

CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An independent film club based in Chelmsford

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THEEB

Jordan 2015

Director: Naji Abu Nowar

Screenplay: Naji Abu Nowar

Cinematography: Wolfgang Thaler

Music : Jerry Lane

Cast: James Fox - Edward, Jacie Eid - Theeb, Hussein Salameh - Hussein, Hassan Mutlag Al-Maraiyaeh – The stranger.

Awards: BAFTA Outstanding debut by a British writer, director or producer and nominated for Academy Award Best Foreign Language Film.

Jordan has become something of a “go to” location for Western filmmakers whose stories take place in the Middle East or some other arid region, or even Mars. Its own film industry is still in a state of re-emergence and “Captain Abu Raed” 2007 was its first independent feature film for 50 years. **Theeb** has been billed as possibly the most authentic Jordanian movie made so far.

Whilst preparing to make the film Bassel Ghandour (script writer) and Naji Abu Nawar (director) spent the best part of a year living in Shakrieh village with a local community learning the Bedouin lifestyle. The nomadic element of this is now compromised by the legal requirement for children to attend school full time. Initially they wanted to have female characters, but they also wanted to have non-professional actors and they found there were no women willing to act in a film. No professional actors spoke the Bedouin dialect so that authentic aspect of the film is missing. Workshops took place to prepare the potential Bedouin actors who were then auditioned. Jacir Eid, who effectively carries the whole film is very quiet and shy but apparently became a different person on camera.

Nawar has called Theeb a Bedouin western. Some reviewers have seen it as a “corrective” to Lean’s classic Lawrence of Arabia, but the films have little in common apart from sharing the WWI time period and the presence of a British military man. Any film that focuses on the region’s nomads is going to come up against colonialism at least implicitly but in effect this is not what the film is about. It is an old fashioned adventure story and a coming of age tale.

It is set in the time of the Arab revolt when Arab nationalists sought independence from the Ottoman Turks. All events are seen through the eyes of Theeb, a Bedouin child who has seen nothing of the world except his desert community. At this time the traditional Bedouin culture of providing pilgrimage guides to Medina was being disrupted by a railway, nicknamed “The Iron Donkey Trail” which ran between Damascus and Medina.

Theeb, whose father has recently died, is the youngest of 3 sons in a family of guides. The father’s stern voice is heard at the beginning of the film giving Theeb cryptic cautionary advice. “He who swims in the Red Sea cannot know its true depth. And not just any man Theeb can reach the sea

bed. And if the wolves offer friendship, do not count on success. They will not stand beside you when you are facing death.” Theeb may look like an adorably tousle haired little boy but appearances can deceive. He is a natural warrior with an avid fascination with weaponry and how to shoot and to wield a knife. His first question to the visiting Brit is to ask how many men he has killed.

The film was made in 3 separate locations, some of which were very problematical in terms of getting equipment and crew there on a daily basis. They encountered another post production problem when it was realised that in one of the key sequences when Theeb climbs out of a well, it would need to be reshot because it is visible that Eid cannot swim! So having spent 4 weekends teaching him how to swim the whole sequence was reshot with him wearing a wig (as his own hair was now cut short). Nawar commented, “I was doing take after take, desperately hoping it wasn’t going to float off in the water!”

One reviewer has felt that the film takes too long to establish the basic premise of the action, that Thaler is not adept at landscape photography and bemoans the fact that the most celebrated Jordanian film to date is another tale in which becoming a man involves learning how to kill. Interesting material for our discussion group!

Following this film there is a chance to stay behind for the final Discussion of the season: meet in the foyer bar area.

Our final screening for this season is ‘Hail Caesar’ on Wednesday 15 June