



AMREEKA

A FILM BY CHERIEN DABIS www.AMREEKA.com



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by G. Allen Johnson

ARAB AMERICAN FILMMAKER'S 'UNIVERSAL STORY'

Cherien Dabis was just like every other kid growing up in rural Ohio. She loved "The Wizard of Oz." She came home from school and watched "The Brady Bunch."

Well, she wasn't quite like every other kid.

"Dating, what's that?" Dabis says over lunch in San Francisco. "I was not allowed to date at high school. Dating was, like, sneaking out at 3 a.m. and driving around and having a beer in the car."

Dabis was the daughter of strict Jordanian immigrants - her father was a pediatrician - and it became a tough situation for them during the first Gulf War. Her experiences then helped inspire "Amreeka," her film about a Palestinian woman and her son who immigrate to rural Illinois, where they live with extended family, just as the U.S. invasion of Iraq commences in 2003.

The woman, Muna (Nisreen Faour), is trained in the business world; in the United States, she can only get a job at a White Castle restaurant.

Her son, Fadi (Melkar Muallem), is bullied by his high school classmates because of his ethnic background.



"This movie is about a family, first and foremost," Dabis says. "It's an immigrant story - most people in America are immigrants, really. This just happens to be specifically about Palestinian Americans. It's a very universal story. It is not overly political or take itself too seriously."

Nevertheless, the problems the fictional family faces in "Amreeka" - the Arabic word for America - in the 9/11 era is based on the difficulties the Dabis family faced.

"In 1991, my father had patients walk into his office and ask for medical records and leave," Dabis says. "We got death threats on a daily basis. The Secret Service actually showed up at my high school because of a rumor that my sister - my 16-year-old sister - had threatened to kill the president.

"There were letters written to the editor that said, 'These Arabs should leave town.' It really reached a level of absurdity. It was a life-changing event."

Her father still lives in Ohio, but her mother went back to Jordan, and her sister lives in Bethlehem, West Bank. Dabis herself feels fortunate she moved to New York the week before 9/11 - she couldn't have imagined living in rural Ohio in the aftermath of the attacks on New York and Washington.

Nonetheless, Dabis believes the post-9/11 world holds a real opportunity for the Arab world and Arab Americans. She believes that Arabs are slowly but surely becoming more understood by Americans, and that Arab Americans got a real wake-up call.

"It was like, OK, enough," Dabis says. "The stereotypes had just gotten out of hand, and it was like, we need to get our stories out there.

There was a real surge in the arts - Arab American comedians, writers, filmmakers."

Dabis filmed the bulk of the movie in Canada, which doubled for Illinois. White Castle, now with a history of supporting movies with an ethnic appeal (the "Harold and Kumar" movies) even gave permission for the crew to build a replica of a restaurant - there are no actual White Castles in Canada.

"Yeah, it's amazing, isn't it? They were really cool about it," Dabis says. "They read the script early on and loved it, and came on board.

There were a lot of companies that wanted nothing to do with a Palestinian-themed film.

"Hey, I would love to be confused with 'Harold and Kumar.' What's interesting about Harold and Kumar is that the two leads are people of color. First-generation Americans."