



AMREEKA

A FILM BY CHERIEN DABIS



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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The New York Times

SETTLERS FROM AFAR, IN LAND OF LINCOLN

by Stephen Holden

Cherien Dabis's "Amreeka" (the Arabic word for America) stands alongside "The Visitor" and "Maria Full of Grace" as one of the most accomplished recent films about a non-European immigrant coming to the United States. While the arrivals in the other two movies were not legal immigrants, the indomitably good-natured protagonist of "Amreeka," Muna Farah (Nisreen Faour), is a divorced non-Muslim Palestinian woman with a green card.

"Amreeka," which is set in 2003 at the outset of the American-led invasion of Iraq, is inspired by the experiences of Ms. Dabis, a Palestinian-Jordanian who grew up in Ohio and in Jordan and whose parents immigrated to the United States just before she was

born. During the Persian Gulf war, she recalls in the production notes, her family faced the same kinds of persecution and ostracism that Muna and her sister's family, the Halabys, suffer as the invasion continues.

The early scenes in the West Bank show Muna stoically enduring the daily humiliation of having to pass through two Israeli checkpoints on her grueling commute from Bethlehem to work in a bank. For all the hardships of life in the West Bank, in coming to America, she is forsaking a relatively comfortable existence to venture into the unknown with her 16-year-old son, Fadi (Melkar Muallem).

At the Chicago airport, where they are detained for three hours, mother and son endure the same sort of hostile interrogation they received at West Bank checkpoints. After finally passing through immigration, they are met by Muna's severe sister, Raghda Halaby (Hiam Abbass), and her family, who live in a semi-rural suburb.

Raghda, who left the West Bank 15 years earlier but is still profoundly homesick, is married to a successful Palestinian doctor, Nabeel (Yussef Abu Warda). The couple have three daughters, the oldest of whom, Salma (Alia Shawkat), is Fadi's age and becomes his guide to the treacherous jungle of American high school life. Horrified at Fadi's pleated trousers, because they make him look "F.O.B." ("fresh off the boat," she explains), she supervises his wardrobe for his first day of school, and the two become fellow rebels from the social mainstream.

Muna's first major setback is her discovery while unpacking that the sealed tin of cookies in which she had stashed all her money is missing, having been confiscated by the immigration authorities, along with the other food she had brought. Deeply ashamed, she is too proud to tell her sister.

Unlike other recent films about immigration, "Amreeka" maintains the buoyant mood of a serious sitcom. As Muna and Fadi confront hostility and prejudice, their misadventures, some of which augur disaster, are resolved without too much grief. The movie is peppered with little jokes. Scrutinizing the cover of a supermarket tabloid, Muna asks, "What does adopting an orangutan love child mean?" A roadside sign with missing letters advises, "Support our oops."

The film's upbeat tone reflects the resilience and sunny temperament of Muna, who as embodied by Ms. Faour is the kind of warm, lovable woman you want to hug. Desperate for work and unable to find it at a local bank, Muna takes a job at a White Castle next door but pretends to her family that the bank is her workplace.

At school, Fadi encounters ethnic slurs and bullying, and in the most serious incident is arrested after retaliating. At the same time, rising anti-Arab sentiment decimates Nabeel's medical practice and strains the Halabys' marriage. As his practice evaporates, Ms. Abbass, the great Palestinian actress who also appeared in "The Visitor," imbues Raghda with a heavy weight of sorrow and anxiety.

Through it all, Muna perseveres. For every hostile person she encounters, there is a good Samaritan. Her co-workers at White Castle are understanding when she makes mistakes. Her most helpful ally is Mr. Novatski (Joseph Ziegler), the divorced Polish-Jewish principal at Fadi's school, who comes to his rescue at a crucial turning point.

If, at moments, the film's positive outlook verges on naïveté, it never strays over separating the possible from the preposterous. "Amreeka" believes in people, and its faith rubs off on you.