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Friday March 13th, 2020

In Between (15)

Dir: Maysaloun Hamoud

Starring: Mouna Hawa, Shaden Kanboura, Sana Jammalieh

Sponsor: Andrew Howard

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Synopsis: Tel Aviv, the present. Friends Laila and Salma enjoy their city's club scene and drug culture. Salma's Christian family want to marry her off, a process she is not keen on. New flatmate Nour is a conservative religious Muslim. Initial suspicion between them gives way to friendship. Laila falls for Ziad, a beautiful, worldly filmmaker, but breaks up with him when he criticizes her dress and behaviour. DJ and bartender Salma meets a female doctor. They begin a romance. At a family gathering they are spotted kissing, and Salma's parents forbid them from meeting again. Nour is raped by her controlling fiancé Wissam, after asking to postpone their wedding. The women blackmail him by sending Laila to compromise him at work and succeed in persuading him to go to Nour's father and call off the wedding. The three women go dancing together. Laila is harassed on the dance floor.

In a pivotal sequence of this melancholy Tel Aviv set coming-of-age drama, three friends - young Palestinian women of varying degrees of conventionality and familial loyalty - conspire to entrap the sleazeball fiancé who has subjected one of them to rape. It falls to the elegant, self-assured and outspoken Laila (Mouna Hawa) to act as the bait, passing herself off as a downtrodden victim of domestic abuse in order to beg his help and then seduce him. This requires her to conceal her abundant, corkscrew-curl hair under a hijab. She and her friends undertake this process with great solemnity, not because of its religious connotations, but because Laila's freedom and modernity are everything to her, and their renunciation - even temporarily and in a worthy cause - is a significant sacrifice.

The sequence is simplistic (be free or be veiled), improbable (a sophisticated young woman - a lawyer no less willingly putting herself in the hands of a known rapist?) and touching nonetheless for the sincerity it conveys and the skill with which it's played. The same strengths and weaknesses apply to the film as a whole. There is a cartoonish quality to its characterization that gets in the way of Laila, her gloomy DJ friend Salma (Sana Jammalieh) and their conservative religious third wheel Nour (Shaden Kanboura) emerging as fully-fledged people: Laila's smoking is so incessant that even the actress playing her seems to find it obtrusive at times, and the contrast between Laila and Salma's party girl ways and Nour's low key piety is hammered home with an overload of rolled eyes and clutched pearls.

However, the film's bluntness proves more effective when it is deployed to highlight how these very different women - Nour a religious Muslim and aspiring computer scientist, Laila a secular, career minded Muslim, Salma a permanently stoned hipster lesbian from a Christian family - all see their romantic hopes and general life prospects curtailed by social and familial expectations. Laila's romance with Ziad (Mahmood Shalabi) initially seems like pure wish

fulfillment, for he is as beautiful, urbane and pleasure-driven as she is. but it takes the merest reminder of Ziad's home and family - a visit from his more conservative sister - to start him down a slippery slope of criticising Laila's behaviour and appearance. Salma enters a private idyll when she meets the lovely Dounia (Ahlam Canaan), but any hope of the affair earning her parents' tolerance or approval is quashed as soon as they learn of it. The worst is reserved for the obedient and observant Nour: she is raped by her self righteous bully of a fiancé, Wissam (Henry Andrawas) as punishment for an increasing tendency to assert herself, which he interprets as evidence of the influence of her wild new friends.

The women's status as Palestinians in an Israeli-ruled society is another complication, lightly but incisively referenced; "Who knows, tomorrow peace may erupt!" is Laila's sardonic kiss off to a Jewish suitor. Salma loses a restaurant job when she stands up for her right to speak Arabic in the kitchen.

Smartly utilising what power do they have in the face of these many constraints, the women successfully conspire to blackmail Wissam into freeing Nour from their engagement. Writer-director Maysaloun Hamoud wisely withholds any sense of triumph, however: instead, the piece ends with the trio staring blankly ahead, traumatised by what they've undergone and implicitly contemplating futures in which no peace of mind or fulfillment can come without colossal and painful sacrifice.

