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Review: Habibi

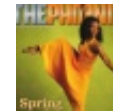
By **PETER KEOUGH** | February 26, 2013



3.0 Stars

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As seen in Susan Youssef's wrenching *Habibi*, it's not easy being a poet in Palestine. Qays (Kais Nashif) writes poems on walls expressing his love for Layla (Maisa Abd Elhadi), whom he met in a lit class at the university. But her family has pledged her to a rich man, and her brother, who has become a fanatic member of Hamas after his friend was shot by an Israeli, wants to kill Qays for tainting his sister's name with his muse-inspired graffiti. Based on a 9th-century poem about similar lovers at the



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mercy of historical turmoil, Youssef's debut film captures the ecstasy and desperation of frustrated passion as it presents a desolate portrait of Palestine today. In a heartbreaking scene, after finding refuge in Gaza on the beach, the couple are caught by a roving gang of morality police, and Layla counters their condemnatory quotes from the Quran with the Prophet's words of compassion. To no avail. Their love might be doomed, but with young filmmakers like Youssef defying tyranny and intolerance with art, the poetry will endure.

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