

## 16<sup>th</sup> Franco-Arab Film Festival

by Emily Lodge

The common thread running through all of the films at the Franco-Arab Film Festival in Jordan this past week is a sense of helplessness—the inability of young Algerians to escape their wretched lives by attempting dangerous crossings to Spain (“Harragas”), an almost surreal film about the helplessness of Palestinians watching silently as the Israelis steal their private belongings during the 1948 war and in successive years, as their lives and dreams are dashed, (“The Time That Remains” by Elie Suleiman), a documentary about the helplessness of children in Jordanian orphanages who are subjected to psychological and physical abuse (“ID:000”) and the helplessness of two people from different backgrounds whose children have been killed in a July 7, 2005 London terrorist attack (“London River”).

Merzak Allouache, director, “Harragas,” who took questions from the audience at the Al Hussein Cultural Center, underscored his quest to make the public more aware of thousands of people who pay their life savings to local mafia for the crossing only to be returned home to prison or death by suicide.

Prior the screening of London River, the winners of the Best Jordanian Short Film Contest that had been organized as part of the festival were announced by the jury (composed of Dr Samir Jaber, journalist Musa Hawamdeh, actor Rasheed Malhas, producer Khaled Haddad and president of the Jordanian syndicate of artists, Hussein Al Khatib) with “Missing,” an animated film by Tariq Rimawi about surviving the loss of limbs, “ID:000”, the documentary about orphanages, by Widad Shafakoj and Ahlam, a comedy about the different versions of why a woman is standing at a window, by Mohamed Ali Eliwat winning the first, second and audience prizes respectively. A total of fourteen Jordanian short films were screened last week within the competition organized by the festival for the 4th consecutive year.

The 1st prize for fiction (750JDs) was handed out on behalf of the French Embassy in Jordan / French Cultural Center in Amman. The 2nd prize for documentaries (500 JDs) was donated on behalf of the Abdel Hamid Shoman Foundation. The audience prize (A Mini DV Cam) was given on behalf of TV5 Monde. The jury made a special mention for “Light and Dark” by Motaz Hasan Matar, “Wednesday Afternoons” by Nora Al Sharif and “Yousef” by Abedalsalam Moh'd Alhajj.

Guests of the festival included Merzak Allouache, Director of Harragas, Sherif Mandour, producer of Heliopolis, Ahmed Bedjaoui who curated the Algerian focus and presented “London River”. The Ottoman palace which houses the Royal Film Commission provided a romantic outdoor setting to watch, among other films, “Fairouz” by Frédéric Mitterand, a documentary from the 1990s which focused on a shy, conservative girl with the voice of an angel who was protected and promoted by her family and became a world-wide sensation. On the same night, participants could celebrate with DJ Mohand Haddar for the DJ party at Books@cafe on June 21.

(SPECIAL BOX): FOCUS ON “ID:000”

The award-winning documentary film-makers, Widad Shafakoj, director, David Deir, cinematographer and Yazan Hazeem, film editor, had considerable trouble showing their film until Prince Ali and Princess Rym of the Royal Film Commission offered their protection. The film made in November 2009 shows footage taken by orphans from their cell phones of the beatings and psychological torture by supervisors going on among the 800 orphans under eighteen in Amman, Irbid, Madaba and Aqaba.

“They are not encouraged to go to school and are left without a future when they graduate,” director Widad Shafakoj commented. According to the film, 50% of the “graduates,” later have criminal records or go into prostitution, 40% have drug abuse or alcohol related problems and 10% commit suicide. The case studies in the film, partly based on research contributed by Majdoleen Allan and Emad Al Rawashdeh and checked by the Noor Al Hussein Foundation, were first published in El Ghad earlier this year. The article was strongly condemned by Hala Lattouf, Minister of Social Services.

“In the 1990s, when King Hussein was made aware of the abuses going on in Jordan, he donated a palace to the orphans’ well-being,” Widad commented. “But that was a long time ago although the subject has apparently caught King Abdullah’s attention. The fact is children would rather go to jail than go to an orphanage. In jail, at least your mother can come and visit and check on whether you are being badly treated. Orphans don’t have any mother or father to check up on them. When there is no accountability, there is abuse.”