



### BETHLEHEM

**STEVE POND** This is an Israeli film, but your co-writer is Palestinian, and so are many of your cast members.

**YUVAL ADLER** Because it was a film that shows both worlds, we knew that people from both worlds had to do it. A lot of the Israeli films about this issue try to teach you something, or protest against something. And we said, "We don't want to have an agenda. We want to explore and investigate and show, and we want you not to know whose side you're on." That's the only way this film could have been made.

#### What did you learn in your exploring?

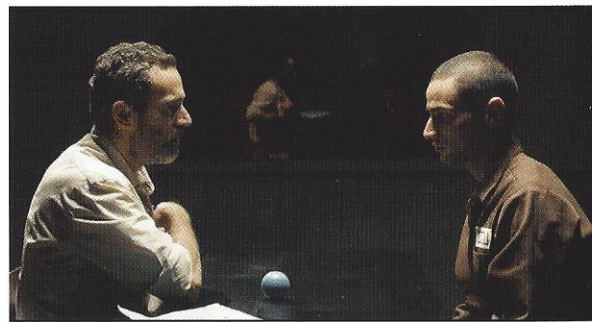
When we started, we didn't understand how secret-service handlers work, how they recruit and run an asset. American films always present it either based on torture and pressure, or satellites and gadgetry. And every secret service guy we met said, "No, you look for a person who doesn't get something in their world, who's weak, and you get in there and develop a relationship." It's both the most exploitative relationship you can imagine, and at the same time there's always a real human bond there. That's what's so fascinating about it.

## BOTH SIDES NOW

Just like the timing flukes that seem to happen regularly with Hollywood studios, this year's Oscar foreign-language race has two films tackling the exact same subject: The Israeli and Palestinian entries both deal with the complex relationship between an Israeli secret service agent and a Palestinian informant.

Yuval Adler's Israeli film, *Bethlehem*, swept this year's Ophir Awards with wins in six categories; *Omar* comes from Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad, whose *Paradise Now* was nominated for the 2005 foreign-language Oscar.

Both have received strong reviews and are considered real candidates for the nine-film shortlist that will be announced in December. We spoke with both filmmakers to get two sides of the story.



### OMAR

**STEVE POND** Have you seen *Bethlehem*?

**HANY ABU-ASSAD** Yes, yes, yes. It's from a different point of view, which makes it interesting. But even though my subject is political, my movie is really about love, trust and friendship. And it's a fusion of three traditions of thriller: American thrillers like *No Way Out* or *The Firm*; French thrillers like *Le Cercle Rouge* and *Le Samourai*, where the tension was from the language of cinema; and Egyptian thrillers, where even in the most horrifying moment, they make a joke. I mixed all these three to give the genre a new elan.

#### How did you come to make a movie about this subject?

It came first of all from a panic that I had one night that I'm not making good movies anymore. I was busy with artificial stories that don't come from real life. This panic let me dig into my own real life. I was once paranoid—I thought one of my crew members was spying on me for the army on my film *Paradise Now*. And I had a friend, they tried to force him to collaborate because they had a secret on him.

You know, one of the reasons for the occupation is to make society paranoid, because when they think that



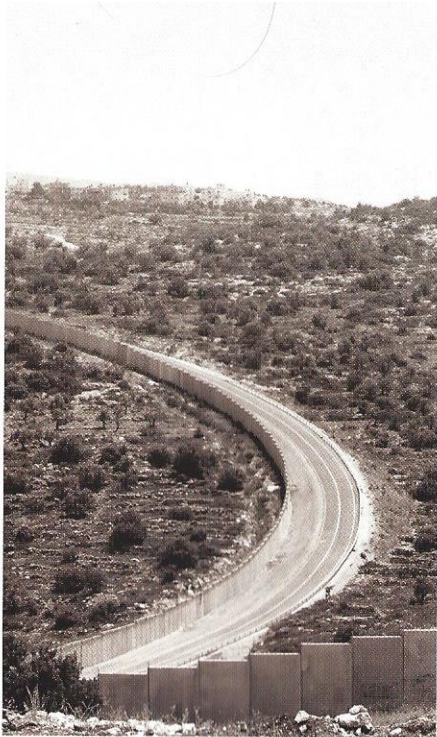
## Does cinema have a role in showing what's happening on the West Bank?

I think *showing* is important. If you make a film whose point is to show that the occupation is evil, then people are saying, "I don't want to go see a lecture." But if you make a film and don't define yourself so obviously, they'll have to say something about it.

People say, "Why don't you give hope?" And I think the film gives hope to people, because it shows the situation. People have said to me, "I understand the other side now, and I feel we have to do something, because this can't go on."

## What did you think when you first heard about *Omar*?

We were like, "What the hell?" We shot our film nine months before *Omar*, and we actually were screening cuts of the film. So when they started telling me, "You know Hany Abu-Assad is doing one," we were perturbed. But I'm actually sure that Hany didn't see our film or our script, because otherwise he would not do his film like this.



...You know, one of the reasons for the occupation is to make society paranoid, because when they think that they are being watched everywhere, they will behave themselves. All this came together, and I thought, I need to make a real story about what bothers me.

## Can cinema change minds about what is happening on the West Bank?

I think cinema cannot change minds, but it opened my mind. I can only tell you about my experience when I saw *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Or *Novecento*, Bertolucci. Or *4 months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. Or *There Will Be Blood*. Or Carlos Saura's movie *Cria Cuervos*. Or *A Prophet*, or *The Godfather*. All these experiences opened my mind. For sure, movies will give you a rich experience. And this rich experience makes you as a human being more open to life, to yourself, to others, to your enemy, to politics.

Politics is failing, really. Everywhere, it's failing. People think their lives cannot be really protected by politicians, so they are depending on other things, like art. I think a lot of people in Palestine, as in the rest of the world, want to express themselves through different mediums, and cinema is one of them. **w**