, Issa's discovery and slow loss of the statue parallels his increasing boldness in expressing his wish for marriage to Siham, perhaps suggesting the necessity of embracing one's sexuality at any age and in any culture.

All of this action takes place in Gaza, one of the most densely populated and economically isolated places in the world. The Nasser brothers show only glimpses of life outside of the homes and workplaces of Issa and Siham, but they still manage to convey the difficulties of these characters' lives in other ways. Christophe Graillot's cinematography is constantly concerned with matter of space, and tight shots of Issa's small apartment that he shares with his sister and Siham's fabric shop manage to communicate the tenuous grip on a space that possesses both one of the highest rates of population density and of population growth among top-level political units (*BBC*). *Gaza Mon Amour* also frequently employs a dark palate, no matter the location it portrays, mirroring the inconsistent electricity that its residents receive, a detail that further highlights Gaza's insecurity and the factors that cause it to resemble what the historian Jean-Pierre Filiu calls "an open-air prison" (323).

Gaza Mon Amour thus creates a more personal film through its limited portrayal and background of the place and situation in which it situates its characters, focusing not on the political and militaristic goings-on that would be difficult for the viewer to completely relate to, but instead on how intense economic and political affect actual people. Even the military and police bureaucrats that Issa is forced to deal with in his ordeal with the statue of Apollo do not seem as much malevolent as simply greedy, showing how such a situation as Gaza as in simply forces people to do what is best for themselves much of the time. The film's ending is the most potent and poignant reminder of the encroachment of affairs of state on the everyday lives of citizens, as Issa and Siham lay in an embrace in the captain's bay of Issa's fishing boat. However, while they seem to be enjoying their happy ending, they hear a voice on a bullhorn ordering the ship to immediately return to the five kilometer stretch of Palestinian waters, lest the Israeli navy is forced to do their worst. The lovebirds merely return to their embrace and the film ends, leaving the viewer unsure if Issa and Siham were truly able to enjoy their marriage or if it was brought to a short end by the Israeli military. Thus, the expected happy ending is disrupted by a quick return to the real world, leaving the viewer unable to forget what is actually happening in a country that may be thousands of miles away.

In the end, *Gaza Mon Amour* generally succeeds in creating a feature that is both funny and fulfilling while still not letting the viewer forget the consequences of the prolonged conflict surrounding Gaza. Though various younger characters like Siham's daughter and a man who works with Issa at the market express their desire to be anywhere in the world besides Gaza, the film showcases the pull that one's home, no matter how difficult, can exert on its inhabitants. The comic and unrealistic endowment of the statue of Apollo seems to support this suggestion, showing the value of accepting life and oneself as they are. The film's title functions as a declaration of this theme of love for the region, reminding viewers both of what life looks like in a country such as the Gaza Strip while also emphasizing the desire for people everywhere and of every age to find love.

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