

MOVIE REVIEW

Romeo and Juliet are Palestinians longing for freedoms

By Loren King

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Two Palestinian students are torn apart, Romeo and Juliet-style, in Susan Youssef's accomplished but erratic debut feature, "Habibi." The 2011 film, which played the Boston Palestine Film Festival in October, was shot in the occupied Palestinian territories and has a gritty, low-budget realism as it depicts day-to-day life under the threat of violence and age-old cultural and generational obstacles.

It opens with young lovers Layla (newcomer Maisa Abd Elhadi, who is terrific) and Qays (Kais Nashif of "Paradise Now") reluctantly returning to Khan Younis after their West Bank student visas are revoked by Israeli authorities due to an upswing in violent clashes. The beautiful and outspoken Layla, forced to abandon her engineering studies, rebels against her well-meaning but conservative parents who want her to marry a wealthy but narrow-minded Hamas supporter and live in relative safety in Gaza City. The ante is upped when the good friend of Layla's younger brother, Walid, is killed. Walid is (a bit too conveniently) recruited by militants at the local mosque and soon becomes another obstacle to Layla's freedom.

Qays, a free spirit and poet, lives in the Khan Younis refugee camp and works menial construction jobs. Despite his love for Layla, he has little to offer her family. Instead, he boldly declares his love by scrawling poetry on walls around the camp, with verse borrowed from the ancient Arabian poet Qays. However romantic, this seems a rather reckless move (the movie's full Arabic title is "Habibi Rasak Kharban," which translates as "Darling, something's wrong with your head," according to the film's website) and, sure enough, Qays's actions turn Layla's not-unsympathetic father (Yussef Abu Warda) against him. Nashif's gloomy face doesn't convey enough passion or charisma to match the volatile situation the couple is in.

The pair plan to flee Gaza for the Netherlands. When they meet on a beach, they attract the anger of two extremist men who object to their innocent affection, demanding to know whether Qays and Layla are married. In the film's most powerful and politically charged scene, they're violently interrogated by an unseen border official.

Aided by the striking presence of Abd Elhadi, the film is at its best portraying with honesty and searing realism Layla's limited options as she struggles with both Israel's political boundaries and Palestinian social conventions.

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