

Project Portrait: Johnathan Ben Efrat, Video48

Johnathan Ben Efrat is a documentary film director who co-founded Video48, an Israeli documentary production collective, in 1999. Video48 primarily seeks to highlight the struggles of the working class, primarily amongst Arab populations in Israel and the West Bank. They have produced several 50 minute features, and some shorter documentaries, since their inception.

WACC has been a key funder for Video48, providing them with a camera and the equipment necessary to equip an editing studio, and funding their latest film, *Six Floors to Hell*.

The plot of *Six Floors from Hell* follows the story of Jalal, a Palestinian man who struggles for two years to save money for his marriage to his fiancée Nisrin. Jalal, along with other illegal immigrants, squats in the parking lot of an uncompleted mall in Tel Aviv, six floors underground.

Efrat sees the underground living conditions of these workers as a metaphor for the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. "The Israelis exploit the Palestinian working class, but they don't want to see them or give them rights. The Palestinians need their own country, economy, and dignity. We aren't even talking about social security and pensions."

Indeed, the needs go far beyond pensions to basic human rights and security. One of the workers who lived in the garage fell to his death in the construction zone. Others endure a dark and dangerous home, without water or basic amenities, in their desperation for a day's wage. In Israel, a day's work fetches five times the pay that a day's work in the occupied territories earns, but a trip through the Wall costs a day's wage itself, and is becoming increasingly dangerous and difficult.

Efrat continues, "You cannot build a future on terms like that. This is the important thing about this film, or others like it, that the rich countries have a responsibility for this problem. And if they take ownership of this responsibility, they will reap the benefits of peace."

The metaphor of hidden realities extended to the reaction of Israeli broadcasters to the film. They were not interested in screening it. The Israeli public broadcaster stated that it exposed Palestinian, not Israeli, issues. The documentary has enjoyed much wider success in Europe, where it has been screened at numerous film festivals, and won international awards.

While some of the workers living in the garage were afraid to be exposed to eviction or arrest because of the film, the community cooperated with its production. The film has been an important tool for Video48 to initiate discussions in Arab villages in Israel about issues that they face. The communities' emotional connection with the protagonist, and the issues that he faces, are very strong. Video48 has also used the film's beautiful cinematography to create opportunities to screen the film at Israeli art colleges and universities, where the political message of the film may slowly build awareness of Palestinian issues.

Efrat sees the film as an agent of indirect, rather than direct, change. "I don't believe, in my point of view, that films, or any kind of art, can change the world. Problems can only be solved in a political way, which means that the film has its own contribution to the public discussion, but it can't solve problems by itself."

"For me it's important for people to understand if the situation of the working class Palestinian won't be solved, the Palestinian question won't be solved. It's not only an issue of land, or Jerusalem, it's an issue of how people live in their own country, and if they're living in a poverty situation, I don't think we will have peace."

This film has helped Video48 become much more widely known in the documentary film world, giving them opportunities to work with more talented staff, who feel part of something worthwhile that they can contribute to.

Efrat's advice to other filmmakers is not to be afraid in the development of their own projects. He advocates becoming very

emotionally involved with the story, the protagonist, and the issue, to deeply feel it. This allows you to overcome your fears because you know you are on the true path to exposing the story.

Learn more: <http://www.video48.com>

Attachments: audio clip of interview 1, audio clip of interview 2