



AMREEKA

A FILM BY CHERIEN DABIS www.AMREEKA.com



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Review: 'Amreeka'

A CHARMING, HUMOROUS SPIN ON THE CLASSIC IMMIGRANT STORY,
AS A PALESTINIAN MOTHER NEGOTIATES SMALL-TOWN AMERICA WITH HER TEENAGE SON.

By Andy Klein | Film critic of The Christian Science Monitor

If movies are anything to go by, the classic American immigrant experience is about 80 percent uniform, regardless of the country of origin. But, oh, how that other 20 percent can make a difference! Case in point: Cherien Dabis's debut feature, "Amreeka."

Muna (Nisreen Faour) is a divorced, 30-something Palestinian, living in the West Bank and scraping by on her salary as a bank clerk, while looking after her teenage son, Fadi (Melkar Muallem), whose private-school tuition strains her budget. One day a letter arrives, announcing an opportunity to move to America. (The press notes explain it's a green card, but the film itself is irritatingly unclear on the point.)

There are a lot of reasons for Muna to leave, most of them mundane and universal. Fadi is an A student and wants to go to a top-tier college someday; and – talk about cultural universality – Muna's live-in mom might as well be a classic Jewish mother, alternately urging her to eat and criticizing her for being too round.

But there are also some pretty obvious reasons why a Palestinian in particular would want to decamp, and the film quickly conveys the degradation – and, almost more compellingly, the unbelievable inconvenience – of living in occupied territory. And, when Fadi, full of adolescent impatience, gets a tiny bit sassy with an Israeli checkpoint guard, the wisdom of leaving becomes even clearer.

Luckily, Muna's sister Raghda (Hiam Abbass) long ago settled in a small town in Illinois, together with her husband (Yussef Abu Warda), a successful doctor. Unluckily, through a misunderstanding, Muna manages to lose her life savings while going through immigration at O'Hare International Airport. (In one of her few unlikable moments, Muna unfairly blames Fadi for the loss.)

Even more unluckily, the pair arrive in the United States on the day of the 2003 Iraq invasion. Suddenly, anti-Arab feelings – still seething from the memory of 9/11 – are newly inflamed. "But we're not even Iraqi!" the naive Muna exclaims.

Surprisingly, despite the subject matter, most of this plays out as comedy. At O'Hare, the immigration officer asks where she comes from. After she tries to explain about Palestinian statelessness, he moves along: "Occupation?" Muna: "Yes, for 40 years now." There are even some standard farce elements e.g., as soon as Raghda drops her off at the bank where she claims to be working, Muna has to furtively dash over to the White Castle for her real job. (No, Harold and Kumar don't put in an appearance.)

Dabis is Palestinian/Jordanian and primarily grew up in the US; it's a good guess that the character of Raghda's totally assimilated, typically rebellious daughter has elements of autobiography. Certainly, Dabis achieves a greater impression of verisimilitude than Alan Ball ("Six Feet Under") did in last year's "Towelhead," which dealt with overlapping issues.

It's not a very flattering view of small-town America, though for every moronic racist the new arrivals have to contend with, there is also a good-hearted counterbalance, most notably the principal (Joseph Ziegler) of Fadi's new high school. And Muna holds her own stereotypes as well, as demonstrated by her bemused reaction to learning that the friendly principal is Jewish.

Dabis works hard (and successfully) at not seeming polemical when touching on the ethnic/racial issues. If anything, her tone may come across as wishful thinking. But you barely notice this while watching, largely thanks to Faour's portrayal of the wide-eyed Muna. Her innocence and energy are simply infectious. (Rated PG-13 for brief drug use involving teens, and some language.)