



AMREEKA

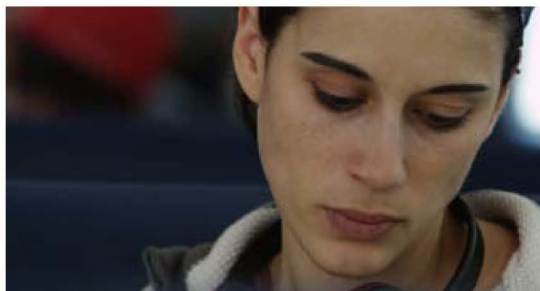
A FILM BY CHERIEN DABIS RELEASING SEPTEMBER 2009 www.AMREEKA.com



FILM REVIEWS

Film Review: Amreeka

By Kirk Honeycutt, January 17, 2009 08:25 ET



Bottom Line: A heartfelt, fully realized comic drama about Palestinian immigrants in the American heartland.

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PARK CITY -- Cherien Dabis' "Amreeka" lives up to its positive pre-Sundance buzz. The film is terrific, especially since American immigrant stories like "Amreeka" have been playing in Park City for years. Dabis, a Palestinian-American, has thoroughly re-energized the genre

with refreshing wit, honest emotions, incisive observations and a perfect cast she literally flew around the world to find. What's more, this is a thoroughly professional indie film; no allowances need be made for rough production values or budgetary shortcomings.

"Amreeka" -- Arabic for America -- is a festival director's dream, but it obviously will have an uphill struggle in theatrical distribution. Critical acclaim and fest honors could pave the way for it to become a modest indie hit. If nothing else, Dabis, in her first feature, gets immediately added to that impressive list of Sundance discoveries.

What adds poignancy, to say nothing of dramatic heft, to this immigrant story is that it concerns a Palestinian mother and her teenage son, who leave their Israeli-occupied homeland for Illinois just as American forces invade Iraq. Few immigrants have been greeted with such fear and animosity as American "patriots" fail to distinguish between different Arab groups or to realize this family isn't even Muslim.

When Muna Farah (stage actress and director Nisreen Faour) gets a U.S. Green Card in the mail, she is shocked. She had forgotten she applied for it back in the days when she was still married. Her son Fadi (Melkar Mualllem), whose educational and job opportunities are so limited in the Palestinian territories, is overjoyed. He can't wait to flee his home.

The two fly to the American heartland where her sister Raghda (veteran actress Hiam Abbass) and her doctor husband Nabeel (Yussef Abu-Warda) live in a small town. Muna loses all her money in a misfortune at the airport, then finds bank work impossible to find despite her experience and degrees. Meanwhile, Nabeel's practice has all but vanished with the Iraq invasion.

The film does deal with the setbacks these two FOBs -- fresh off the boats -- suffer, but Dabis shows the other side to the American Dream with a rich sense of humor. Small cultural misunderstandings, the vital importance of clothes and attitude to get through high school and rousing family quarrels all trigger big laughs.

In this way, Dabis subtly shifts the tale away from victimhood to one of human nature finding unexpected ways to triumph under pressure. She nails the universal in every single instance. She catches people with their pants down whether it has to do with the doctor's unhealthy obsession with the nightly news or the mother's obsession with weight loss, having lost her husband to a skinny woman.

The cast is uniformly wonderful, but let's single out the two leads especially. Faour, working for the first time partially in English, delivers an empathetic portrait of a woman who is far braver than she realizes and who startles even herself when she learns just what kind of pride and feelings of self-worth are necessary to survive in a new world. Mualllem, all of 16, beautifully captures the vacillation of a newcomer who wants to embrace a new life but is torn by homesickness and displacement.

Tobias Datum gives the hand-held cinematography different looks for Ramallah -- warm but sun-blasted -- and for the U.S. (where Winnipeg actually plays the Illinois town) -- overcast and a tad monotonous with lots of artificial lighting. Kareem Roustom's Middle Eastern-flavored score contributes greatly.

Production companies: First Generation Films, Buffalo Gal Pictures, Eagle Vision Media Group, Cinergy Prods.

Cast: Nisreen Faour, Melkar Mualllem, Hiam Abbass, Alia Shawkat, Yussuf Abu-Warda, Joseph Ziegler

Director-screenwriter: Cherien Dabis

Producers: Christina Piovesan, Paul Barkin

Executive producer: Alicia Sams, Cherien Dabis

Director of photography: Tobias Datum

Production designer: Aidan Leroux

Music: Kareem Roustom

Costume designer: Patricia J. Henderson

Editor: Keith Reamer

No rating, 96 minutes