Ciné-Sud Promotion presents

tiff. toronto international film festival
OFFICIAL SELECTION 2009

Every Day is a Holiday

a film by Dima El-Horr

Synopsis

Three women are riding in the same bus through today's Lebanon for a day's journey towards the same destination: the men's prison. The first woman is visiting her husband, in jail since their wedding day. The second has one single goal in mind: to have her husband, who is serving a long sentence, sign the divorce papers that will finally free her. The third is traveling unwillingly, with fear in her stomach: she is secretly carrying in her bag the weapon her husband, one of the prison guards, forgot at home.

A stray bullet throws the journey off track. Lost in the middle of nowhere, the women become prey to their anxieties and obsessions. As the land around them becomes more and more arid, they hear rumors of massacres and throngs of refugees… And yet they go on, pushing further into what eventually turns into an interior journey, where individual life and collective memory blend and blur into one another. Is this a dream, a nightmare, a fantasy or each woman's own reality?

An interview with the filmmaker

After watching your film, one has the lingering impression that Lebanon is the victim of a curse and that the terrible events that have beset the country are unavoidable. Lebanon is a democratic, multi-denominational country whose history, whose right to a peaceful existence, have in a sense been stolen. Your female characters express this idea very strongly. Do you think of this as a political film?

The story of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) is never told, because there never was any dialogue between the various warring factions. There never was a clear explanation for what happened during the war, why the war started and why it ended. Unlike what happened in other countries, there was no Truth and Reconciliation Commission, no forgiveness. Nothing was ever settled, and the Lebanese people are asked to simply forget. The people of Lebanon live in an abstracted version of reality.

Every Day is a Holiday **is a very female-centered film, where men are almost absent. And when they appear, it is only through the portraits of "disappeared" people or as threats…**

Toni Morrison writes: "thus the masculine genes decide: from Odysseus to today, men are programmed to leave home and travel." Men leave, make war and die. And women are condemned, as it were, to live among their ghosts, who hover in every corner of this small country. The dead return, they reappear in their dreams and their nightmares and always find a way of existing within them.

Three women, three generations, different nationalities, an almost common language (French)… What brings these women together and what differentiates them?

Two of my characters are Lebanese and the third is Palestinian. Nothing in particular determines their religion. Why should anything? Lebanese society is just so, a mosaic of backgrounds and religions, a diaspora scattered on a global scale and more numerous than the population of the country, thus creating constant back and forth movements between cultures. This explains, for instance, why the youngest of the three women was born and lived all her life in Africa and therefore does not speak Arabic. There are essentially three languages spoken in Lebanon today: Arabic of course; French, the language taught during the French Mandate and still used by the elite; and English, the language of business. Personally, I am used to it. Like many others, I dream in Arabic, speak in French and write in English!

What is the reason for the characters' anonymity and distance? Why do we know so little about their life, their religion and their individual history?

When you think about it, it's very realistic. When you find yourself in a situation both tragic and collective, you don't introduce yourself. There is no time for formalities. And yet the people around you exist, with their personalities and identities. When the bus driver dies, chaos ensues and the characters suddenly become prey to the random events that spring up on the road and progressively crush their personalities and individual

desires. The personal starts to blend with the collective; the intimate merges with the political.

This atmosphere of menace, the bombardments, the refugees, the men's prison… Do these details epitomize and crystallize the tragedy that has befallen Lebanon in the last 35 years?

Despite the end of the civil war in 1990, the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the Lebanese territory in 2000 and the departure of the Syrian army in 2005, nothing much has changed in Lebanon. People live in a constantly menaced bubble, with the idea that catastrophe is looming and will fall upon them any minute. Danger can strike at any time, and they know there is no way out. It is this state of permanent foreboding that I wanted to explore, through the omnipresent threat of a war that is never shown, but only suggested by the rumors of massacres, the muffled sounds of explosions, the fleeing refugees… However, the characters themselves do not feel threatened, because they have absorbed this atmosphere of apprehension in their lives. Their proximity with death shapes their unconscious, but without necessarily affecting their actions.

The events of the film take place during one day where chance seems to play an important role.

"Life is short, but the day is long," said Goëthe.

It is an exhausting and peculiar day in the short life of these three women. The film focuses on the details of this long journey during which dreams and nightmares coexist, where the fantastic and the real come together on endless roads. Chance plays an essential role in the film. Three women, who were in no way destined to meet, take the same bus. It is a chance meeting, a happenstance of life, like the stray bullet that turns their journey into chaos. In Lebanon, life, like death, is governed by chance. For a Lebanese person, remaining alive is ultimately a result of chance.

