Toronto International Film Festival 2012

An interview with Mahdi Fleifel and Patrick Campbell, director and co-producer of A World Not Ours

By David Walsh
26 September 2012

The WSWS spoke to Mahdi Fleifel, writer and director of A World Not Ours, and Patrick Campbell, co-producer (along with Fleifel) of the film, in Toronto.

David Walsh: How did this particular film come to be?

Mahdi Fleifel: This film has been around as long as I’ve been around, without my noticing it. After my last trip to Ain El Hel-weh [Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon], I realized I’d been personally recording there for 12 years. My father had been filming since the mid-1980s, and it hit me that perhaps I had a story in all this footage.

Initially, we were talking about doing a fiction film. I trained as a fiction director. This was my first documentary, almost by default. It occurred to me: what’s the point in trying to write a fiction film and cast someone who reminds me of my granddad, or my friend, when actually the real deal is right there in front of me?

There were something like 150 hours of footage, in different formats. VHS, Super-8, HD, etc.

Patrick Campbell: We were working with a wonderful editor, but he didn’t speak Arabic, so that was an added complication. Some 150 hours of footage that he didn’t quite understand. We’ve basically been sitting in the same room for two years.

DW: Perhaps for the benefit of the readers, could you explain a little about your family and personal history?

MF: It occurred to me on that trip in 2000 that this was not Disneyland. We went to Denmark in the early winter of 1988. We stayed, I think, two weeks in an asylum center and were granted permanent residency. We were taught the language, we got a home. It was very secure and comfortable, and really what my parents were looking for.

But that changed as well, because their lives seemed to stop in some sense, because of the language, culture and other issues. I was nine, I picked up the language. I went to school and high school, and after high school, I felt like I wasn’t particularly excited about being in Denmark, there were a lot of family issues, a divorce. I decided to come to the UK and study film.

Eventually I found my way to London. I’d grown up in Dubai, which at the time was a desert. We had a small, air-conditioned flat, the bus would drop me off after school and that would be that. And from there, it was the camp, which, again, was a small, confined space. In Denmark, we ended up in a very small town, on the outskirts of Elsinore. After that, I lived in Newport in south Wales. So coming to London was a big change that shook everything up. I felt at home, because for the first time I didn’t have to worry about whether I was Palestinian or Danish...

DW: What is your relationship to the refugee camp now?

MF: For me, it’s been conflicted. The camp has changed over the years. As a kid, it was the best place to visit. There were a few summers that we didn’t go, and it just felt that the year was ruined. It was like being in a perpetual festival. Everyone knew each other. At the time, pre-Oslo [Accords in 1993], there was still an idealism, a feeling for the revolution that was still there.

In terms of the physical conditions in Ain El Hel-weh, you have to bear in mind that the population has grown over the years, but the space has not. It can only expand upward. Three generations have now built houses on top of each other.

The ambiance today is different, it’s quite tense. You can hear the neighbors snoring, there is no privacy. And this is one of the difficult things for older people, like my granddad, who’s in his 80s and just wants to be able to relax.

My mother doesn’t have any ties with the camp any more. She left when she was 18, she got married, she never looked back. All her siblings live in Canada, Germany, Denmark. Whereas for my father, the camp was where his heart was, that was his home, he never felt at home in Denmark or Dubai. So I have both sides.

DW: You’ve obviously held on to it in some ways.

MF: It occurred to me on that trip in 2000 that this was not Disneyland,
but something much more complicated. When I was younger, it was strange, because here I was filming this place, but no one had heard of it. I’d come back from Lebanon, and I’d try to explain it to my classmates in Denmark. As soon as they heard “refugee camp,” they’d say, “Is it somewhere in South America?” “No, no.” So I’ve always had this need to explain, to show people what it’s like. The sad thing is that people in Lebanon don’t even know what it’s like inside a camp.

