



DEUX BEAUX GARCONS & EN COMPAGNIE DES LAMAS
PRESENT

TESTIMONY

Original Title: EDUT

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شهادة

فيلم لشلومي القباص

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עדות

סרט של שלומי אלקבץ

Directed by
SHLOMI ELKABETZ

2011 · ISRAEL · FICTION-DOCUMENTARY · 80 MIN · COLOUR

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SYNOPSIS

Palestinian testimonies collected after the second Intifada revealed a harsh daily life reality that, for Israelis, had always belonged to the "others" - the Palestinians - and hence was denied.

A few years later, trespassing what had been taboo until then, Israeli officers who served during the Intifada told of their memories. Memories of violence, of suffering, of humiliation.

The stories from both sides matched.

Against the backdrop of local empty landscapes, an Israeli officer remembers... a Palestinian civilian remembers as well. A journey into the collective memory of Palestine and Israel takes place.

SHLOMI ELKABETZ BIOGRAPHY

Born in South Israel in 1972, Shlomi Elkabetz spent seven years in New York acting in fringe theatre, writing and filming. In 2003, with his sister (actress Ronit Elkabetz) he began work on a cinematic trilogy about the individual, society and the state, seen through the eyes of a Maghrebi woman and her struggle for inner and external freedom. The first parts - "To Take a Wife" and "7 Days" - were presented in festivals worldwide (including Critics' Week in Venice and Cannes) and released internationally. The third and final part - "The State" - is currently in production. Also active as a television director, Elkabetz teaches film studies at the Sapir Film School and in Tel Aviv.

SHLOMI ELKABETZ FILMOGRAPHY

- 2004 **"TO TAKE A WIFE"**
("Ve lakchta lecha isha")
- 2008 **"7 DAYS"** ("Shivha")
- 2010 **"THE QUINN-TUPLETS"**
("Reviyat Ran") 2nd season

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

To act between fiction and documentary is like acting between denial and acknowledgement.

I am not seeking forgiveness or redemption by recounting these stories... I want only to assume responsibility for the acts I have committed, witnessed and heard of.

I wanted to shoot this country the way Jewish people imagined it, and the way Palestinians remember it. To grant the same importance to man and to the nature, the country, that surrounds him. To create the mysticism of occupation rather than the image of it. To turn the viewer into a witness. To turn the language of the occupier - my language, Hebrew - into his own nightmare. To unite the narratives. To accept and step out of denial. To witness, testify and memorize. To file and preserve these testimonies in a joint Palestinian-Israeli archive for the future, for forthcoming generations, as a condition of reconciliation.

A CONVERSATION WITH SHLOMI ELKABETZ

conducted by Osnat Trabelsi

Why did you choose to make a hybrid film, to work between documentary and fiction?

I act between fiction and documentary, as between denial and acknowledgment.

We tend to accept documentaries as 'Truth' and fiction as 'fiction' literally. In the first shot of the film, you see Ronit Elkabetz, a well-known Israeli actress, delivering the testimony of a Palestinian woman her age. The viewer understands that I'm not using the real witnesses to testify, but those who wronged them - if not directly as with some of the male cast, at least by being silent partners of the oppressor's policy. One of the Israeli actors relates his own memories from the time he served in the army in the occupied territories. He presents and represents his own story. It can be considered as pure documentation, but then again, I don't declare which of the three young actors he is.

You haven't chosen the worst, the most horrifying, testimonies, but those relating to day-to-day situations.

These stories have been heard all over the world for the past 20 years. There's even an Israeli documentary film, "Testimonies", from 1993, which shows testimonies of soldiers from the first Intifada. The stories are similar. In making TESTIMONY I did not try to shock the audience by revealing unknown events. I wanted to shock them with the form - a form

that leads the viewer to question the reality, question what is being said about this reality, and hopefully to act upon it.

Does the authenticity of the narrative depend on its form?

Using these testimonies only as a source of information is worthless: the information they convey has been known for decades. As a filmmaker, I have nothing to add, unless I manage to deliver them in a form that forces the audience to listen again, to look again. Then the entire experience is different. The difference is the point of view.

The gaze of those testifying makes the experience of watching the film very uncomfortable. Each testimony starts and ends with a direct look into the eyes of the viewers.

It was one of the hardest things to figure out: how to shoot the film. When I took the liberty of defining it as a documentary, my actors took the liberty of looking directly into my camera when they delivered their testimonies. They are looking at me and at the audience. Their gaze doesn't stop disturbing us. You can turn away, but when you look back, they're still staring at you. The only way to cope with it is to look back at them. The viewer becomes a witness. Eventually, the gaze can be a warning, but also a first step towards reconciliation.