The film presents women who want to rebuild their lives. The idea is very powerful: always build, even if it will be destroyed the next day. Never give up. This bus and its female passengers, these three women in particular, you yourself… are women more powerful vectors of this particular energy?

Independently of the context, the story is about women who want to regain control of their lives, who dream about love, sensuality, and calm, who want to be fulfilled, despite the constant conflicts. They hardly dare to sing, laugh, talk about themselves, their desires or their suffering, but therein lies the challenge. And I believe that women are tougher and braver about this. But I don't have a feminist activist agenda for all that, and above all I'm not trying to define "the" Lebanese woman.

Though ostensibly very serious, the film is steeped in the absurd. From the stray bullet that sets off the women's wandering in the beginning, to the phone booth in the middle of nowhere, the succession of vehicles (a bus full of women going to the men's prison, a van filled with hens, a hearse…) and that surrealist dialogue between the characters played by Raïa Haïdar and Manal Khader when the truck driver abandons them: "I think my hen is dead! – Not mine…"

War gives rise to improbable situations. Of course, it causes many tragedies, but it also generates the unfamiliar and the implausible. For instance, the chicken van that you mention is both very realistic in that it represents commerce and life, but at the same time it is an incongruous *deus ex machina* device. Chance, or God, or fate – whatever you wish to call it – presents these women with symbolically loaded means of transportation. Everyone will make sense of them in his or her own way. A situation of conflict engenders precisely this type of ironic or ludicrous juxtapositions. Humor is a very powerful weapon of resistance.

Similarly, the power transmission lines act like Ariane's thread, leading the characters out of a labyrinth that is both real (the desert) and symbolic (the constant anxiety and sense of threat). Was that decision made while writing the script, or was it a way for you to appropriate this not so empty space after all?

The desert has as much importance as the main characters. It is an empty space, and at the same time a loaded space. It is a space where everything remains to be built, a virgin space where everyone can project his or her fantasies, hopes and dreams. It is a place that invites introspection. And it is, as well, a very cinematographic space. It is true that I've deliberately included these power lines in many frames, on the one hand because they are a link to culture and technology in the middle of the wild, but also because they function as a real and practical guide back to civilization.

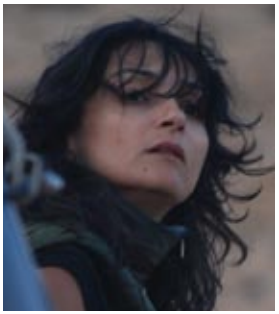
How did you cast your female characters? Hiam Abbass is one of the most famous actresses in the Middle East. Manal Khader co-wrote and acted in *Divine Intervention* (not to mention the fact that she is a famous journalist in Lebanon), and Raïa Haïdar is at the beginning of her career. Were these choices obvious to you from the beginning?

I was incredibly lucky to be able to work with these three women. I have not tried to be exhaustive, but I think that anyone can identify with one or the other of my characters, depending on one's own trajectory. Hiam Abbass brings fragility and courage to her character, Manal Khader is all strength and determination, and Raïa Haïdar, whose role was specially written for her, gives it a dreamy, slightly naïve quality.

You co-wrote the film with Rabih Mroué, a playwright known for the dark hum or of his plays about Lebanese history. Why this decision, and how did you come to conceive this very personal film?

This is my third screenwriting collaboration with Rabih Mroué. For us, writing this film meant no cheating. The authenticity of our work is rooted in the daily life of a country whose sociopolitical conjuncture is alienating. Our lived experience imposed itself as a necessity and a prerequisite to speak about the daily life of others. So it became necessary for us to confront our own reality.

This profoundly introspective experience allowed me to confront certain obsessions caused by years of war and to become aware of the violence of their impact. For this reason, I wanted essentially to speak about things very deeply buried within me, that constitute who I am. I have heard too many times that in order to live better it is preferable to forget. But we have to face the fact that reality is entirely different! Knowing how to accept confrontation is a path towards understanding. This pursuit is what guides the story and the characters of my film.



Dima El-Horr

Dima El-Horr earned an MFA in Filmmaking from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and currently teaches cinema at the Lebanese American University in Lebanon. She has directed three short films, which have been presented in numerous festivals including Clermont-Ferrand, San Francisco, Ann Arbor, Hong Kong and Brest. *Every Day is a Holiday* is her first full-length feature.

Rabih Mroué

Rabih Mroué belongs to a new generation of contemporary Lebanese artists whose innovative artistic work is internationally recognized.