Ain El-Hel-weh is the largest camp in Lebanon, it’s in the south, about an hour and a half from the Israeli border, halfway between Beirut and the border.

PC: It’s also one of the few remaining autonomous camps. Although they’re not as well-armed as they were, the PLO is still armed and the Lebanese state wouldn’t really get into it very much, whereas they’ve either destroyed the other camps, or they’ve integrated them. Ain El Hel-weh is one of the last authentic Palestinian spaces left in Lebanon.

MF: In the 1982 Israeli invasion, it was completely flattened. I have pictures of my auntie smiling into the camera while she’s trying to find stuff in the rubble of her house. Then you had the camp wars, involving the Syrians. Everything that played out in Lebanon played out in the camps as well. The Palestinians were used for various purposes.

DW: What do you think lay behind your father’s obsession with filming?

MF: I’ve always wondered about that. My father was the youngest boy in a family of nine or ten. He was one of the youngest, in his mid-20s in the 1970s. He loved movies, he loved heist films, action films, he loved to dress like John Travolta.

Subconsciously, I think he felt a need to keep a record of our lives. There was always this obsession in my family. And everyone in Ain El Hel-weh knows about it. When I’m there, I hear it all the time. “You’re just like your dad.” I’m not sure whether it’s meant as a compliment or not…. 

DW: The three central figures, your grandfather, your uncle Said, and your friend, Abu Iyad, emerge very strongly as human characters, as personalities. Is your grandfather still persevering?

MF: He’s sort of mellowed over the years, but I think there’s no way he would leave the camp. I think it’s hard for any of us to imagine what a tormenting experience it must have been to be uprooted like that, in 1948. My granddad was 16. They had to leave everything. Homes, land, possessions. You sense that when you sit with some of the older people. Somehow they’ve never grown, emotionally they’re frozen.

DW: What about your uncle Said and his brother Jamal, that seems another trauma?

MF: His whole history, his sacrifices have made him feel, “Hang on, I’m genuinely interested in going all the way, and everywhere I look, I see leaders and people chickening out. My god, I’ve given everything for this. I dropped out of school, because I really believe in this, and yet no one is actually doing it. Where do I go from here?” That’s essentially how I see it….

DW: That comes across. And that’s the question of questions.

MF: The camp’s our home, but it’s not. It’s on loan. For Abu Iyad, it didn’t work out for him in Athens or anywhere else, but I don’t know if it could. I have friends who have been in Belgium for five, six years, but they don’t know how to function. They didn’t even know how to function outside of the camp in Lebanon, where they spoke the same language, had the same culture.

One of my cousins had a canary. He trained it to leave the cage, he gradually expanded its space, so the bird could fly in the living room, making sure that the windows were closed. During the 2006 war, the door to the balcony was open, and my cousin came in and saw the bird on the balcony, and he said, “Come back, come back.” The bird hesitated, and then it flew out. He said that most likely it would die, because the expansion of space was just too overwhelming. I’ve always thought of this as a metaphor for what happens when you leave that 1-square-kilometer space.

Many a time, Abu Iyad and I would drive out to the river, maybe a half-hour away, and when we were coming back through the check-point, there was a sense of relief at being back in the camp. There’s also a sense of shame, Lebanese people look at you differently. “Oh, you’re a refugee from one of those camps.” You’re a Palestinian refugee, all you have is this blue ID. You’re not part of Lebanese society, you can’t work. Except perhaps in the black market, or for NGOs.
PC: There are certain jobs you can do, but many things are barred to you. If you’re a Palestinian, you can’t be part of the Lebanese political landscape.

DW: What other films would you two like to make?

PC: We have a fiction in mind, following on from Abu Iyad’s story. It’s the story of these guys who leave the camp and end up in Greece. So they’re dealing both with being refugees in Europe and the social collapse in Greece. It’s kind of a double whammy. You’re going to go from one situation of hopelessness to another. What do you do?

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

http://www.wsws.org