



A SYRIAN LOVE STORY was screened by Kino Ken as part of the 2016 Carnegie Mellon International Film Festival in Oakland, Pennsylvania. Here is his review of that film.

4 of a possible 20 points

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France / Lebanon / Syria 2009-2015 color 76 minutes live action subtitled feature documentary 10ftfilms / BFI (British Film Institute) / BBC Storyville Producers: Elhum Shakerifar, Sean McAllister

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

0 Direction: Sean McAllister
0 Editing: Matthew Scholes and Jimmy Burke
0 Photography: Sean McAllister
0 Lighting
1 Interviewees: Raghda Hassan, Amer Daoud, Kaka, Bob
1 Music: Terence Dunn
2 Locations
0 Sound
0 Creativity
0 Insightfulness
4 total points

Sean McAllister's documentary film A SYRIAN LOVE STORY examines the impact of revolution and civil war on a Syrian family headed by political activists.

Sometime around 2009, the director visited Syria, more in the role of provocateur than tourist, hoping to acquire more information about that nation's percolating social unrest. Eschewing popular antiquity sites and advice from hosts, he instead attempted to interview natives about their perceptions concerning Syria's present and future. Eventually his investigations led to a family thoroughly enmeshed in current politics.

Amer Daoud, a former Palestinian revolutionary, and reformist Raghda Hassan met in a Syrian prison. Through conversations there, the pair discovered they had much in common and fell in love. After getting released, they began a family which ultimately expanded to four children. Raghda then wrote a book critical of the Assad regime and was again imprisoned by authorities. Leaving Amer to raise their family on his own.

Understandably, he campaigned for his wife's freedom, receiving assistance and publicity through connection to filmmaker McAllister, who attached himself to the family like a barnacle and refused to let go. Despite the existence of four children from this union, only two are prominently featured: Kaka, age ten when film reportage begins, and Bob, then age four. Two other siblings are mostly ignored.

During the following five years, Amer and his dependents are compelled by circumstances to leave their home in Tartus, Syria, relocating first to Yarmouk, a suburb of Damascus heavily populated by fellow Palestinians, then to Lebanon, and finally to France. Thanks to international publicity, Ragha is freed from prison while they are still in Syria. Her inflammatory remarks about the repressive Syrian government and McAllister's videotaping of them trigger a brief arrest of the foreign documentarian and consequent compulsory exodus of Amer, Ragha and their brood across the border into Lebanon, where they become political refugees. Life is miserable for them in a strange land, yet they cannot safely return to Syria.

Application for political asylum is made to French authorities. France approves that request. Off go the exiles again. For them, France is a safe haven. At first.

Later, Amer's wandering eye and Raghda's discontent at removal from Middle East turbulence rip apart familial harmony. Divorce looms in the offing.

Bob finds assimilation into French culture difficult, his feminine hair style sending peers and neighbors the wrong message about the boy's gender. That in turn leads to bullying, estrangement, and ridicule.

Amer packs up once more, departing Paris for vineyards in the historic walled French town of Albi. He takes his youngest child along, necessitating another set of farewells to old playmates. Bob must start building relationships again from scratch, a process he's likely to find increasingly wearisome and frustrating. His new home is less cosmopolitan and accepting of immigrants. Amer doesn't seem to notice or care, wholly occupied with farming responsibilities. He has temporarily given up on reconciliation with his wife.

She has settled temporarily in southern Turkey. Her chosen job there is counselling Syrian militants about strategy to overthrow the embattled government of their homeland.

Do McAllister's relentless camera and nagging questions contribute to marital discord, instigate it, or merely record its development? From what is seen and heard, the filmmaker is all too eager for conflict of every kind, whether governmental or familial. He appears to pour salt on open wounds verbally, relishing friction at any cost for the sake of invented drama.

This is not a tolerable position for a documentary filmmaker. If aggression and discord is all he wants, McAllister should stick to narrative fiction. Otherwise, he becomes more problem than problem-solver.

Lighting and sound are of abysmal home-movie quality, missing even the dubious virtue of realistic rawness. Editorial choices, not limited budgets or colorless locations, result in unpleasantly ragged, underlit babbling in cramped, overcrowded interiors and successive bleak, earth-toned exteriors. Anything remotely beautiful is eschewed in favor of unremitting ugliness and abrasion.

Nor are interviews with family members especially revelatory. Origins of Amer's radicalization are absent as is any rationale for his wife's restless negativism. If Amer is really committed to family unity, why pick a spouse far more concerned with crusades outside the home?

Due to violence, vile language, and graphic verbal descriptions of torture, A SYRIAN LOVE STORY is acceptable viewing only for indiscriminating adults. Its lack of objectivity overrides any merit as a documentation of contemporary Middle East politics. McAllister's movie is unsatisfying, unnecessary, brutally dishonest, turning domestic unravelling into melodramatic fodder for the benefit of cynical audiences.

An English professor imported for a follow-up Q and A was even more of an embarrassment than the movie itself. Belittling Syrian Christians in the auditorium whose experiences contradicted his political theories further discredited this dictatorial analyst whose stock in trade was purely polemical and badly disconnected from reality. Losing no opportunity to attack U.S. foreign policy, while avoiding any mention of British miscalculation and disastrous favoritisms in the Near East, the lecturer contented himself with restricting dialogue only to sympathetic comments supporting his own highly debatable claims. Such conduct was more an indicator of academic abuse than freedom of speech.

The reviewer wishes to thank www.screendaily.com for providing more background information on the subject family and its background than the filmmaker coherently managed to do.