

# Film

## Children of Rage

(Written and directed by Arthur Allan Seidelman; produced by George R. Nice; L.S.V. Productions, Ltd.)

### Mark A. Bruzonsky

Financially backed by a Midwestern American Jew well known for his support of Israel, written and directed by a young American Jew, yet considered by many to be sympathetic to the cause of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), *Children of Rage* is a highly controversial film. When it was screened in Washington last June, a fair percentage of the audience held invitations from the Egyptian Embassy. I myself had been invited by a young Pakistani friend who actively supported the PLO and was writing a doctoral thesis justifying international terrorism (his invitation had come from the Egyptian Embassy). I expected the usual rationalizations for fanatical Palestinian irredentism.

But *Children of Rage* is something quite different. It is a shocking and absorbing portrayal of Middle East reality. Though admittedly espousing the theme of Palestinian homelessness through Israeli usurpation, the film is not the propaganda it is said to be by those who fail to appreciate the writer's artistry or motivations. For those viewers aware of the complex history of the Arab-Israeli tragedy, *Children of Rage* is a powerful presentation of the human dimensions of what transpires daily on both sides of the nationalist/cultural barrier.

With poor advance publicity the film played to exceptionally small audiences during June in New York City. Little wonder too that the reviews of *Children of Rage* contradicted each other in glaring fashion, ranging from "PLO job...an explosively controversial film" (Smith and Van Der Hoast in *The Village Voice*) to "a picture so evenly balanced in its view of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that its American writer-director...can take a bow" (Winsten in the *New York Post*).

Writer-director Arthur Allan Seidelman, who does deserve some

bows, is currently promoting his creation throughout the United States and abroad—but so far with limited success. The film is a commercial venture, but in a way financial considerations seem almost secondary. It is obvious upon talking with Seidelman that he could not have written and directed this drama unless he felt a passionate need to communicate the personal dimensions of the bitter struggle.

Predictably, American Jewry split over the film's objectivity and worth (just as the Israeli Film Board's liaison with the Foreign Ministry—General Hareven—caused a schism over approval of the script). As predictably, those opposed to Israel find in *Children of Rage* a sophisticated device for eliciting sympathy for the PLO. On both sides those who are highly political are compelled to consider the film primarily in the context of its potential effects on the American public and on various international audiences.

But while political groupings do their verbal battle, it would be quite unfortunate if most viewers overlooked the human meaning of Seidelman's one-man crusade. Seidelman admits that "I had to tell the story from the Palestinian side. I had to unplug ears and eyes." This is a realization he came to during the three years he spent researching, writing, and directing. As Kissinger shuttled between capitals for the purpose of government posturing, Seidelman was shuttling between refugee camps in Lebanon and Israeli settlements to assess the effects on people's lives. The result of his researches is a visual and emotional journey into "the dilemma of individuals strapped to the powder keg of national loyalties while struggling to speak to each other with words of peace. Virtually every thought, political speech, and viewpoint expressed," says Seidelman, "was from a conversation I had had with an Israeli or an Arab."

A summary of the story can provide little of the intensity of watching and feeling the plot unfold. A mine explodes, and soldiers chase terrorists. With a flashback technique these border scenes are interspersed with those of youngsters playing kickball in Jerusalem (the next generation's soldiers and terrorists?). Rushed to a hospital, a Fedayeen commando is recognized by Dr. David Shalmon as

friend from his school days. The dying commando's brother, Omar, decides to avenge his brother's death and join the Fedayeen, much to his family's torment. "You have come here to die," he is quickly instructed. "Do not doubt that victory will come, if not in this generation then in the next." Within the PLO a debate rages over the use of terror—"honor versus terror," as one struggling opponent defines the moral terrain.

Omar is finally readied for a mission. Posing as a student, he goes with a book bomb to a community center in which a dance is being held. Injured in the subsequent blast, Omar is sent, unconscious, to David Shalmon's hospital. Suspecting Omar's involvement, David seeks out Leyla, Omar's sister. David had tried to befriend Leyla months earlier when she had come to the hospital to identify her dead commando brother. This time he succeeds.

David is tormented by the antagonistic causes for which both he and Leyla's brother Omar now struggle, and he tries to convince his family and friends of the desperate need to attempt understanding of the Palestinians, of their needs and aspirations and their passionate conviction of having been wronged. In the process the wide spectrum of attitudes held in Israel toward the Palestinians and the PLO is revealed.

"We came to this land in peace. We wanted to join them. All they want to do is destroy us...."

"This country was theirs before we came here...."

"I know the way their minds work. They want all or nothing, so they get nothing...."

With David's request to cross the border turned down, he and Leyla arrange to be smuggled out of the country to a camp in southern Lebanon. Though serving as a doctor, he is always distrusted and usually openly hated. Omar escapes the hospital; he loathes the friendship developing between his sister and David. Emotions explode in a scene in which Omar screams out "You'll never have my friendship"—a statement which translates in the viewer's mind as "Israel will never be accepted by the Palestin-

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ians." David responds to this "Well, will you at least take mine?"

The prevalent hatred of all Israelis competes with the PLO camp leader's attempt to at least tolerate the contradictions and accept David's help. But "We've learned not to trust, not to believe," he shouts to David in desperation.