You chose to shoot the testimonies against the backdrop of empty Israel-Palestine landscapes. We see the country as we've never seen it before. You created the mysticism of the occupation without showing checkpoints or barriers.

I wanted to shoot the country the way Palestinians remember it and the way Jewish people imagined it.

It was an intuitive process for me. At the beginning I was looking for places the eye and heart would yearn for. I was looking for the same empty land - "the land with no people for people with no land", as we are taught in our history lessons at school. I chose to show the perception of the country, its mysticism, rather than its realism.

In a way it's riskier to shoot the empty landscapes, not the checkpoint or the wall. What made you think it could work?

I am infatuated by the beauty of the country. I thought that if I could succeed in showing the beauty of "The Promised Land", "The Land of Milk and Honey", the place Moses was allowed to see but not to enter, I would create the yearning for it. But then, I deflate the yearning and the beauty by the content of the testimonies.

You say: to "deliver" testimonies, not "to testify"?

Yes. In the donkey story, the actor says: "I did not tell anyone what happened." When testifying, one delivers one's soul. There's a huge difficulty to overcome. It's not simple,

not for the victim and not for the victimizer. That's why I insist on "delivering".

The testimonies are delivered in Hebrew. In other words, you directed stories from victims in the language of the oppressor. Why?

I don't pretend to unroll the Palestinian narrative, or the Israeli for that matter. I try to create one space, one narrative for both people who share history and land. The authenticity is of story and landscape, not of national definitions. If there will one day be a bi-national state here, we will have to invent it from scratch. This is why I stripped the characters of all national features or iconography. It creates the feeling of a single narrative that could have been told by one soldier or one Palestinian. So it can be one long confession or one long accusation. I chose Hebrew because it obliges the Israelis to listen again to what they think they have heard enough by now. Exactly like my process regarding the film. If I had separated and predefined the characters, I think I would have missed the point.

Then why did you end the film with an Arabic song?

One thing is untranslatable: music. You can't occupy it. You could translate the lyrics into any other language - it will always remain an Arabic song. It is what it is: undeniable, existing. This is the real soundtrack of the place I come from: the Middle East. The music of a place is the most authentic testimony to its essence.

Maybe for Israelis it's easier to distinguish between Palestinians and Israelis but what do you expect in the rest of the world?

Of course, Israelis will recognize the actors as Israelis, or to be precise, as Israeli-Arabic-Jews. The Palestinians will recognize them as Israelis with no differentiation between Arabic Jews or European Jews. For the rest of the world, I think we all look alike, so I'd like the film to feel like a voyage through a single Middle Eastern consciousness.

Working with Israeli actors on solid character is obvious, as they have real solid memories, but how was it for them to work on the Palestinian characters?

During the casting process, I was interested in one thing: how the actor relates to the story he is telling. I wasn't looking for the pain caused by humiliation, but for its long-term consequences. When I recognized this in an actor, I gave him the part.

Did you serve in the army?

Yes, and part of my service I did in Gaza jail on the beach. I served in Gaza for a few months, but I had completely repressed it, forgotten about it. The Israeli street enables that. My role was to watch the jail fence from a tower. I watched the whole compound. On my left was the beautiful Gaza beach, on my right the city of Gaza and in front of me the jail. Under my tower was a cement yard where the Palestinian prisoners were held, standing handcuffed and blindfolded for hours... for days. I didn't remember any of it;

it was erased from my memory. I didn't make the film because of my military service. During the shoot someone asked me if I'd had the same experience as the soldiers in the film, and I said: "No". But then while working I had a surprising recollection of it. Today I can draw the jail from memory, the way I saw it from the tower.

What led you to make the film?

It was Ofer Ein Gal, the scriptwriter, who brought a folder with the testimonies. Once we read them, I knew I wouldn't be able to leave them in the drawer, we knew we had to find a new way to tell them. Together, we read more than five years' worth of testimonies. Hundreds of testimonies collected by human rights organizations. For each one in the film, there are more than fifty we left out.

Why didn't you include testimonies given by Israeli people who lived through terror attacks?

The purpose of the film is not to create a balance between the two peoples but to share an experience.

But doesn't that include the experience of the Israelis?

As I said, I'm not trying to make a balance. The film attempts a single narrative uniting both sides. There used to be a bigger dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian citizens. Since the wall was built, the contact has been critically cut off.

Now, the only dialogue, awful as it is, is when Israeli soldiers meet Palestinian civilians. I cannot call suicide bombers and missiles in Sderot, or the Israeli Air Force bombing Palestinian cities a “dialogue”. For now, these testimonies are the only narrative we share. This is where the people on both sides meet.

You chose the acclaimed portrait photographer David Adika to shoot the film...