An actor, author, stage director and screenwriter, Mroué began directing his own plays, performances and videos in 1990. His work has lately been in great demand in the European art world. A constant researcher, Mroué explores the definitions of theater in its relation to space, the form of performance and the audience. His minimalist work uses various media such as video, performance and theater.

He recently featured in Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *I want to see* with Catherine Deneuve.

Hiam Abbass

Raised in a Muslim family, Hiam Abbass grew up in a village of Northern Galilee, Israel. Though she had already been on stage by the age of 7, she soon turned to photography, which she studied in Haifa. She later joined the Palestinian company El-Hakawati, before working for a children's theater. In 1987, she appeared on film for the first time in *Wedding in Galilee*, by Michel Khleifi, in which she played the role of a woman raped by her husband.

After some time in London, Hiam Abbass settled in France at the end of the 1980s, playing roles for TV and the big screen, including a women's lib activist in *Living In Paradise*, and Gérard Depardieu's wife in *A Loving Father*. She gained notoriety for her role as a housewife and mother who discovers belly dancing in *Satin Rouge* by the Tunisian filmmaker Raja Amari (2002).

An emancipated sister of the *Syrian Bride*, this Madonna-faced actress and author of two short features has worked with the most renowned filmmakers of the Yousry Nasrallah to Amos Gitai (*Free zone*, 2005). A speaker of many languages with a thorough knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she was an advisor to Steven Spielberg during the high-risk shooting of *Munich* (2006). She recently featured in *Lemon Tree* by Eran Ricklis, *The Visitor* by Thomas McCarthy, *Amreeka* by Cherien Dabis, *Human Zoo* by Rie Rasmussen, *Persecution* by Patrice Chéreau, *The Limits of Control* by Jim Jarmusch and Julian Schnabel's next project *Miral*.

Manal Khader

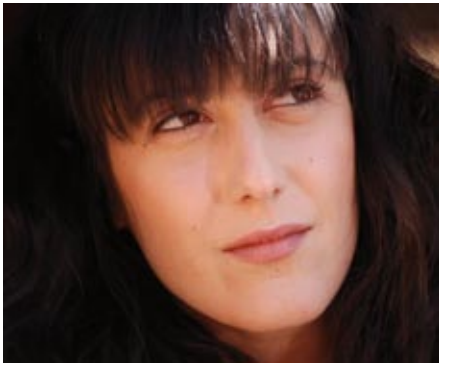
Born in Ramallah (Palestine) in 1968, Manal Khader now lives in Beirut, Lebanon.

She has been working as a journalist since 1982.

Manal Khader received accolades for her debut performance in the film industry as one of the screenwriters and actors of *Divine Intervention* (2002), a French/Palestinian co-production by the Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman.

Divine Intervention received both the Jury Prize and the Fipresci Award at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2002.

Manal Khader's turn as a "wonder-woman" breaking through an Israeli checkpoint in order to meet her lover left no one unmoved.



Raïa Haïdar

Born in 1978, Raia Haidar divides her time between Lebanon, France and Gambia.

Haidar earned a License in the Performing Arts from the Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris in 2002 and studied at the Atelier du Soir at Ecole de Chaillot from 1998 to 2000, and at the Atelier International Blanche Salant & Paul Weaver in Paris in 2002.

Haidar's career as an actress began with several Lebanese theater plays, as well as short films shot in various locations, including Beirut, Los Angeles and Paris.

She was also featured in:

Lettres d'Algérie, a TV movie directed by Azize Kabouche for TV5 (Paris, 2001)

Le Dernier Homme, full-length feature directed by Ghassan Salhab for ARTE (Beirut, 2006).

France/Lebanon/Germany – 2009 – 87'
35mm – 1,85 – Color – Dolby SRD

Cast

Hiam Abbass, Manal Khader, Raïa Haïdar,
Fadi Abi Samra, Berge Fazelian, Nabil Abou Mrad,
Karim Saleh, Sirvat Fazelian

Crew

Director: Dima El-Horr

Screenwriters: Dima El-Horr & Rabih Mroué

Dialogs: Rabih Mroué

Cinematographer: Dominique Gentil, AFC

Sound: Jean-Guy Véran, Thomas Robert,
Emmanuel Zouki

Editing: Jacques Comets

Music: Pierre Aviat

Producer: Thierry Lenouvel / Ciné-Sud Promotion
(France)

Coproducers: Sabine Sidawi Hamdan / Orjouane
Productions (Lebanon)

Hanneke Van Der Tas & Nicole Gerhards /
Nikovantastic Film (Germany)

Associate producer: Rémi Bonhomme

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Ciné Cinéma

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