

Why I Make Films

Grantee: Annemarie Jacir (Palestine)

Project: Lamma Shoftak

Story collected by Zena Takieddine, November 27 2013



May 2008. My legs buckled under me and I felt my heart fall into the earth. After an eleven-hour interrogation, a longhaired woman from the Israeli Ministry of Interior told me I was "denied entry". In that moment, the place I called home; my apartment, my lover, my friends and my life - were pulled out from under me. Two policemen carried me away from the bridge and escorted me onto a bus back to Jordan.

I tried five more times to return home but could not.

Jordan was as close as I could possible get, so I moved there. I spent a year in an apartment in Amman trying to find a way to do something positive with the anger and pain I was in. I began writing a script about a little boy who loses his home in 1967. A boy full of hope and dreams, not anger and defeat. This was the beginning of what would be my second feature film *When I Saw You* (Lamma Shoftak).

The development of *When I Saw You* took three years. I was lucky to work with my partner and producer Ossama Bawardi. My wish was to make a film entirely supported by Arab financiers and funds, and consisting of an entirely Arab cast and crew. We need to break the reliance on European funding to have a strong and independent film community. It is also crucial that, as filmmakers, we work with local crew to train and build up our own teams and I believe absolutely that, in the long run, this will lead to a more independent and better Arab cinema, one that is made up of more young people leading the way in finding new ways to tell our stories.

When I made my first feature film, *Salt of this Sea*, I spent six years trying to find Arab funding and failed. The reasons are always the same – my work was too political, my work was not commercial, my work would not sell, "too Palestinian", too direct, too obscure, blah blah blah... And yet, as the film traveled the globe, again and again I had to hear the same question from the press, "Why don't Arabs fund the arts?", "Why don't Arabs support their own artists?", "Why don't you have any Arab support on the film?"... I am not one to give up and so I began the whole process again as I tried to find the partners who would make *When I Saw You* (Lamma Shoftak) a possibility.

AFAC was one of the first places I came to. I had known about AFAC's works and the projects they had supported proved to me that they were an institution that would not shy away from topics that are political nor would they try to demand any conditions or artistic censorship. There is nothing more important than finding partners who do not try to change the content and idea of a project.

Even though the main story of my film is about a boy and his mother, and I chose a romantic tone while being critical of the generation before us, many funders still felt uncomfortable supporting such a project. We were delighted when AFAC was among the first organizations to come on board our project during the development phase. As everyone knows, once one institution comes on board, others soon follow, as if they wait for the first one to make a move. From there, slowly we gathered all our partners, supporters, investors and eventually crowd funders. For the first time in my fifteen years of making films, Ossama and I managed to raise the shooting budget for the film entirely from Arab sources! Even more exciting, every single producer on the film was Palestinian.

Part of what is very important to me is hiring and working locally. As we moved into the production phase, we gathered our cast and crew from Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. I found the wonderful and talented Mahmoud Asfa in the Irbid refugee camp in Jordan and knew this son of Palestine was destined for great things. The actress I dreamed to work with for years Ruba Blal came on board. Once again Saleh Bakri and I were able to collaborate. In Jordan, we found beautiful people full of energy and dreams, which I cast in the roles of the Fedayeen, only later to learn they were in reality the children of Fedayeen and refugees. Many of my former crew member from Salt of this Sea returned to work on When I Saw You as well as many, many new people which brought together a team so special and dear to my heart. Challenges and obstacles were too many to list. But we built the sets, a refugee camp, the freedom fighters camp, designed costumes, and brought to life the lost world of the late 60s. When singer Ruba Shamshoum, who I cast in the film as Tarek's first crush, sang her original and haunting song "Ya Layla La Trooh" around the fire one night on set, I was so overwhelmed my voice could not call "cut". I looked around at the cast and crew, saw tears and emotions, and as we looked at each other I was reminded why I make films and perhaps no words can ever explain how precious this moment was.

As cultural workers and artists in the region, I also believe our most important job is to share our works with our people. For cinema, distribution is one of the greatest challenges we have, especially when up against the larger monster called Hollywood that has monopolized our cinemas and TV screens. In addition to AFAC's tireless work in helping us to bring our projects exposure, their continued support to reach more people by also enabling us to meet and discuss with our audience has been crucial.

While the success we have had at festivals this past year has been more than I ever expected, we were still up against the greatest challenge of all which is making sure the film is seen widely in the Arab world and not just to the elite audience at festivals. Ossama and I therefore spent the last nine months wearing a new hat – that of film distributors, just as we had done five years ago for Salt of this Sea, screening the film in more than 50 villages in Palestine and making it available for online streaming. We felt that if we didn't do it ourselves and share When I Saw you in the most public places, it was not going to happen. After a theatrical run in Jerusalem, we then focused first on Jordan, the country where the film was made.

There are two cinemas in Jordan, which, with a lot of work, occasionally screen independent films. We decided to experiment with an even larger release in order to make the film available in as many spaces as possible in this very class-divided country. After several months of work, we are proud today that in Jordan, the film was eventually released in all the cinemas, including in the mall Cinemaplexs which had never before in their history screened an independent Arab film nor an independent film of any kind. In addition to theatrical releases in the UK, Greece, US, Switzerland, and Belgium, we followed with a theatrical release in Lebanon, Abu Dhabi, and Morocco. I will not say it was easy but it was rewarding to see the plan become a reality and I remain convinced that the battle against Hollywood must go on and we will succeed in bringing independent cinema and Arab cinema to our audiences.

When I Saw You (Lamma Shoftak) Awards

- NETPAC award for Best Asian Film at the Berlin International Film Festival
- Winner Audience Award Amiens Int. Film Festival
- Winner SIGNIS Award for Best Film Amiens Int. Film Festival
- Nomination Best Children's Film - ASIAN PACIFIC SCREEN AWARDS

- Palestine's 2013 OSCAR ENTRY for Foreign Language Film
- Nomination YOUNG ARTIST AWARD for Leading Performance in Foreign Film
- Winner Special Jury Prize - Oran Festival of Arab Cinema
- Winner - Tunisian Film Critics Don Quixote Award – Carthage Int. Film Festival
- Winner Jury Prize - Cairo Int. Film Festival

