

2013 Toronto International Film Festival

Interview with Hany Abu-Assad, director of *Omar*

By David Walsh
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David Walsh spoke to Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad, director of Omar, at the recent Toronto International Film Festival.

David Walsh: I write for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Hany Abu-Assad: Yes, I know it. What it does is good.

DW: Can you tell me what the significance of the Israeli-built wall is in *Omar*? I was under the general impression that it divided Palestinian from Israeli areas, but this is obviously not true.

HA-A: No, the Israelis are creating ghettos within the Palestinian areas. They are dividing cities in the middle, they are dividing refugee camps and villages. Suddenly, Palestinians are separated from their friends and family. This is why I deliberately didn't make clear which side of the wall the characters are on, because there is no difference.

DW: The personal situation for these characters seems almost impossible, living under these incredible external pressures of occupation, war, repression, poverty. What would you like an audience member to conclude about their behavior?

HA-A: Over the last 20 years or so, especially since September 11, I've always felt I should do something about trust. The whole capitalist system is trying to create mistrust among people, to set them against each other. Because when you don't trust each other, you think you need people to protect you, you need cameras to protect you, you need weapons to protect you.

I thought, I don't want to give a lecture. How can I find a simple, vivid story that shows that without trust among human beings there is no friendship, no love, no society? In love, when you start to doubt, the love will die. I have experienced this in the past. I killed the love between myself and another person. You want signs from her, you demand more and you kill it.

DW: I understand, but when you get into more complicated, geopolitical territory, however, trust also has a social and political content. For example, if I say I don't

trust the Palestinian Authority or the Egyptian government, that's a different matter, it seems to me. Because, while trust is important, distrust is also important. I think in regard to the history of the Palestinian people, I can see why trust is such a big question ... because they have been betrayed by everybody.

HA-A: Yes, the trust between Rami [the Israeli policeman] and Omar is completely different than the trust between Omar and Nadia, and his friends. There is a completely different level of trust between you and the people above you in society, who have different interests, than among the people themselves. All of Nadia's friends stop trusting each other because the bigger, influential power manipulates them. When Omar trusts Rami for a moment, he comes back and tells Omar, "You are screwed for the rest of your life, you have to work for us."

The situation is complicated. Today you have so much ... let's call it greed for simplicity's sake. There are people who can't get enough, even though they are full. And there's us, who want to lead normal, decent lives, be happy and spend our time doing something other than consuming. There's a complete difference of interests between us and these greedy ones, whose only goal is how they can become richer and richer.

DW: Can you speak a little about Amjad?

HA-A: If you take the three types in the film. There's Omar, who's the brave one. And Tarek is adventurous. Amjad is the opportunist. The adventurer will start the war, the brave one will do the fighting and the one who reaps the spoils is the opportunist.

We have a negative view of Amjad, but I don't like to dehumanize any characters, even the Israeli policeman. He's a human being too. This doesn't mean you are forgiven. I think if you are a human being, your crimes are even worse. How could he, the policeman, do this to Omar, when he has his own kid he cares about, who's in school? You make your characters human, you show them to an

audience who experiences their situation, but their deeds are still ugly. Circumstances made them ...

DW: ... But to understand people is not to excuse them.

HA-A: Exactly.

DW: Is it easier or more difficult in the Middle East at the moment to be an artist who tells the truth?

HA-A: It's more difficult. Or perhaps it's the case in the whole world. Capitalism is becoming more and more aggressive. They are controlling opinions, including opinions about art—who's in and who's out. This is the case even in the alternative cinema, where there were always movements in the past saying [to filmmakers of a certain type], "To hell with you, you are corrupt, you are helping impose the vision of the powerful, you are not faithful to your own cause," and they created something in the margins.

Capitalism has even started to control those margins. When you become important, when you have 10 readers [laughs] ... as soon as you become influential, they will buy you and corrupt you. I feel so many artists around me, from the West and from the East, gradually becoming corrupt.

Artists apparently need to consume things. For some reason, they need to live in luxury. I am outside this to a certain extent. But if I don't compromise, I will not have enough money to eat. I don't have a big house, but still I need to pay the bills, I need this and that. I am 51 and I am worrying about how I can survive another three months, for example, with the money I have. I need more work. If I want to make bold movies, honest movies, I know no one wants to ...

I am so depressed now. Everyone is demanding that I make more "uplifting" stories. "You are an incredible filmmaker," they tell me, "but why don't you make more cheerful films?"

And, I swear, I might have to do it the next time. I have to survive. The next film might be lighter. I will do a dark comedy. *Omar* is not going to make money.

DW: But the opposite is also true. There are great difficulties, but there are big social movements coming. Look at the millions in the streets in Egypt this summer. It's a transitional movement. The old is discredited, parties, unions, artists too, but the new allegiances have not emerged yet. There is not yet a new, big audience. It's difficult. But I would not be pessimistic. There's a huge audience coming. These films will endure, they mean something to people. That's the only thing that counts. They will find their audience, maybe not this year.

HA-A: I hope you are right. We need people like you, giving hope.

DW: What about the threat of war against Syria?

HA-A: It's not coming, in my opinion. The US wants a

war, but they won't be able to do it. Not just because of the opposition of the people, but there is a real danger now that this war might escalate into something much bigger than they can control. The outcome might not be in the favor of the US. This is why they are very nervous. The army is telling them, this is not Iraq, where we lost, but it was controllable. Libya was controllable. But Syria might turn into something global, with Russia, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia.

DW: I think perhaps you underestimate the crisis of American imperialism. They are driven to war by powerful contradictions. On that score, I think you are being naïve.

HA-A: In the beginning, I had illusions in Barack Obama ... Not now. When there was the financial crisis, Obama could have solved it by making "real change," like his slogan, but instead he invested billions, no, trillions, in the same corrupt system. And this is money that could solve the problems of the whole world economy!

DW: Why do you make films?

HA-A: Of course, there is the element of doing this because it's the only thing you can do to survive, it's your profession, you need the money. But this is banal. Let's not speak about that. I think my artistic motivation is to be a witness to history. One hundred years from now, people will still look back on movies that are not just great stories, but also showed what happened in that period of time. To witness history, from my point of view. History is something we all write together.

DW: This is why your movies are interesting, and there are so many movies that are not interesting. Does art change the world?

HA-A: No, I wish it did! The most influential power now is money. And, let's say, capitalism. They are changing everything. Well, art might be the seed that will create hope and change. We might be that. So, yes and no. Films I saw when I was young taught me about my own power. They changed my life. But in terms of global change ... We are the small seeds whose results you might see in 20 years.

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