I was looking for someone with the same cultural roots as me, with a similar experience of this country, someone who could bestow the face with its full importance and yet not ignore the importance of the landscape, which is a key player in this film. Adika could fulfill these wishes.

With him, I knew we could create the image of the “land with no people for a people with no land”. A No Man’s land, with no law and no borders, standing like a virgin, ready to be taken. Palestine, aka Palestina. We could then place the testifiers in this scenery, attach them to it with nothing to hold on to, just delivering their stories. Present absentees.

Why did you choose to shoot the film like this?

Empty landscape, a person talking to a camera, and blurred identity were the three ideas that guided me.

I wanted to shoot places that would look familiar but couldn’t be recognized. When you cannot name a place, you cannot claim

ownership. Eventually the owner of the land is the narrative. The joint narrative. The prominent eyes that are looking at you throughout the film oblige you to participate. The viewer becomes a witness. Blurred identity creates a new identity.

How did you choose the testimonies?

It was an investigation. I was looking for the details that could assemble a complete picture, an emotional one. Since I didn’t have a narrative to work with, like in my other films, I had to find the stories that completed each other and created an emotional narrative.

Are you a political activist? Is there any connection between this film and your previous work?

I am not an activist: this is my first “cry”. My first act.

In my previous work, I commented on the place of the Arab Maghreb Jews who live in Israel, and their relations with the European Jewish hegemony. In Israel, it is very recent that we can speak up about the European Jewish hegemony, which tried to erase Arab identity and culture. My parents were born in Morocco. In Israel their cultural roots became the enemy’s.

There is a connection: it’s the attempt to relate the inside story of people who were overlooked over the years. The link between the work is straight and clear, redefinition of identity or miss-identity.

How has the film been received in Israel?

It hasn't been released yet. So far I had only one screening, which caused a huge scandal that revolved not around the authenticity of the context but around freedom of expression and speech. The Minister of Culture tried to ban the film but the audience lived through a powerful experience.

What would you like to convey?

Why should I be privileged over my Palestinian counterpart? The jailer will always be jailed and liberator will gain freedom. It's a first step towards reconciliation.

A FEW WORDS FROM OFER EIN GAL – CO-WRITER

One of the strongest experiences for a person visiting Tel Aviv for the first time is the sensation of normal life that exists in the city: cosmopolitan, vibrant, good food, beautiful people, freedom... The gap between that which was adopted by media world-wide - religious fervour, constant war, aggressive, Fascist - and the reality is huge.

The script of TESTIMONY arose from this hedonist reality. A thick folder containing hundreds of testimonies was handed to me, and tore the thin fabric of my personal anomaly - the anomaly that allows you believe that an untroubled life in Tel Aviv can exist along with the unbearable reality of occupation 40 minutes away from the city centre.

The testimonies are not new. They have been over-exposed in all types of media. But eyes and ears have grown tired from listening and seeing, and prefer to skip over them, to make them transparent, non-existent.

The way TESTIMONY took is the way against the anomaly of life in Israel today - a life that chooses to avoid the "other", as if the problems of occupation belong to them only, as opposed to the way it should be looked at: as ours, them and us.

It's not an accusation against the Israeli public; lack of hope and a crisis of confidence have turned the Palestinian issue into a transparent one. And there the "monster of anomaly" continues to grow. We believe that if we keep the problem at arms' length it will go away or somehow resolve itself. Citizens who served as soldiers in the territories pushed their memories into a dark corner, and are now the soldiers of the "silencing army". TESTIMONY is an attempt to break down this wall.

It may be a first step in a dialogue that might occur by way of conversing, by taking responsibility for the deeds committed in the past 66 years.

CREW

Directed by

SHLOMI ELKABETZ

Screenplay

**SHLOMI ELKABETZ and
OFER EIN GAL**

DP

DAVID ADIKA

Editor

JOËLLE ALEXIS

Casting

YUVAL AHARONI

Producers

**SHLOMI ELKABETZ and
SANDRINE BRAUER**

Production

**DEUX BEAUX GARCONS
EN COMPAGNIE DES LAMAS**

With the participation of

**THE YEHOSHUA RABINOVICH TEL-
AVIV FILM FOUNDATION (CINEMA
PROJECT), NOGA COMMUNICATIONS
(CHANNEL 8), CENTRE NATIONAL DE
LA CINÉMATOGRAPHIE ET DE L'IMAGE
ANIMÉE (CNC - AFLE), WILD BUNCH**

CAST

RONIT ELKABETZ

MENASHE NOY

DIKLA

RAYMOND AMSALEM

ZOHAR LIBA

OFER HAYUN

ALBERT ILUZ

ESTI ZACHEM

ROY ASSAF

RINAT MATATOV



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