And in the midst of these interpersonal subdramas a retaliatory Israeli commando raid unfolds. David is shot dead by one of the extremists. Omar falls to Israeli helicopter fire. The camp goes up in flames. Leyla is alone, shattered by what outsiders often casually refer to as the "Arab-Israeli conflict." She becomes the lasting image of the human grief that is the legacy of the actual participants.

Some will term it melodrama, except for the fatalistic ending. Others, of course, will charge political manipulation, if not by a gullible Seidelman then by Arab-supporting promoters. But Seidelman (clearly exploitable as another "turncoat" I.F. Stone) sees his creation as an attempt to get to the roots of the human conflicts, to try to uncover the motivations and passions that turn people into fanatics and ultranationalists. "All I wanted," he insists, "was to make a film about people, not political issues. If I were interested in politics, I'd have done a documentary."

Seidelman, though, has often been treated as if he were making a documentary, as if he were politically motivated. General Hareven ("General" is a first name, not a military designation)—who caused an initially favorably disposed twelve-man Israeli Film Board to refuse approval of the script that would have made possible the help needed to produce the film in Israel—accused Seidelman of everything from being a bad Jew to being a bad Christian. "Even after my return to New York," Seidelman recalls, "I received letters from him damning me." "Hareven," says Seidelman, "hated the script with a vehemence that was rather phenomenal. In two interviews the man never smiled." Among the additions Hareven insisted upon was a scene in which Omar would accept money for something he was to do and one in which an Israeli-built hospital for Palestinians would be destroyed by terrorists. Hareven was most upset at the very notion of

David's crossing the border illegally and with the appearance of David's apartment, which he compared to one on the upper West Side of New York City. "We are not like American Jews," Seidelman was instructed. "You are insulting us."

During the past summer, after one of the American screenings, a man approached Seidelman shouting, "I'm going to knock the shit out of you." Seidelman responded: "First tell me what side you are on." The writer insists that "the film is not apologetic of the terrorist problem. I am a pacifist. I abhor terrorism. But you don't stop terror by not trying to find out its root causes."

However, like the rest of us, Seidelman has his own political orientations, though he may not recognize them as such. His "truth" is passionately expressed, but even the most admiring can easily see omissions and gaps in Seidelman's presentation of the Israeli-Palestinian nightmare. Some accuse him not only of telling the story from the Palestinian point of view, but of giving depth and feeling to his Palestinian characters while portraying the Israelis on the whole as less feeling and less sensitive. Whatever one's view, Seidelman's belief that "this film presents a microcosm of the truth" is largely true—that is, if the sentence is slightly amended to read "...some of the truth."

Other views of the writer are more open to challenge. "Only when Israel as a national-political entity is willing to see this truth can she achieve a lasting peace in the Middle East. The Palestinian problem is the core and the base of the Middle East problem. Unless that problem is solved, they can sign treaties till kingdom come and there won't be peace, and I don't think there are ten members of the Israeli parliament or the American diplomatic corps who know that. I don't think that Mr. Kissinger has ever visited a refugee camp."

During the final months of 1975 the film was scheduled to open in Houston and a number of cities in Florida for the first commercial showings since those in New York in June. It has become something of a hot potato, with unconfirmed rumors that pro-Israeli groups have been applying considerable pressure behind the scenes. It is

also true that some simply feel it's a bad film. Whether there is truth to the rumors or validity to the more critical assessments, the \$1.1 million film hasn't really gotten off the ground yet. According to Seidelman, the Rugoff chain in New York thought they might suffer a bombing if they agreed to distribute the film. The K-B theatres in Washington apparently considered the film too anti-Israeli. On the other hand, Seidelman is completing negotiations for the film to be shown on German television and has sold the film for cable TV in the U.S., which, he notes, will include showings at U.S. Army camps.

This mostly true-to-life portrayal of what is in fact happening began about three years ago at the suggestion of a young woman of Syrian ancestry. As Seidelman began exploring the actual situation in the Middle East, the script began to develop out of his own perceptions of the motivations, beliefs, and attitudes of those he met. Whether Seidelman is "right" in believing that the plight of the Palestinian refugees is the key to solving the conflict is not nearly as crucial as how meaningfully he has presented the Palestinian case while not diminishing the Jewish one.

It is far too easy to dismiss *Children of Rage* as a PLO tearjerker. More than any other film I know Seidelman's captures dimensions of pain and suffering that are well understood by Middle Easterners on all sides of the cease-fire lines, but all too little felt by many of Israel's most supportive followers or the PLO's intellectual cheerleaders. As Seidelman puts it, "Nothing I say in the film is different from what Amos Elon has written in his excellent book, *The Israelis*."

But seeing all of this on the screen at a time when the PLO taunts the world with concessionary "dreams" of Israel's collapse is wrenching to those who see in Israel the legitimate embodiment of Jewish aspirations, if not, indeed, survival. Even so, the pain is necessary to bear—actually a small price in comparison to the fate of so many Israelis and Palestinians. And if in Seidelman's story there is some impetus for attempting to understand the other side, to learn why young Palestinians eagerly accept suicide missions as well as why Israeli sabras race into battle, then it is a film that deserves a wide audience.