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TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL 2023

BEALL PRODUCTIONS & LIGHTDOX PRESENT

BYE BYE TIBERIAS

باي باي طبريا

A FILM BY LINA SOUALEM

WITH HIAM ABBASS



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France, Palestine, Belgium, Qatar
2023 / 82min / DCP / COLOR / 1.85 / 5.1

Language : French, Palestinian Arabic

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SYNOPSIS

In her early twenties, Hiam Abbass left her native Palestinian village to follow her dream of becoming an actress in Europe, leaving behind her mother, grandmother, and seven sisters. Thirty years later, her filmmaker daughter Lina returns with her to the village and questions for the first time her mother's bold choices, her chosen exile and the way the women in their family influenced both their lives.

Set between past and present, *Bye Bye Tiberias* pieces together images of today, family footage from the nineties and historical archives to portray four generations of daring Palestinian women who keep their story and legacy alive through the strength of their bonds, despite exile, dispossession, and heartbreak.



INTERVIEW ——— WITH LINA SOUALEM



Your debut film *Their Algeria* was about the paternal side of your family, now with *Bye Bye Tiberias* it's about the maternal side of your family - when did you decide to do this?

Everything I experienced with my first film, *Their Algeria*, led me to *Bye Bye Tiberias*. Both films explore exile and transmission, how information gets passed down through generations. I'm half Algerian, half Palestinian, born in France. On the Palestinian side of my family, we survive through speaking; passing on our story is central. On the Algerian side, silence is preferred; we hide our truths deep within us. It's for this reason I had to make *Their Algeria* first. I needed to break this silence to reconcile us with our past and to reconstitute and reclaim our history. This time it felt like I was making a film as a young woman who has the experience and courage to tell a story about women in Palestine, a place which, at least politically, is a trickier subject to essay. The story of the colonization of Algeria by France tackled in *Their Algeria* at least is in the history books. It was harder to make *Bye Bye Tiberias* as it's an ongoing history, with Palestine and Palestinians still being erased today.

Was there a sense that after making a film with your dad, Zinedine Soualem, you had to make a film about your mother, Hiam Abbass?

My mum kept joking: when will you make a film about us? I didn't think I would ever have the courage and strength to tell intimate personal stories about the women of my family against the backdrop of this collective tale of an unrecognized Palestine. But the process of making the first film and the positive reception from audiences gave me the confidence to tackle my maternal family's story.

Can you explain the importance of transmission and exile in your work?

As a descendant of immigrants, I wanted to undertake the urgent yet daunting task of addressing the questions of colonial trauma, exile and transmission through creative writing, building imaginary territories and unpicking and documenting the indelible suffering of uprooted individuals. Transmission is an essential matter for families coming from diasporic backgrounds because it's more likely that the generation gap between the parents and children leads to a cultural gap, especially when some members of the family are born far from the customs and cultural traditions of their parent's or grandparent's home country. Reconnecting with your family history is not always a natural process. You face obstacles depending on how much you know the native language or how much the family is attached to traditional values. Exile has an emotional and cultural impact because the bonds with your native home are broken, you're uprooted, and you must find new roots. I feel people like me, born in Europe, tend to have difficulties finding our place in the West because we sense there's a collective memory that's not part of our daily life. It feels like something is missing, something in our history that is incomplete, as if we don't fully know or understand ourselves.

At the start of *Bye Bye Tiberias*, in the car journey around the lake, your mother tells you about all the bordering countries - can you tell us about Tiberias and how you feel being there?

When I'm in Tiberias, it's like being haunted by everything around me. Every time we travel around Tiberias Lake, we are reminded that "over there is Lebanon", "and right behind that mountain is Jordan", and "look, it's Syria". There's a nostalgia for a time when it was possible to travel easily between these places, which is impossible today. In 1948, when Palestinians were evicted from their homes,

some didn't cross the frontiers and stayed inside the borders of the new Israeli state – becoming involuntary citizens of Israel. 90% of Palestinian villages were destroyed in 1948, and very few were spared, as my mother's native village, Deir Hanna, was. The Palestinians residing here are surrounded by Arab countries, but they are forbidden to go to these neighbouring countries and are disconnected from the Arab world to which they belong.

Can you talk about how you use the personal stories of women in *Bye Bye Tiberias* to show how displacement affects them?

The personal journey of each of the four main women in the film takes us back to different times. We see how different types of exile affected them differently. My great-grandmother Um Ali and grandmother Nemat are from Tiberias and lived 30 km away from their native town, from which they were evicted in 1948. When they returned, they saw nothing they recognized, and their house no longer existed. No more Palestinians are living in Tiberias. Their memory has been wiped from the memory of the place. Another type of exile is the one my great-aunt Hosnieh experienced. In 1948 she became a Palestinian refugee in Syria and was not permitted to return to her native land, Tiberias, where she was born. My mother Hiam had yet another type of exile, as she voluntarily decided to leave her native Palestinian village. As she tells me, even if you leave by choice, you still leave something behind, creating a split or rupture that marks you for life. I was interested in digging profoundly and unfolding the layers in each of their stories while embracing their flaws and highlighting the strengths that shaped the women they became.

