

# The Hollywood Reporter

## 'Iraqi Odyssey': Film Review

10/8/2014 by Deborah Young



An extended family of liberal Iraqi intellectuals becomes part of the diaspora in veteran documaker Samir's most personal work

Subtitled *A global family saga in 3D*, the documentary *Iraqi Odyssey* aims ambitiously high in its investigation of the effects of history on one large middle-class family, and it succeeds in conveying a sense of impotent regret felt by family members forced into exile around the world. Whereas Western journalism has focused on mass migrations and the tragedy of the boat people, this Iraqi-Swiss-German-UAE coprod is a timely reminder that even the well-to-do, well-educated and well-connected are the victims of war and dictatorship.

Filming his aunts, uncles and cousins, the Swiss-based writer, director and Dschoint Ventschr producer Samir recounts the history of his distinguished family with respectful modesty, throwing it up against the background of dictators, kings, wars and chaos. His approach to these smart, articulate characters is so objective and comprehensive it is able to capture only a few moments of emotion in the course of nearly 3 hours of running time, for instance, when he is finally able to visit his father's tomb in 2010. One senses the filmmaker's yearning and love for these wildly displaced people, yet feelings get swept under the carpet in favor of repetitive globe-trotting. In any case, the film's seriousness and topicality will certainly affect Mideast audiences and extend its festival life to selected Western small screens.

If the film seems long to talk about the peregrinations of a single family, it's short as a crash course in Iraqi history. Just as the director's award-winning *Forget Baghdad* about the fate of the Iraqi Jews, directed in 2002 just before the U.S. invasion toppled Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime, proved prophetically timely, *Iraqi Odyssey* once more appears at a cross-roads in Middle East history. Here Samir turns his insight on the personal story of his own family of middle-class professionals, the descendants of his patriarchal grandfather whose liberal attitude towards women, religion, the arts, Communism, the army and life in general is reflected in the next two generations of independent thinkers.

As the film delicately recounts, Samir and his parents left Baghdad for Switzerland when he was barely in his teens, becoming members of a world-wide diaspora that today counts some four million Iraqis. Having himself joined a radical youth movement in

Switzerland, he obsessively probes his family history as it is interwoven with political events. Meanwhile, a criss-crossing network of aunts, uncles and cousins – teachers, lawyers, doctors and even a nuclear physicist – scatter one by one to Moscow and Paris, New York and New Zealand. Several of them, including Samir’s father, were activists in Iraq’s Communist party, which was dismantled under Saddam. They were obviously privileged to be able to choose their own exile, even though Samir tries to puzzle out why uncle Sabah, steeped in Western culture, decided to move to the USSR, and how his young cousin Sohair ended up a refugee in the cultural wasteland of Buffalo, New York. When they do return briefly to Iraq, they find the country unrecognizable. “It’s sad to come home and find your wife Penelope in bed with someone else,” comments Sabah, on the Odyssey theme.

Still one senses that this intellectual, unconventional, free-thinking family has lead fulfilling lives in spite of the political barriers that sometimes separate them and the ongoing tragedy of their homeland. Their long odyssey is at times amusingly illustrated with excerpts from Mario Camerini’s 1955 *Ulysses*, and less amusingly with red arrows traveling around a school globe, in case sleepy viewers forget how far away various countries are. Mostly one wishes for a more concise edit that would pull this impressive avalanche of memories and faded photos together a lot sooner.

*Production companies: Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion, Coin Film*

*Director-Screenwriter: Samir*

*Producers: Werner Schweizer, Herbert Schwering, Furat al Jamil*

*Executive producer: Joel Jent*

*Directors of photography: Lukas Strelbel, Pierre Mennel, Yuri Burak, John Kellerman, Kirill Gerra, Samir*

*Editors: Sophie Brunner, Ali Alfatlawi, Wathiq Al Ameri, Samir*

*Music: Maciej Sledziecki*

*Sales Agent: Outlook Filmsales*

*No rating, 163 minutes*

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