Credits

Laila	Mouna Hawa
Salma	Shaden Kanboura
Nour	Sana Jammalieh
Ziad	Mahmood Shalabi
Wissam	Henry Andrawas
Dounia	Ahlam Canaan
Saleh	Aiman Daw
Qais	Riyad Sliman
Raba	Firas Nassar
Director	Maysaloun Hamoud
Screenplay	Maysaloun Hamoud
Director of Photography	Itay Groun
Editors	Lev Goltser, Nili Feller
Msic	Hagar Brotman
Art Direction	M. G. Saad
Sound	Tully Chem

Israel/France 2016. 102 mins

Another View

sisterhood that forms in fractured circumstances is at the centre of this poignant debut feature from director Maysaloun Hamoud. Following Leila (Mouna Hawa) and Salma (Sana Jammeli), the film offers an engaging celebration of young and carefree Palestinian women living in Tel-Aviv, still adhering to lingering traditions that exert control over them. Should they speak Arabic or Hebrew? Should they dress conservatively or wear whatever the hell they want? Do they care for your opinion in the slightest? The film is an energetic and resounding middle finger to such pressures and stereotypes.

Hamoud highlights Tel-Aviv as a space thriving with the rhythm and colour of metropolitan life, a hedonistic playground far removed from the constraints of religious custom experienced by new arrival Noor (Shaden Kanboura). An orthodox Muslim, Noor occupies the room vacated by her cousin in Leila and Salma's flat, bringing with her a palpable air of concern mingled with curiosity. She is a student of computer science, engaged to a man she does not love. This creates an obvious clash with the freewheeling intoxication, open sexuality and female camaraderie practiced by her roommates. The apartment becomes a tangible representation of the "in between", acting as both drug-scattered dance floor for a happy-go-lucky clique, and a clean, respectable environment in which Noor can cook for her fiancé.

As Noor peeks into this vibrant side of life, the limitations by which she is most clearly affected become more apparent. This oasis of independence is under a constant threat, from parents with high expectations to boyfriends with a creeping duty towards social conformity which rears an ugly head from under the surface of their superficial liberalism. All three women are creative, intelligent and joyous, yet exhausted from battles they should not have to fight. The men around them seem intent on tearing them apart like the food they crush with their hands at the table, as if they were ripe grapefruits rather than human beings.

Hamoud's film is concise yet enthralling. It invites the viewer into this closed enclave, but pushes back just as the protagonists start to dance along the metaphorical "in between". Leila, Salma and Noor are beautifully depicted as individuals, but also as an ad hoc family unit. When trauma strikes, they form the fiercest collective shield and demonstrate the deepest strengths of friendship and protection. Hamoud is bold in her approach to scenes of violence, making the support shown among the three women all the more affecting.

The power of the film is clear in its decision to promote female friendship without the need for rivalry, disagreement or division. These women learn from each other and reject those who expect them to change. The camera rarely leaves their side, preferring to capture domestic personal spaces rather than fill matters out with bustling colour from the wider cityscape. The outside world, with its regressive attitudes, does not win here, but the women of In Between, with their cool resilience, absolutely do.

Caitlin Quinlan: Little White Lies

Programming News

Coronavirus

At the moment, the Society has no plans to cancel any screenings as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. We have asked to be kept informed by The Venue if BGU places restrictions on the holding of community events on the campus, or if there is national advice to that effect. We will pass on any such information to

members as soon as we receive it, via email and our social media accounts. We'd be very grateful if members who use these forms of communication are able to pass on details to any members they know who don't.

There's one more week to submit any suggestions of films anyone would like to have added to the fong list for next season. The programme will be chosen in the week after our next film.

Our next screening: Friday, March 20th, 2020 Cléo, from 5 to 7 (France 1962. Cert PG)

Our classic this season, voted for by members in a recent poll, is a timely tribute to Agnès Varda, one of the great directors to emerge in the French New Wave, whose film Faces Places was such a huge hit with members & who died last year.

Cléo, from 5 to 7 captures many of the defining themes of the New Wave - including existentialism, and a strong feminine viewpoint - in a present-tense drama, which avoids melodrama and sentimentality in favour of a delicate portrait of a mind and spirit in turmoil. It's firmly rooted to a sense of time and place (Paris's Left Bank, from 5pm to 6.30), it is also one of a number of early 60s new wave films to flirt with the conventions of the musical (maybe a reference to the fact that Varda was married to Jacques Demy at the time). The film includes cameos by Jean-Luc Godard, Anna Karina and Eddie Constantine while composer Michel Legrand who wrote the film's score, plays "Bob the pianist".