How was it filming your mother and aunts? Did it change your dynamic?

I found it difficult filming my mother. It required being conscious of your mother, not as a mother, but as a woman. Working together as director and subject changes the power dynamic of our relationship, which is not easy at first because you still are the daughter. It was easier with my aunts because I had more

distance from them. I also wanted to protect my mother, even though I wanted her to talk about difficult moments in her life, about a time when she was struggling to be the woman she wanted to be. That's why I added some fictional aspects to the film. For her to be more at ease, I ask her to act, this time playing a version of herself. She becomes the guide, opening revolving doors and stirs up intimate memories from the past. She pulls out the multiple threads in the journeys of the women in the family that have left a mark on her, allowing me to highlight the fundamental links between the personal and the collective memory. She is central to this story.

How long did you film for?

Filming commenced in 2018. So, it's been almost five years. The writing, shooting and editing were not linear in the sense that I would write, film, start editing and then go back to filming and rewriting. For example, some important sequences of the film – for which I wrote a text about the women of my family that my mother reads – are sequences that we wrote and shot almost three years into the production after having shot and edited twice. It also took time to collect the diverse sources of images: images from today, family archives from the 90s and historical archives. The writing never stops. Even in sound editing, I would keep on recording new voiceovers. It's a privilege to work like that because it's not always possible.

How do you relate to your mother's experiences and story?

Her story interests me because she never did things totally against the traditions and her parents. She tried to combine her desire to live life as the woman she wanted to be with the fact that she deeply respected and loved her parents. It was important to me to show that complexity in the film as I sometimes feel that the trajectories of Arab women in films have been told in a binary way. Like, it's either the one totally controlled by the traditions or the one disrupting everything. It's crucial for me to try to give back complexity to those who are often deprived of it in terms of representation in cinema.

How did the fact that your mother is an A-list celebrity affect the storytelling?

It was difficult at first because she's used to the camera but in a fictional context. So, it was hard for her to share with me as her daughter because she was very conscious of the camera. She also told me she felt ill at ease because she is used to sharing her emotions through the fictional characters she plays in productions. In this way, she built a protection mechanism around her personal life and intimate stories. She has never really spoken about her life, her parents and her path this way. Then, of course, the positive thing is that as she is used to film sets and the difficulties we can face while shooting, she was very supportive of me in the filming process, she was very patient, and she accepted to try different ideas.

There are two moments of reconstruction in the film. Why did you choose these two scenes?

I chose these two scenes because they are key moments from my mother's journey as a young woman. Both moments are linked to one of her sisters, as I realized through making the film that sometimes her sisters helped her. She wasn't always alone as a young lady wanting to take a different path. But the film is not a biography nor a portrait of her as an actress. These scenes represent key moments of my mother's journey as a Palestinian woman with a dream that she struggled to achieve. The film doesn't go beyond the moment that she left home.

What did your mother think of the film?

I showed her the film after we finished editing the picture before we started post-production to make sure she was okay with it. It was very frightening. She told me that she hadn't slept the night before seeing the film as she was anxious. But at the same time, she trusted me because she had seen my first film, and she knew that for me, filming intimacy is not filming intimate things. And now we feel that we are ready to both share it.

LINA SOUALEM

French-Palestinian-Algerian filmmaker and actress, born and based in Paris. After studying History and Political Science at La Sorbonne University, Lina Soualem worked as a programmer for the International Human Rights Film Festival in Buenos Aires. Soualem's debut feature documentary *Their Algeria* premiered in *Visions du Réel International Film Festival 2020*, and received the *First Film Award* in *CINEMED Montpellier International Festival of Mediterranean Film*, the *Best Arab Documentary Award* in *El Gouna Film Festival* and the *Best Documentary Award* at *Cinemanía Film Festival 2021*, among a dozen other awards. Lina Soualem also acted in three feature films directed by Hafsia Herzi, Hiam Abbass and Rayhana. She currently works as an author on fiction, documentaries and TV series.

