



FEATURE FILM

Open Bethlehem

By Leila Sansour, film director

"One of the most remarkable and moving documentaries I have seen. The tragedy of the Palestinians encapsulated in the life of one town, BETHLEHEM." Jon Snow

A well-known commissioning editor of feature documentaries in the United Kingdom once said that all independent documentary filmmakers are depressed. They lead a sad life and invariably die poor. So why on earth do we do it? I cannot answer for others, but it is difficult to see why people would ever put themselves through this ordeal unless the subject was the most sacred thing in their lives. For me, that was Palestine, and I needed to find an angle that would make my ordeal worth it.

This is why, in 2004, I left London, where I had lived for more than twenty years, to settle back in my family home in Bethlehem. The idea was to stay for one year to document the building of the Wall. I thought that Bethlehem, with its iconic name and bigger-than-life status was sure to provide the best gateway to Palestine and its trials.

I was right about Bethlehem. On September 24, 2014, at the first preview screening of my film, as I stood in front of an audience of 750 people



at the Royal Geographical Society in London, it was completely obvious that Bethlehem does have special appeal. The theatre was packed with people from the press, members of parliament, and heads of think tanks. So the plan has worked out, except that this was ten years later. My idea to create a video diary of one year in the life of Bethlehem has turned into a decade-long project that changed my own life as well as that of Bethlehem. The experience has been both daunting and, certainly, impossible to forget, especially because it has all been captured on film.

Open Bethlehem, the feature-length documentary that has resulted from ten years of filming, will be released in cinemas in the United Kingdom in December 2014. Here in London, people refer to it as "The Alternative Christmas Film." So as I wait for my big encounter with audiences, I keep thinking about the past ten years of my life.

When I first settled in my family home in Bethlehem I was immediately confronted by the past. The house was built by my father. It was built big, like many houses conceived by Middle Eastern patriarchs with an eye on bringing together several generations of the family. My father had big dreams. He was the founder of Bethlehem University. It wasn't easy, therefore, for me to return to a totally empty home. My father had died eight years earlier and all my family, like many in Bethlehem, had emigrated abroad.

In the best tradition of independent filmmakers I had almost no resources, and that state of affairs persisted throughout the ten years. Filming the Israeli army at work was neither smooth nor easy to stomach. But I had this one big castle, my father's home. It housed my film production and fired its spirit. The job had to be done.

Today I have to thank him for being the force that brought me back to Bethlehem. This journey has taught me

a great deal; most importantly, that the greatest experiences in life often take place in the most modest of places. Furthermore, I may have earned myself a way out of the doomed life of an independent filmmaker.

Throughout the past ten years, I have been painstaking about getting hold of every existing old print, photograph, or video footage of Bethlehem that exists in the world. Initially, I needed the material for my film, but then it became an obsession – the obsession of gathering the shreds of Bethlehem from all over. Maybe I was trying to render it whole in my imagination. It is an empowering act. For the coming three years, I will be busy distributing my film. I also intend to run an audience outreach campaign alongside to mobilise support for Palestine, but I am already plotting an online museum of Bethlehem that would house the thousands of items in my possession. I feel that this would somehow be a much more optimistic occupation. If any museum experts are reading this piece and disagree, please get in touch. I would appreciate an early warning.

