

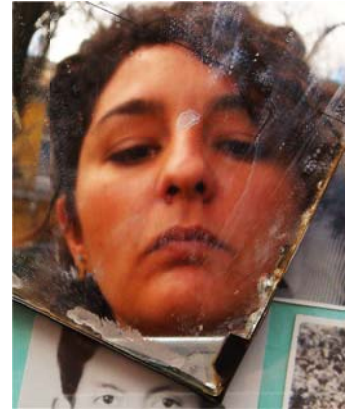
Palestine, Boundless

Grantee: Mais Darwazah

Project: Documentary "My Love Awaits Me by the Sea"

Country: Jordan, Germany, Palestine, Qatar

Story collected by Zena Takieddine, July 22, 2012



I made my film, "My Love Awaits Me by the Sea," through a process driven mainly by subjective intuition, in search of the remnants of hope within our surrounding hard reality. My film is about Palestine, about poetry, dignity and freedom. When I fell in love with the words and drawings of Hasan Hourani, this gave me the strength to make my first ever journey back to my homeland, back to Palestine, in search of a love story that only exists in my imagination. I went searching for the unreal, in a world, which has no space left for our dreams.

When Hasan captured my attention 5 years ago, he turned my world upside down. A million questions flooded in. Why? Why him? Why did he affect me so? Why did I get hooked? These are personal questions, yes, but they are also huge questions about what it means to exist as a Palestinian and as a human being. The writing of the narrative took its time but, throughout, I was enjoying the melancholy and mystery of having Hasan as my muse. But it wasn't easy to stay on this poetic track, with so many forces pushing and pulling in different directions. How was it possible to remain in the purity and the beauty of the imaginary world while also maintaining focus on what was going on in the outside 'real' world. This was the core issue, as at the end, this film is about dreams as much as it is about reality.

Turning this project into an actual film of this complexity needed a custom-made unique team. I worked with Hala Alabdalla, the creative consultant, from the early days. I owe a lot to Hala for continuously challenging me to go deep within myself, to the place where our deepest longings come from. I will never forget her wise words "a film is like a sponge [a living, breathing entity], which will always grow and change just as we do". Also, finding Rula Nasser, the project's producer, was a real challenge and such a blessing. To make feature cinematic documentaries, not catering for television, has never been an easy task for any team working within this genre. Rula's drive, sincerity, tenacity and non-compromising belief in our maturing film industry were key to turning this film from a floating idea to something substantial.

Another challenge was finding funding, that by itself was a whole other matter. In the beginning, I was fundraising single handedly. As an emerging independent director in the Arab region, your personal contacts can often be your only source of support. So, I turned to the people I know: people who care about arts and culture, and people who care about Palestine. I approached everyone I could think of for funding; corporations, foundations and institutions – frankly I was extremely stubborn in presenting my project in the way I wanted. I wrote my film's dossier as I saw the film in my mind - a stream of thoughts, images and poetry - and I refused to cut it down or reformulate it into the expected synopsis and concept note. I strongly believe that there is not one standard way to present a project, and that those who would be interested to support my film would have to be sensitive to the artistic experience I am seeking. I was lucky that AFAC's documentary program was open to innovative ways of making film, and, with its friendly and approachable team, the necessary collaboration was built.

But the most strenuous challenge was the geography; I was shooting in three different countries, in Syria, Palestine and Jordan. Yes, it was expensive. Rula and I were working with very little or no money, but I could never expect any crewmember to accept low pay just because our film is about the 'Palestinian cause'. If anything, our cause is about survival, and making sure my crew got paid their fair share was absolutely essential. So when we finally managed to gather the team, I carried Hasan with me and we went on our journey to Palestine. What a surprise it was to meet the characters of my film face to face, within the contexts of their own neighborhoods and their own homes, and to find them absolutely vibrant with love and hope. The young men of Jerusalem, for example, broke the assumptions I had unwittingly carried about the 'occupied' Palestinian. I thought they would be tired and broken, a downtrodden youth, but I was completely wrong. They

were gushing with strength and vision! In fact, everyone I met, the young, the middle aged and the elderly, were full of life! Their sense of humour and solid dignity was not something I could have predicted. But I was there, experiencing it first hand, I was overawed to see all these people living their lives and proving every media stereotype on the planet to be completely false. The dream of Palestine is still more alive than ever.

When I returned to Amman for the editing of the film, I felt that I could remake the entire project, as so many personal and political transformations had happened along the way; which perspective would I tell the story from? What really was the dream I went to search for? Editing took a lot of time and, again, it was a challenge to find the right editor! Where could I find someone who could enter my mind and understand intuitively how I was seeing things? There is a visual language in my subconscious that is not in words and is difficult to express verbally. The editing process needed to have a freedom within its structure to allow for these images to play around and come together in the way that felt right. Vartan Avakian and I found a way of working that was spacious and explorative, using image and feeling, symbolism and storytelling. The discussions that took place in the editing suite were one of the most crucial elements in bringing this project together. We could build, break, deconstruct and build again....

The process of writing has to be free. How can you make a film about freedom without being totally free in the creative process itself? If I constrained myself in the writing and the editing, then at the end, that would surface in the narrative. With Hasan being my muse, my imaginary lover, I was opening all boundaries and yet, over the five years of making this film, my relationship to Hasan was changing. My attachment to him in the beginning loosened and expanded into something else. I was able to free him and let go only after I understood a few things about myself.

As a director, I cannot expect the viewer of this film to feel anything if I do not expose anything of myself. Considering this is a first person film – an auteur documentary – one would sometimes find, and very naturally, the voice of the director to be so authoritarian. The only way to break such a barrier and build a two-way relation with the audience is to be extremely honest. Candidness invites openness, even when the questions have no tangible answers. What was it that I 'really' wanted and what kind of questions did I 'really' want to ask. I don't have many answers but I know that at the end I found the reality or 'truth', which I sought as a creative, one which I had both formed and been transformed by.



Inspired by the true story of Palestinian artist Hasan Hourani

www.myloveawaitsmebythesea.com