FILMOGRAPHY

As director

- 2023 *Bye Bye Tiberias*, Documentary, 82min, Venice Days
- 2020 *Their Algeria*, Documentary, 72min, Visions du Réel

As writer

- 2021 *Oussekine*, Fiction series, directed by Antoine Chevrollier (Disney+)

As actress

- 2019 *You Deserve a lover*, by Hafsia Herzi (Cannes Films Festival / Critic's week)
- 2015 *I Still Hide to Smoke*, by Rayhana
- 2012 *Inheritance*, by Hiam Abbass





BYE BYE TIBERIAS

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CAST & CREW

Director
Screenplay

Lina Soualem
Lina Soualem and Nadine Naous,
in collaboration with Gladys Joujou

Cinematography
Additional images

Frida Marzouk
Thomas Brémond, Lina Soualem

Editing
Original Music
Sound recording
Sound editing
Sound mixing
Color grading

Gladys Joujou
Amine Bouhafa
Ludovic Escallier, Lina Soualem
Gervaise Demeure
Julie Tribout and Benoit Biral
Christophe Bousquet

Produced by
Coproduced by

Jean-Marie Nizan
Guillaume Malandrin, Ossama Bawardi

Production companies

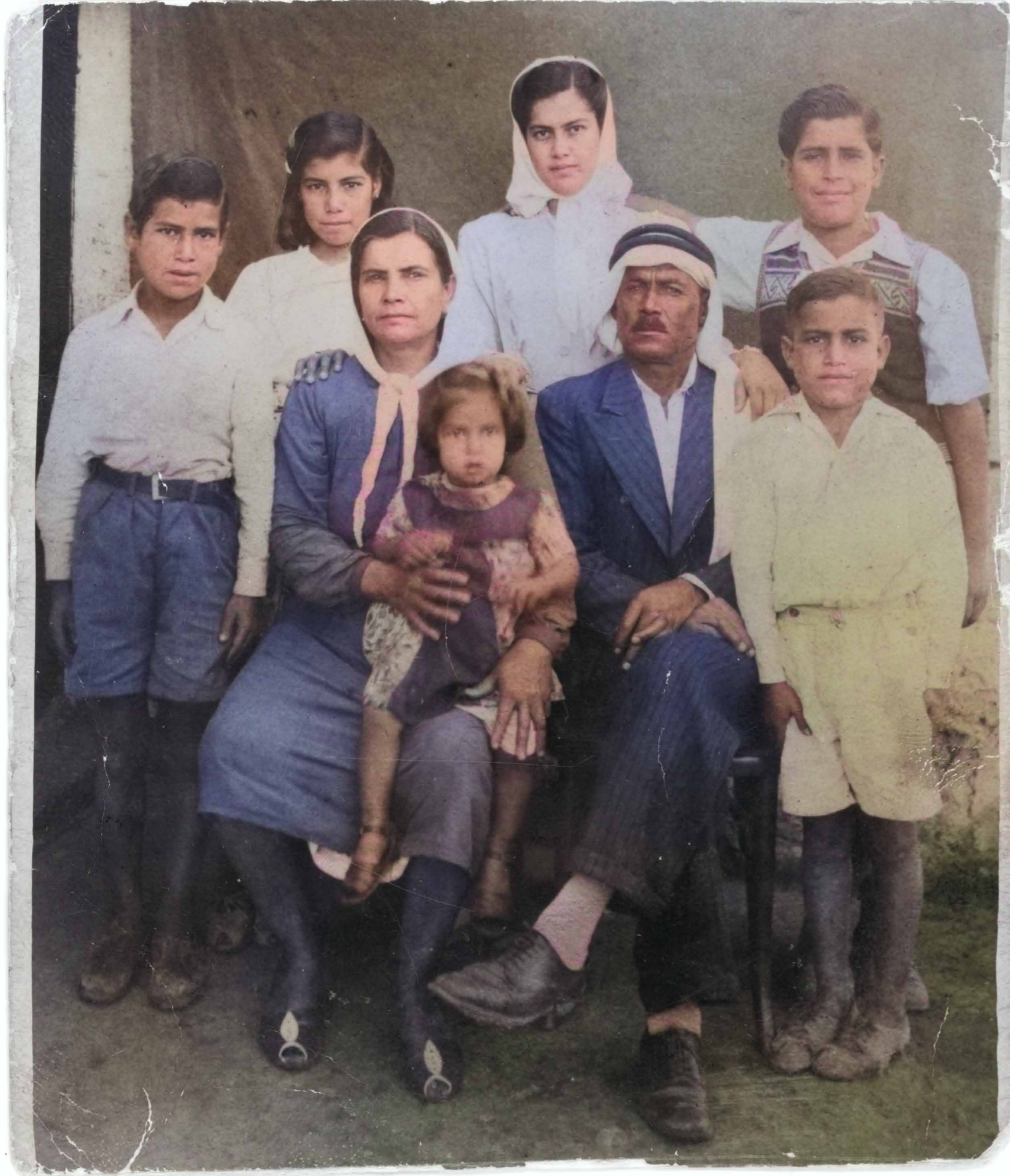
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