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Family reunion the theme of veteran director Samir's latest film Iraqi Odyssey

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From left, the cast member Souhir Ahmed Riadh, the executive producer Joell Jent, the director Samir and the editor Sophie Brunner of Iraqi Odyssey at the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival. Maarten de Boer / Getty Images

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Ah, the family reunion. Aunts and uncles, cousins and their kids, your cousins once-removed that you haven't seen in years. Everyone trying to glean just exactly what everyone else does for a living – a mail sorter, the manager of a co-op grocery store, a district bank something-or-another – but really, it's all a prelude to share stories from your common past: inside jokes, gossip about those not in attendance, lore about a deceased grandparent.

Of course, the family reunion isn't always as much fun for outsiders, spouses who never met Uncle Jim, or distant relatives who weren't part of that unforgettable trip to Disneyland.

The documentary *Iraqi Odyssey* – which had its world premiere on Saturday at the Toronto International Film Festival and will be screened during the Abu Dhabi Film Festival (ADFF) in October – is what family reunions might look like in the future.

It traces the history of one Iraqi family scattered around the globe. There's Amm Jamal, for example, who now lives in Moscow, and the lovely Souhair, who lives in bleak, freezing upstate New York.

The movie features sepia-toned pics of a family picnic in the hillside, maqam music and a funny story from Amm Sabah, the ophthalmologist, about that time he returned to Basra only to be told he had been declared dead. But this reunion is filmed in 3-D and is able to splice family photos, archival footage and calligraphy next to the storyteller.

"3-D enchanted me," says the director, Samir, who turned the camera on his own family. "The film is a puzzle, a 3-D puzzle. A stereoscopic puzzle.

"In reality, every day we get a piece of the puzzle and we try to make sense of it. It's a part of the mind, in my opinion. It's built on memories and concrete details, a mix. When you talk to neuroscientists, an objective past does not exist."

Samir traces his family back to British colonial days when they lived a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle in Baghdad. His grandfather was a judge, his aunts and uncles well-educated. Many flirted with communist politics.

With the rise of Saddam Hussein they started to leave their homeland, ending up scattered in places as far afield as New Zealand, France and the United States. Samir's mother was Swiss and so he moved there when he was a boy. Like any family, there were fallings-out – "frictions", Samir calls them – and reconciliations through the years.

"My family told me the film was shameful because we are not special," he says. "'Yes, you're right,' I told them. 'And that's why we should show it.'

"Of course, we have some special stories, but sociologically, we represent several million people who live as we do. At each projection people come up to me and say: 'This is our story.' And it's not just Iraqis, but Egyptians, Syrians and Lebanese."

The inspiration for *Iraqi Odyssey* came from an unexpected source.

In 2002, Samir directed and produced a film about a different diaspora. *Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs – The Iraqi Connection* won a Critics' Week prize at the Locarno Film Festival, and Best Arab Film in Rotterdam for its examination of five expatriates who fled their home and now live in Israel.

"I was, of course, confronted about this," Samir says. "'A film about Jews. Are you nuts? Why?'" So I looked into the mirror. Could we do the same film, but all about my family? All the Jews were the same age as my uncles and aunts and they told the same story. But instead of one land, obviously I wanted to make this movie more global."

Iraqi Odyssey – which received US\$12,000 (Dh44,000) for development and \$50,000 for post-production from ADFF's Sanad development and post-production fund – is also set to screen at another "major festival", which the filmmakers could not name because of a confidentiality agreement.

Samir is also optimistic about television sales. In this way, his family is destined to be reunited forever.

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