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PRESENTS



AJAMI

A film by Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani

Academy Award Nominee, Best Foreign Language Film

Winner, Special Distinction Award, Camera d'Or Competition, Cannes Film Festival
Winner, Best Film, Director, Screenplay, Editing, Music, Israeli Film Academy Ophir Awards
Winner, Best Feature Film, Jerusalem International Film Festival
Winner, Best First Film, London Film Festival
Winner, Audience Award, Thessaloniki Film Festival
Winner, Best Film, Montpellier Film Festival
Official Selection, Toronto International Film Festival

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SYNOPSIS

A powerful crime drama set on the streets of Jaffa's Ajami neighborhood – a melting pot of cultures and conflicting views among Jews, Muslims and Christians – and told through the eyes of a cross-section of the city's inhabitants: a young Israeli (Shahir Kabaha) fighting a criminal vendetta against his family, a Palestinian refugee (Ibrahim Frege) working illegally to finance a life-saving surgery, a Jewish police detective (Eran Naim) obsessed with finding his missing brother, and an affluent Palestinian (Scandar Copti) dreaming of a future with his Jewish girlfriend. As their stories intersect – and the film's narrative shifts back and forth in time – we witness a dramatic collision of different worlds and the tragic consequences of enemies living as neighbors.

CREDITS

Shahir Kabaha	Omar
Ibrahim Frege	Malek
Fouad Habash	Nasri
Youssef Sahwani	Abu Elias
Ranin Karim	Hadir
Eran Naim	Dando
Scandar Copti	Binj

Written, directed and edited by Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani
Produced by Mosh Danon, Thanassis Karathanos and Talia Kleinhendler
Cinematography by Boaz Yehonatan Yacov
Sound Design by Kai Tebbel
Original Music by Rabiah Buchari

In Arabic and Hebrew with English subtitles
120 minutes / 35mm / 1:1.85 / Dolby Digital



ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

YARON SHANI is an Israeli Jew, born in 1973. A graduate of Tel Aviv University's Department of Film and Television, his thesis film, *Disphoria*, won the Audience Award at the Babelsberg International Student Film Festival, as well as a Special Jury Mention at Karlovy Vary. The film was broadcast on ARTE and ZDF (Germany), and participated in several other international festivals. He has also directed and edited documentaries and 3D films for Orpan Group, shown in museums and cinemas all over the world.

SCANDAR COPTI is a Palestinian citizen of the Israeli state, born (in 1975) and raised in Jaffa. Originally trained as a mechanical engineer, his first short, *Truth*, screened at the 2003 Artists Against Occupation in Montreal, and was purchased by the Israeli Channel 8. Since then, he has written, directed and edited several fiction, documentary and experimental short films. His video art works have been screened at the Israeli Center for Digital Art, the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art and at the Redding Art Fair 5 in Tel Aviv. He is also part of the team that helped launch the Doha Tribeca Film Festival, where he works in film programming and community outreach, seeking out local and regional film talent.

COMMENTS FROM THE FILMMAKERS

Yaron Shani: The basic plot of *Ajami* was developed during my film studies at Tel Aviv University. The idea was to show different stories, one after the other – back then it had nothing to do with Arabs or Ajami. I knew that since the idea dealt with different perspectives, making it a Jewish-Arab story would make it very interesting. But like an everyday Jewish Israeli, I didn't know much about Arab society in Israel. I didn't know more than a few words in Arabic, as most Israeli Jews don't speak Arabic at all. The actual screenplay had to wait until 2002, when I met Scandar. Back then I was the director of the Tel Aviv International Student Film Festival, and Scandar was making a short film for one of our special productions. When the festival ended, I asked him if he would like to do something bigger – writing a feature film together. Scandar was delighted, and we started working together in August 2002.

Scandar Copti: The commitment to work together was intuitive and proved to be very fruitful, even though this was a project involving a complicated conjunction of identities and perspectives. It could never have been done by just one of us along, and without the will to listen and relate to new ideas and perspectives of the other side. That is why the work revolved mainly around hanging out together, and gaining a strong friendship and trust. It wasn't just centered around writing sessions. In the beginning it was more about telling each other stories we knew would eventually become the stories in *Ajami*.

On the mechanical side, once we decided we had a good story that could fit to the plot, one of us would write something and we would discuss it together. Most of the stories were encountered in our everyday life in and outside Ajami. We had to adapt these stories to a very precise structure, all the while keeping them true to reality, out of respect to the real people of Ajami and to our method of working.

