Conversation with Annemarie Jacir
Recorded on 9th December in Brussels, Belgium
For “The Wall has ears; conversations for Palestine”
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“For The Wall has ears; conversations for Palestine” talks to Palestinian film director Annemarie Jacir a few days before the release of her latest film “When I Saw You” in Belgium. The film opens on 18th in cinema Flagey (more info here).

For more details about other cities and countries, visit the film's website here.

Frank Barat for “The Wall has ears”: We saw your film yesterday, « When I Saw You », which opens in Brussels on 18th December and we wanted to ask you how did you become interested in films, in making them?

Annemarie Jacir: I started by writing. I grew up in Saudi Arabia, so did not have a lot of film or cinema in my life until I was much older. I liked cinema but I approached things as a writer first. I moved to the USA, outside Los Angeles, was interested in cinema and started doing whatever jobs I could find in the industry. Production assistant, set painter, continuity, any jobs I could get, really. I did that for a couple of years. Trying to learn the craft. Working on fiction, on documentaries. I did not know what I wanted to do, but was interested in the form, of cinema. And I hated being in LA and I hated what LA produced in terms of films. It was not what I was interested in. After a while, feeling that I was not learning anything, I decided to study film in New York. I was between Palestine and New York, back and forth, working, editing, shooting things writing. Loads of different things before I really discovering that I really liked directing and writing. Working with actors a big part of the process. For me it's the most interesting part.

FB: Who influenced you?

AJ: I can't give you a specific name as there are so many. But independent films, European cinema spoke to me much more. The films that stayed with me were old italian films, french cinema, iranian cinema. This was what I was most interested in.

FB: Your last two films “Salt of this sea” and “When I Saw You” are both highly political. So for you, is everything political?

AJ: I always get asked by press, by other filmmakers and especially European journalists: Do you think you can do something not political, not about Palestine? Yes, of course, I can do that. I can make a science fiction movie tomorrow. But we live in this world, and this is what's happening. I do think there is a real effort made to separate artists from politics. They say Art should not be about politics, you should be above that. No, I do not agree with that at all. We are part of our societies. We live within them. Look, it's difficult to make independent cinema, but it's also a privilege. You are working with people, you are telling a story, have an audience, so for me, you have duty to be part of the world around you. I don't feel I represent Palestine or the Palestinians, but at the same time, these stories come from real places, people, real experiences in life.

FB: The concept of return is very present in both of your films. For Palestinians, the concept of return is key. Talking about personal experiences, your own story, what about your family. Do you also have a story of exile in your life?
AJ: The majority of the Palestinians are refugees, have never seen Palestine. But my experience is different. I had what I call the privilege of Palestine. All my life I was going back and forth. My grandparents, aunts and uncles lived in Bethlehem, so we were able to come in and out and we spent three or four months of the year in Palestine since I was a baby. So I have known Palestine all my life and it's the one place that has always been constant. For me, it's home. Later, I was denied entry and found myself in Jordan five years ago. I suddenly found myself in the position of most Palestinians. I was looking at Palestine from across the border and could no longer reach there. I had the keys of my apartment, I could not get back, my partner was on the other side, we could not reach each other. It's like being a modern day refugee. Suddenly everything was just taken from me, like that. That's when the idea of “When I Saw You” came about. I found myself stuck in Jordan and very depressed. Trying to figure out what I could do with this depression. I found the story of Tarek, a boy with hope, that's what I needed to focus on. When I did “Salt of this Sea”, which is much about the present day reality. A woman trying to deal with anger that she feels, a very politicized person. A lot of people tell me that “Salt of the sea” is a very angry film and this one is very hopeful. So is that your mood? It's actually the opposite, I was more depressed when I made “When I Saw You” maybe that's why I went towards another mood for it.

FB: You were denied entry to Palestine in 2008. Few people know that the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian People is still going on today. It's not like 47-48 or 67, it's a slow motion one, but it's still happening, right?

AJ: Absolutely. It's alive today. This is the common experience of Palestine. It's not just the Nakba. It's a constant Nakba. It's happening all the time. It never stopped. It's not something of the past. Houses are still demolished today, people are being ethnically cleansed today. Before moving on from there, this basic thing should be recognized. People are asking us to move on, forget the past. It's not the past, it's now. That's something that a lot of people forget also or do not realise.

FB: The acknowledgement part is key, for sure. Look at Australia. The aboriginals are still asking for reparations, but the first thing they needed was for the government to say sorry. Governments after governments refused to do so, but when Kevin Rudd was elected he did apologise, a few months later, to the “stolen generation”. This is a first, important step. So far, this has not been done when it comes to Palestine. The zionist narrative is so strong, that people still think people left of their own accords in 48.

AJ: Yes, it's crazy but people still think that. Even when I travel with this film, Mahmoud the boy who plays Tarek in the film, who lives in a refugee camp, who has never seen Palestine, a child of refugees, when I say that to people, they are very surprised. Why do you call him a refugee? I see that disconnect between what people know of as refugees and the reality. Here is a child who is a refugee. I do not know what it is. They do not realise that the camps are still there, have been there for more than 60 years? Do they think they went away? I don't know, it's strange.

FB: In the film, there are shots when you see the protagonist looking at the landscape, seeing Palestine, yearning to go back, for the homeland. It would seem logical for everyone, if we replaced the Palestinians by Europeans, that if you leave your house during a war, you have a right to go back to it. So why don't people get this when it comes to Palestine? Why is it different?

