



AMREEKA

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



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FESTIVAL REVIEWS

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Sundance

Amreeka

(U.S.-Canada-Kuwait)

By ROB NELSON

An E1 Films Canada, [Maximum Films Intl.](#) (Canada)/Cinergy Prods. (U.S.) presentation, in association with Rotana Studios and Showtime Arabia, of a First Generation Films, [Alcina Pictures](#), [Buffalo Gal Pictures](#) (Canada)/Eagle Vision Media Group (Kuwait) production. (Sales: [William Morris Agency](#), Beverly Hills, Calif.) Produced by Christina Piovesan, [Paul Barkin](#). Co-producers, [Liz Jarvis](#), Al-Zain Al-Sabah. Executive producers, [Alicia Sams](#), [Cherien Dabis](#).

Directed, written by [Cherien Dabis](#).

With: [Nisreen Faour](#), [Melkar Muallem](#), [Hiam Abbass](#), [Yussef Abu-Warda](#), [Joseph Ziegler](#), [Alia Shawkat](#). (English, Arabic dialogue)



'Amreeka'

[All Sundance Coverage](#)

From the West Bank to [White Castle](#) flips the resilient heroine of "Amreeka," a culture-clash dramedy whose background in Middle-East conflict is leavened with vibrant energy, balanced politics and droll humor by first-time feature director [Cherien Dabis](#). Enormously appealing turn by earthy [Nisreen Faour](#) in the lead role of Muna, a Palestinian single mother who brings her teenage son to rural Illinois in pursuit of a brighter future, more than makes up for the film's familiarities. The formulaic fish-out-of-water elements in [Dabis'](#) script actually suit her principled effort to make Muna easily identifiable. Kudos and a Stateside pickup seem likely.

Vividly lensed in Ramallah and Manitoba, with a modicum of English-subtitled Arabic dialogue, crowd-pleasingly topical "Amreeka" takes its name from the Arab word for "America." Pic opens on the West Bank, just prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, with divorced Muna's discovery of the green card that will take her and 16-year-old Fadi ([Melkar Muallem](#)) away from their daily drive through menacing checkpoints to Jerusalem. More of a similar nature, however, accompanies Muna and her son at the Chicago airport, where the modest seed money she had naively wrapped in a cookie tin gets confiscated by customs agents, leaving her broke upon arrival at the suburban home of her sister [Raghda](#) ([Hiam Abbass](#)), married with three kids.

Thickly accented and pudgy Muna tries and fails to land a bank management job similar to the one she held back home, leading her to take work at a [White Castle](#) and struggle to keep it secret from her sister and son. As much as the first "Harold and Kumar" movie, "Amreeka" serves the fast-food chain's bottom line even as it pokes mild fun at greasy sliders, which Muna at one point hilariously replaces with fresh falafel burgers to the delight of her blue-haired young co-worker.

Building to a warm and inclusive vision of immigrant family life, "Amreeka" might meet reflexive derision in some quarters for seeming either too PC or not political enough. Although [Dabis](#), particularly in scenes at Fadi's new school, maintains the presence of white prejudice and the threat of violence, she takes care to reassure her audience that the film will protect its characters from grave harm.

The writer-director scores bonus points by pointing up ironies such as the "Peace" bumper sticker on the car of Fadi's cousin [Salma](#) ([Alia Shawkat](#)), who initiates a plan to let the air out of a racist bully's SUV tires. So, too, the friendly school principal ([Joseph Ziegler](#)) who takes a shine to Muna is not only Jewish, but bears a passing resemblance to [Donald Rumsfeld](#).

In addition to [Faour's](#) irresistible turn as Muna, acting is strong and believable. [Dabis](#) and her crew make creative use of locations in the teeming West Bank and the wide-open spaces of suburban Illinois. The images, captured with handheld film cameras, have a pleasingly grainy texture, and the sprinkling of Arabic pop on the soundtrack helps keep [Dabis'](#) tribute to Middle-Eastern culture authentic and jaunty.

Camera (widescreen), [Tobias Datum](#); editor, [Keith Reamer](#); music, [Kareem Roustom](#); music supervisor, [Doug Bernheim](#); production designer, [Aidan Leroux](#); art director, [Laura Souter](#); set decorator, [Scott Rossell](#); costume designer, [Patricia J. Henderson](#); assistant director, [David Antoniuk](#); sound (Dolby Digital), [Brock Capell](#); casting, [Ellyn Long Marshall](#), [Maria E. Nelson](#). Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 17, 2009. Running time: 96 MIN.