Copti and Shani: There is no location we know of that better expresses the tragic collision of "worlds" than the streets of Ajami. Ajami is a melting pot of cultures, nationalities and opposite human perspectives. Our main goal was to show this reality in the most sincere way. Our stories are inspired by real events. Our actors come from the real streets and houses of this human environment and not from acting schools.

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Copti: We wanted to widen the boundaries of dramatic expression in a fiction film – to bring it closer to a pure and truthful expression of the real world. During the film, we tried to bring the actors into a conscious state similar to what happens in real life – a state in which we don't know what will happen or what is expected of us. The actors reacted spontaneously, without written text or any awareness of plot. The words that came out of their mouths were generated from their hearts and not by a scriptwriter.

Shani: Our actors were not given scripts. They didn't know where we were heading. We threw them into real life situations, and they reacted spontaneously, like they would in the real world.

Copti: None of the actors had ever studied acting or appeared in a film before. Many of them come from a tough background, where violence and crime are part of everyday life. Each actor was chosen according to his or her similarity to the character, in terms of personality and personal history. Over the course of a 10-month workshop, the actors went through a psychological journey, experiencing the private history of their characters through role-playing and discussions.

Shani: Our workshop started with some 300 participants. Many deserted along the way, but enough stayed on and became enthusiastic participants. By the seventh month, we basically had our main cast and the workshops continued primarily with them. In the workshops, the participants didn't learn about text, goals, mise-en-scene or acting tricks. The focus was the psychological journey of the characters through dramatic role-playing. The actors were not given dialogue to learn, not even a script to read. And there were no rehearsals. But unlike other improvisational experiments, *Ajami* had a very precise script centered on a specific plot, thus requiring a precise emotional structure.

When the cameras started rolling, something magical happened – the actors forgot that they were in a fictional situation. It was as if they were not able to see the cameras around them. For a moment, their minds believed that what was happening was real. The emotions that came out of it exceeded our wildest imagination.

Shani: The film was shot scene by scene, chronologically, like it was a real chain of events in the real world. The film crew had to jump from one location to the other and back, so that each actor would experience his personal story just like in real life. That way, each actor acted a scene after being charged with the emotions of the previous ones. The progression created a very strong and dramatic logic in the mind and hearts of the actors, and generated emotions as in real life.

Copti: Sometimes it became so real and personal that we had to physically stop the scene so that no one would be injured. These real and spontaneous emotions were captured by the documentary-style camerawork. For example, in the opening scene when young Nasri's neighbor gets shot by unknown assassins, none of the actors knew anything about the shooting. When the kid got shot, the emotions of horror and surprise overwhelmed all of us. A woman from the neighborhood who witnessed the shooting began crying because her own son had been murdered the same way in real life.

Shani: The policemen in the film were played by real former policemen. There is a lot of hostility between *Ajami's* Arab residents and the Jewish police. Eran Naim, who fought Palestinians as a young soldier in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) and who was a real-life policeman, can easily relate to that. In the film, when his character arrests an Arab drug dealer, he is attacked by young Arabs from the neighborhood. When he shot the scene, Eran wasn't informed about what was going to happen. As a former policeman, he did what he was trained to do – arrest a criminal on the street. That's when the

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

young Arabs came out to defend their friend. We didn't need to direct anyone – the scripted violence was inevitable.

Copti: Every take was unique and couldn't be reproduced. The best take would be the first one, where everyone would really react with their hearts. After the first take, the actors would know what was about to happen and the whole idea of "living it" would not work anymore. We made a second take only when the outcome of the first take did not go with our plans.

Shani: In order to set the scene in a different direction, we changed the stimulus, like secretly giving a certain actor a different psychological motivation. With this new motivation, the actor would go into the second take, surprising the other actors with a new behavior, and setting everything onto a different course. This way we maintained the freshness of the acting. It was like a first take.

Copti and Shani: From the beginning, *Ajami* was a project that was going to be about the human side of this community. We felt that dealing with the human side is the only way to address the big issues that are behind everything. But all the social problems revealed in the stories are generated and governed by politics.

The first assembly was about 40 hours of multi-camera footage, which is 80 hours of single camera. From this point we had numerous possibilities for each scene, like in documentary editing. The entire editing process took about a year. The edit was like exploring the dramatic potential from scratch.

Throughout the entire seven-year process of the making of the film, we worked closely together. If we had not been two, we wouldn't have succeeded in making such a rule-breaking project – a complex plot involving hundreds of non-actors working without a script, a fiction film shot with two cameras on a very tight and crazy shooting schedule, and in chronological order. Neither one of us could have been strong enough to face such a project alone. This was a very unique project and we are proud of what we did together. That's the most important thing.