AJ: It's the main issue. The core issue. The return. It's as simple as that. Tarek asks this very logical question:” If you walked, why can't you walk back”. You can see Palestine from Jordan, you can see cities, recognise towns, everything. It's that stupidly close. The right of return is the central issue and it's not complicated. That's also why the film is from the point of view of a child. It's that simple. He wants to come back to his house. That's the place he knows. I wanted to keep him like
that. He is the only one in the film who remains straightforward in that goal. The media, governments and other interest groups are playing a part in making this issue seems complicated, and that it's so many other things. In reality, the Palestinians are the only refugees who have not been able to return.

FB: The fact that the film is from the point of view of Tarek, a kid, makes things look straightforward. We walked away, let's walk back. The borders at the time where not as militarized as now. Nowadays crossing by foot is near impossible. But do you think that at the time, it might have been possible to actually do it? If it was that simple at the time, do you think that in a way, the fedayen, maybe wanting to do something much bigger, over complicated things?

AJ: The idea of the fedayen was first to say that they were are not victims anymore, neither refugees. Tarek refuses to be a refugee, that's the main thing about him. It makes no sense to him so he rejects it. The film was a way for me to both critique as well as pay homage to that movement. The fedayen. They did not accept to be victims anymore. Like Tarek, who rejects being a refugee. This movement was incredible for many reasons. They took their fate in their own hands. We will do this. At the same time, Tarek is my way to criticize them, to ask the basic questions. He is not politicized but is around a political atmosphere. He does not understand who the fedayen are. He thinks they are like him. They do not want to stay in a refugee camp, they are going back. That's all he cares about. But as we are watching the story in 2013, which is key. I set up the film in 1967 and never go beyond that. It does not go into all the mess that happened afterwards. We now know how off track things went. We know how the leadership screwed up and how corrupted many people became, great leaders and thinkers who were killed, weak leaders left to live, etc. Tarek is a way for me to ask that generation a question: Why they did not stay like Tarek? Because they could have. A whole movement could have because it was that simple. So why didn't they? Tarek is the hero because he takes action, he doesn’t go off track. The last word in the film, for example is “wait”. That's the word that Tarek hates. That's why he left the refugee camp and that's why at the end he moves beyond the fedayen. We now know the story, we still have not returned.

FB: The “wait” and the end of the film, can apply to today, right? Nowadays it's the Palestinian Authority that keeps saying “wait” to the Palestinian People. So what about today? Can the Palestinian People take matters into it's own hand? When you visit Ramallah, you often feel like the occupation has grown into people, that despite them, it's a fait accompli and that they have to live with it. Live the best they can. Make the most out of it. The spirit of the fedayen has left them. I'm not criticising them, that's something I can understand of course. But how to change this?

AJ: Of course the point is that this directly applies to the Palestinian Authority and how they failed. But don’t forget the Palestinians are not strangers to resisting authority. We’ve been doing that for a long time and will continue to. In the film, the second song that is sung, when Tarek starts to dance, is a very well known resistance song against the British occupation in the 30s. These guys, in the 60s, refer to another revolution, uprising. Like now they refer to the 60s. It's a constant process. When I started writing the script it was before all the Arab revolutions started happening. I did not do a film set in the 60s to be nostalgic. I made it to critique it, but also to take something positive about this period, this hopefulness. To take this sense of resistance and action. The way that Tarek takes action. No matter what anybody around him says. We did not know what was going to happen in the arab world, no one had any idea. But we were all in our own ways, everybody in a different way, was looking for a break, for a change. I was looking for it as an artist and I found my way to do it was through this film. Some people went down to the streets. Something had to break, and it did. And this is an ongoing thing. It's still going on. It's not over. Some people say that the arab spring has failed. It did not fail at all. It did not fail no matter what happens. The point is, people understood they could do something to change their lives. This is the most important feeling to create and have people believe and feel. The Arab world will never be the same again. But you're
right, some people in Ramallah, especially our leadership, are perfectly happy not talking about the right of return, because they think they have it. Some of them are living in their towns and villages. Our leadership has let us down, that's very clear. It's completely out of synch and out of touch with its people. The ones building shopping malls in Ramallah, are out of it. Don't represent us.

FB: Don't you find it very hypocritical for Westerners to ask the Palestinians, or the Arabs, to revolt? What about us? Where is our revolution? When are we going to rise up against our corrupt governments?

AJ: I lived in New York for about six years and kept hearing New Yorkers ask me, “so what's the solution?” I believe in One State for all its people. But the response from them was always that I was too idealistic and such an idea could never be possible. So why do they accept it, that they live in a city, full of different kind of people, ethnicities, religions, that's ok for them, they can do it. But it's not for us. For them we “brown people” could not do that. That's crazy to think that we could live together even though that's the history of Palestine and that's always been what Palestine was before occupation and colonialism. We are a mixed, multi cultural, multi religious society. We are a Mediterranean country, all the mediterranean countries are mixed. It's the most mixed region in the world. But people say that, without thinking about how hypocritical it sounds. Are they more enlightened? Are we animals? I don't know where it's coming from, what's the background?

FB: So what's next for you?

AJ: Loads of things. I am writing a new script. Doing a project in Jordan with Syrian refugees. Another film project of which I am script doctoring. I make a living writing and editing freelance. I teach. Loads of things at the same time.