

INTERVIEW: ERAN RIKLIS

KUHU TANVIR

It takes a master to tell the story of two nations that haven't seen eye-to-eye in decades through a grove of lemon trees. Eran Riklis, the director of the Israeli film *Lemon Tree*, speaks to *Wide Screen* about this haunting film, his relationship with the Israeli and Palestinian governments, with the people, the need to tell a story and the bitter-sweetness of *Lemon Tree*.



Figure 1 Director Eran Riklis

Kuhu Tanvir (KT): When you introduced the film in India, you said you wanted to move from the comfort of Golan Heights (seen in the last film *The Syrian Bride*) to a more volatile situation. Both *The Syrian Bride* and *Lemon Tree* have a deeply social and political content, and have similar themes, can you elaborate a bit on what was different in your approach to *Lemon Tree*?

Eran Riklis (ER): Golan Heights and the Druze were a challenge but in many ways comfortable ones in terms of the Israeli perception of the conflict in the Middle East. In *Lemon Tree* I deal with the Palestinians who are much 'closer' and raise much more sensitive issues. The Israeli-Palestinian story is explosive and traumatic and so in approaching it I had to use all my instincts to avoid traps on one hand and on the other hand not be too politically correct about it.

KT: Did it ever bother you to make two films so close to each other in theme and even in your lead actress one after the other? Has it lead to a kind of categorisation in how audiences look at you? As in, do they now assume that you will make a certain kind of films?

ER: Not at all. I felt I still have a lot to say and in different ways so I had no problem staying in the same region. Of course I am aware of expectations and I try to fight them - so my next film will be quite a departure from both the *Bride* and *Lemon Tree*.



Figure 2 Still from Lemon Tree

KT: What are the challenges you faced while making *Lemon Tree*?

ER: The real challenge was to remain true to the story and to the characters - which I guess is the case in every film but here it got an extra dimension because of the many layers and the complexity of the story and the background. Manipulation of story and image is easy - but to make it well you really have to make sure you avoid land mines on the way - and I did my best to do that.

KT: You said in your note that lemon trees seemed to be perfect for the story you wanted to tell. Why?

ER: I didn't want olive trees which seemed to be too symbolic and over used as an image. Lemons gave me freshness, bitterness, sweetness, a great color and overall a nice metaphor without being too metaphoric...

KT: There is no denying that Hiam Abbas is one of the top actresses in the world today. Her portrayal of Salma is haunting. Apart from just talent, what are the other reasons you wanted were so keen to cast her again in your film. Suppose the story had turned out differently, in a way that the central character did not suit Ms. Abbas, what

would you have done then? Would you change the story or would you have changed the actress?

ER: The relationship Hiam and I have can not lead us to a situation where we would disagree over story issues. We work in total harmony and yet total freedom and the bottom line is she read the script, loved it and we embarked on a new journey together feeling we have a common purpose - to make a good, thoughtful film which will make people think, reflect, cry, laugh - everything a film is supposed to do.

KT: It is interesting that your last two films have central women characters. Is there any specific reason for that? Did you ever consider a male lead?

ER: I felt that in the Middle East the women are the 'underdogs', the under-privileged and I thought, in both cases, that they should be the centre of the story to show support women in the region and perhaps worldwide. But beyond that I also thought the women will bring more complexity and emotion to a story where men tend to hide behind pre-conceptions.

KT: Tell me a little more about audience and government (in Israel and Palestine) response to your films, especially these last two.

ER: *The Syrian Bride* did very well in Israel, *Lemon Tree* did not. I'm not surprised and yet I wish it did but I guess it was a bit 'too close to home' for the Israelis. *Lemon Tree* is a big hit almost everywhere else so it's nice to know audiences around the world are totally open to it and love it. The government in Israel in fact is supportive in many ways but I had no official reaction. And as for the Palestinians - privately I had wonderful reactions and comments, on a more official level - not yet...

KT: The Israeli films we watched during the festival here all seemed to be high on radical quotient, as in all against the Occupation and with a liberal point of view. Is that the general pulse of the people or is this unique to the artistic community?

ER: I believe the people want peace and quiet but it does not always show in reality. The film community is of course more outspoken about it and I think we all feel a responsibility to tell these stories. And yet I don't think enough films about the reality of the Middle East are made.

KT: What is your next project?

ER: It's called *Human Resources* and it is based on a famous Israeli book by A.B. Yehoshua. It is the story of a human resources manager in a bakery in Jerusalem who has a mission - to take back to Russia the body of a young Russian worker who was killed in a suicide bomb attack in Jerusalem. It is about a journey to life by confronting death.

All Photographs: Eitan Riklis.

About Interviewer: Kuhu Tanvir is one of the editors of *Wide Screen*. She currently works as a film critic for *NDTVMovies.com*, an Indian cinema website. Kuhu has an M.A in English Literature from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. She has previously worked for The First City Theatre Foundation and worked on the Festival Bulletin at the 9th Osian's Cinefan Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema. Her areas of interest include realism, fantasy and portrayals of the Holocaust in cinema.