

A reading in the “Roots” film  
Directed by Wafa’ Jamil

By Ziad Jayyosi, Cinema Critic

On the margins of a conference hosted by the Anglican Church near Al-Mahd (Nativity) Church in Bethlehem, the place of Jesus and the place of peace, olives, and prophets, delegations from 23 countries debated and discussed. The title of the conference was, “Forming societies at the time of crisis” and in the atmosphere of the church with the praying and sayings for peace, the peace of soul and man, inspired the participants to sing a song about hope, love and peace between people, without discrimination of race and color and with the amazement of the attendants who each came with their own beliefs.

Within these atmospheres, came the distinguished attendance of the film director, Wafa’ Jamil. She changed the sessions of the conference and the colorful faces, with a surprise and pain, into a story without a previous scenario. She began to open the files and look for the roots of a people who were dismissed and whose land was stolen, a people whose trials were made to destroy the soul of man without benefit. Yet, in spite of the walls and killing, the effort could not prevent flowers to grow between rocks.

With objective capacities and great faith, Wafa’ carried the camera and captured the words articulated from mouths during the field tours for some of the attendants. She collected the story of a people through the eyes and words of others, leaving them to speak in English freely and their faces to express what they felt and sensed, she left the camera rolling to catch these moments with freedom.

A young girl coming from USA says, “I have not come to the east but came to the town of my mother who was prohibited from coming for sixty years. I came to look for the house of my grandfathers.”

An old black man from South Africa says, “I want to see what is happening in this area of the world. The driver who brought me pointed to the settlements built on this land. I was then reminded of the pre-freedom period in my country while passing through the many checkpoints and settlements until I reached Bethlehem.”

Those became heroes without planning and each has come with a purpose. They wander around Ramallah and Bethlehem for this sake accompanied by the camera that observes the expressions on their faces and the spontaneous words attracted by the lens of camera and finally, the soul of an artist gives us invention and acting represented in “The Roots.”

In the streets and narrow suburbs of Bethlehem where there are tired faces and the smells of history, a girl and a priest wander while expressing what is in their minds. The young girl introduces herself as Sama Al-Sheebi of Iraqi roots from her father’s family and Palestinian roots from her mother’s and with an American nationality and Muslim Religion. The priest introduces himself as Mathew from South Africa, where he suffered from racial discrimination and killing as did other citizens in his country.

The camera moves us to where the two visitors are looking in the Al-Mahd (Nativity) Church at a display case holding the remains of Israeli devastation in West Bank cities such as Bethlehem, as well as scenes of the military checkpoints and settlements seen by the priest and the girl. The Church, to which people resorted during the siege with its killing, destruction, and bombing did not escape. The box contains the effects of the bombings and the bullets left behind that show that there was no mercy for the church or citizen. It was broadcast to the world that stayed silent, closing their eyes to the aggressions and attacks on the holy places of Christians and the birth place of Jesus.

Mathew, the priest, expresses his pain and the words escape his lips, “the racial discrimination did not aim to separate between two categories but to destroy man; they did not show mercy for the church or the people who resorted to it. The church was not safe from destruction and damage or the soldiers’ insults of the religious women. These effects are seen in our eyes and the eyes of religious men.” Dr. Metri, a priest and the director of International Center of Bethlehem says, “The Israelis think that God gave them this land. Israel has become a piece of Swiss cheese piece and she pushes the Palestinians inside the holes of cheese.”

The camera moves between these words and senses to the pictures of the settlements taking the land and the wall that snakes through the land cutting the citizens into parts. The checkpoints are an image of man’s humiliation where the Israelis practice the art of degrading the Palestinian people.

In Hebron, between the intensive military checkpoints and under the barbed-wire, fences have been erected instead of forcing people away from their houses and shops. The citizen who refuses to leave his house lives through all types of pressure and detaining processes. Hebron is a strange model of Israeli settlement that spread its people among houses inside the city so that moving from one area to another or even going to pray at the Al-Ibrahim mosque requires citizens to pass through gates and checkpoints as if they are crossing borders between countries.

Within this atmosphere, Wafa' Jamil moves with her camera with her beautiful sensitive eye to catch pain while recording the reactions from the priest Mathew and his trip companion Sama who came to look for the root of her grandfathers in this country. They are reactions drawn by looks and features witnessing each scene or incident. The priest gives a big reaction when he sees the keys held by the owners who were pushed out of their homes as they were taken over by the Israeli occupation in order to carry out the cruelest project in the world called Israel. The priest comments, "My mother kept the keys of her house in Cape Town for ten years until she was able to return to her house. It is time for Palestinians to use their keys also."

In Ramallah, the priest stops near the tomb of president Arafat and addressing him says, "We could not reach here to be with you in the siege but now we visit you while the siege continues." Then, he turns as if he taking the Palestinian people, "We are with you to find new hope. Here we know the meaning of land and its connection with the Palestinian people and that this land is for the Palestinians. The ugliest thing I have seen here is the wall." The camera jumps to the scene of the half moon in the sky waiting for the end of the day to light the other half.

Sama Alshibi, who was accompanying the priest in his tour, came to look for her roots and the scene moves to Budrus village west of Ramallah where her mother's grandfather after being driven from their villages after the Deir Yasseen massacre. She asks citizens about her relatives and finds a few of them. She meets the roots of her family and cries with happiness and sadness as she meets her cousins. They are talking about her grandfather and the roots. She says with the tears falling from her eyes, "Now I felt what is meant for me to be a Palestinian, connected with my roots and identity in Palestine." Mathew whisper and says, "I am a Christian from South Africa but I am connected with the Palestinian people."

Wafa' ends her film in English, the language of the men talking, with a scene of a child running after the birds and scenes of Palestinian rural areas which are silent and neglected; the shots of citizens tied to their land with the background of a song with words saying, "We want justice."

The Occupied Ramallah : 6/7/2006