



AMREEKA

A FILM BY CHERIEN DABIS www.AMREEKA.com



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

ENTERTAINMENT



A GENTLE SENSE OF HUMOR LEAVENS 'AMREEKA'

By Claudia Puig, USA TODAY

Films about immigration and the difficult transition to American life often are dark and somber affairs. They tend to focus on the harsh clash of cultures, economic privation and bitter struggles with prejudice.

The beauty of *Amreeka* is in first-time director Cherien Dabis' nimble touch. Dabis doesn't sugarcoat the painful transition to life in a foreign country, but she doesn't limit herself to the melodrama. Hardship and ignorant attitudes are taken in stride, almost with the cinematic equivalent of a rueful smile, offset by a steady ethnic pride. The result is a convincing and bittersweet look at the struggles of a pair of Palestinian immigrants and their extended family of not-so-recent arrivals. National Geographic Entertainment's first venture into feature films is a particularly vibrant.

Though the story has its wince-inducing episodes of ethnic discrimination, a gentle sense of humor runs through this story of Muna (Nisreen Faour), a resilient and loving Palestinian mother, and her teenage son, Fadi (Melkar Muallen).

The two leave their increasingly dangerous life in Bethlehem to stay with Muna's sister Raghda (The Visitor's Hiam Abbass), her doctor husband (Yussef Abu-Warda) and their three very Americanized daughters in small-town Illinois. The oldest daughter, the teenage Sama (Arrested Development's Alia Shawkat) is particularly outspoken about the conflict in the West Bank and about the Iraq War, both recurring backdrops for the movie.

Sama tries to help Fadi — whose name is an instant source of derision at school — fit in and defend himself against the malicious racist slurs from fellow students. He is referred to as "Osama," and jokes circulate about his being a suicide bomber or planning to blow up the school. An incident in which Muna is taunted sends Fadi over the edge.

Meanwhile, Muna, who held a managerial position in a bank in Bethlehem, can't find a similar job. Her two degrees prove useless. She ends up taking a low-paying job in a fast-food restaurant and hiding it from her family.

But not everyone Muna and Fadi encounter is fearful of them or close-minded. The principal at Fadi's school is a kind and open-hearted man, as are a few others.

This slice of American life, as seen through the eyes of Palestinian immigrants, is nuanced, engaging and authentically observed. Though some of the bias they endure is predictable, the unfolding of Muna and Fadi's subtly uplifting saga is not.