



AMREEKA

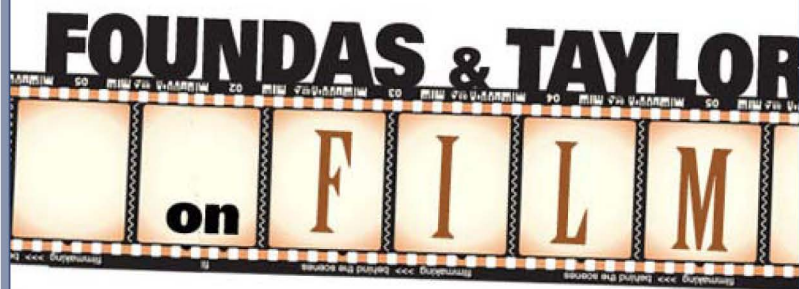
A FILM BY CHERIEN DABIS RELEASING SEPTEMBER 2009 www.AMREEKA.com



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COMING TO AMREEKA

by Scott Foundas

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If the U.S. dramatic competition at Sundance this year failed to yield one truly great film, it did offer up a lovely surprise in writer-director Cherien Dabis' *Amreeka*, which follows a Palestinian single mother and her son as they emigrate from the West Bank town of Ramallah to the flatlands of the American Midwest.

In its basic outline, the movie sounds like a collection of hoary coming-to-America clichés: Upon arriving in suburban Illinois, Muna (the excellent Nisreen Faour) and 16-year-old Fadi (Melka Muallem) move in with Muna's sister, Raghda (*The Visitor* co-star Hiam Abbas), who herself dreams of returning to her homeland. Raghda's husband, a doctor, has seen one white patient after another take their business elsewhere following 9/11 and the Iraq invasion. And as Muna searches for a job and Fadi enrolls in a public high school, they too encounter the face of anti-Muslim discrimination at every turn. That Muna and Fadi aren't Muslims hardly matters. All that matters is that they look the part.

Like *The Visitor*, to which it will surely be compared, Dabis' film aspires to show the plight of Arab people living in the U.S. in the Homeland Security era. Only, unlike that film, *Amreeka* tells its story from the inside-out, without want or need of a white protagonist to serve as the audience's surrogate, and with real three-dimensional characters instead of blunt ideological instruments masquerading as human beings. Although Dabis (who is Palestinian herself) isn't entirely immune from painting in broad strokes -- once again, a white character's first encounter with falafel is deployed as a symbol of East-West bonding -- the details in the film feel lived-in and sincere. Systematically, one form of humiliation is traded for another: no longer subjected to daily searches by West Bank checkpoint guards, Muna instead finds herself flipping burgers at White Castle, while Fadi's classmates accuse him of plotting to blow up the school.

At the heart of *Amreeka* beats an irresolvable conundrum: that a nation founded by immigrants can be so narrow-mindedly conformist. Yet, given every opportunity for self-pitying ACLU hand-wringing, Dabis keeps the film's tone buoyant and light, making a fine comedy of deception out of Muna's efforts to convince her family she actually works in a bank, and laying the groundwork for a gentle, not-quite romance between Muna and the Jewish principal of Fadi's school. When most filmmakers want to say something important about cultural conflicts, they labor to bring tears to our eyes. Dabis, by contrast, makes us laugh at ourselves and, in turn, each other.



Amreeka was the best of several films at Sundance this year concerned with living in (or getting to) the U.S. as seen through foreigners' eyes, a couple of which seem poised for prizes at the festival's closing-night awards ceremony, which begins in an hour from now. One of those contenders is Student Academy Award winner Cary Joji Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre*, which won over audiences (and a lot of critics) with its violent story of a teenage Honduran girl and a Mexican teen gangbanger on the run who end up on the same perilous train journey to the U.S.-Mexico border. When they say "From the producers of *The Motorcycle Diaries*," they're not kidding: another lushly produced, impersonally directed piece of Central/South American slum porn, *Sin Nombre* hitches stylized suffering on to a direly predictable street-thug scenario (two friends, torn between their loyalty to the gang and to each other) while awaiting the inevitable plaudits of festival juries, American art-house moviegoers and Oscar voters. (No surprise: this is one of the only competition entries to arrive at Sundance with a distributor already in place.) Fukunaga's film is slightly less exploitative, and therefore marginally preferable, to Fernando Meirelles' rancid *City of God* -- but not by very much.

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