

# EILEEN SIMPSON & BEN WHITE

## // Reverse Engineering: The making of *Struggle in Jerash*

*The following text is a transcript edited from a series of conversations between film critic and historian Adnan Madanat and artists Eileen Simpson & Ben White in Amman Jordan, May 2008. (Translation by Abdullah Khasawneh)*

**Eileen Simpson & Ben White:** We first heard about *Struggle In Jerash* (1957 dir. Wassif Sheik Yassin) in an article you wrote responding to claims that the recent film *Captain Abu Raed* (2007, dir. Amin Matalqa) was the first Jordanian feature. Can you tell us a bit more about when *Struggle In Jerash* was made?

**Adnan Madanat:** *Struggle In Jerash* was created in the year 1957. Before this there were no Jordanian films whatsoever because, since the twenties, the country was under British authorities. To take footage was banned; if a Jordanian was caught taking footage, he would be arrested and thrown in jail. Lots of foreign reporters would come to film but it was difficult for Jordanians to do so. So it is important that the first movie came after independence.

**ES & BW:** We understand there was no film industry in Jordan at the time and that a self-organised group were behind the production.

**AM:** There were five people behind the film, a group of craftsmen who originally came from Palestine. Their expertise included fixing projectors and cinema tools in theatres back in Palestine, before the establishment of Israel state in 1948. They were probably influenced by Egyptian cinema and the idea of creating a film occurred to them. So they collaborated in establishing a company and they each put in a small amount of money —around 5 Jordanian Dinars. 5 JD at the time was a considerable sum but not really enough to properly establish a film production company.

**ES & BW:** Can you talk about the cultural context that the group were coming from?

**AM:** In the Palestinian cities the group were coming from (Haifa, Jaffa, and Jerusalem) prior to 1948 the social and cultural life was rich. For example, there were good schools there. At the time Jordanians who finished their high school education would go to Jerusalem – anywhere in the West Bank to study. Also Palestine had the greatest Egyptian singers visiting and performing, and theatrical groups would also tour there. So it was a country with culture, not “a land without a people”. There *was* a people.

**ES & BW:** You mention in your article that film materials and equipment were not available in Jordan at the time so the group had to be resourceful and even make their own equipment.

**AM:** They had a 35mm camera and they didn't have anything else. When they considered buying equipment, they found out that the prices were way beyond anything they could afford. One of them, Mustafa Najjar (a car mechanic) travelled to Beirut, visited a studio there, and examined the film equipment. He looked at the machines – in particular the equipment for developing and editing films. He came back to Amman and started, along with his colleagues, using their expertise to manufacture this equipment. They had a small apartment north of Amman, which they considered headquarters, where they installed their equipment and set up the company.

They started working on the film as soon as one of them had the scenario, which was written by a well known journalist at the time, who had no expertise in writing for the screen, but was influenced by Egyptian cinema. Everyone in the group were not only cameramen, directors, producers, and writers – but were also the main actors in the film.

**ES & BW:** And the technical side of things? Again, you mention that the group had to be inventive with technical processes – especially with synchronising sound.

**AM:** Nowadays, people that watched the movie at the time and remember it, speak about it with sarcasm; they talk about how the sound and the images did not match and how it wasn't synchronised correctly. In particular they talk about the fight scenes – how you would hear a hit first and after that you would see the actual punch take place. But this problem with synchronisation was only in parts of the movie. Synch sound of course needed equipment and machines, which they didn't have access to.

The movie was shot and the film was developed with some problems with sourcing film stock. Then they started the difficult process of mixing the sound with the image. They had to transfer the sound from magnetic to optical and they didn't have the necessary equipment. They thought about the projector and how it displays the images, but realised they could adapt it somehow to actually play the sound and transfer it to optical. So this is a major achievement in this film – the technical achievement.

To synchronise the sound with the images, they used two projectors – one displaying the image and one playing the sound, and they connected them both to one switch so that when they turned it on they would both work at the same time. After minute three, the sound and the images started mismatching. So they started cutting the movie,

three minutes at a time and that helped them get the best result.

**ES & BW:** You said that the crew were also the main actors in the movie and it's interesting to think of them using their expertise in car mechanics and applying their knowledge in a different sphere of the production. There are two women in the film. Were they also part of the production team?

**AM:** There were five men in the production team – car mechanics, projection technicians etc., and as I said, they also starred on the other side of the camera. At the time Jordan was a conservative country and getting actors was a problem. For example when Jordanian theatre started in the 60s they had a very hard time casting actresses – they found some but it was very difficult. So just imagine how difficult it was ten years earlier with some nudity and kissing scenes. But they did find actresses and the movie was filmed.

**ES & BW:** And how did the public react to the film?

**AM:** The country took a great interest in the creation of this first movie. In the beginning, the movie was shown to the censorship council and it was forbidden. It was banned by order of the prime minister because of scenes that were found to be revealing or “unconservative”: like a girl, an actress in a bathing suit, and some kissing scenes. The five behind the movie were terrified because they had invested all their money in the film and of course it was their dream. But luckily they had a friend who had a job projecting films at the royal palace for the young Princes. So he told the Princes about the film and projected it for them in the royal court. According to Mustafa Najjar, Prince Hassan —at the time twelve years old —watched the movie and considered it a national achievement. He technically overruled the Prime Minister's decision!

**ES & BW:** During our research period in Amman, we have found it quite difficult to find archive film and audio material produced in Jordan dating from this period. Some of the people we have shown the film to have been surprised that this footage exists. Do you know of other film material shot at this time?

**AM:** In 1966 there was a Department for Cinema and they used to film the beginnings of things; the initiations and establishments of everything, such as, King Hussain's opening of Aqaba Port. They had footage of the 1967 war; they filmed the refugees flowing into the country from Palestine; and they created several movies: *Bells of Return*, *Flower of Cities* – movies about the Palestinian cause. If there were any other documents that record Jordanian history, they would probably be found in England. Now there are some documents in the Jordanian Television archives. Of course, they bought these from London.

**ES & BW:** It seems then that this film is a really important and unique glimpse of aspects of Jordanian life at the time, filmed by Jordanians,

featuring scenes of Amman streets, the airport, 1950s fashions and lifestyle, Philadelphia Hotel, the ruins of Jerash, crossing the River Jordan, as well as documentary footage of the West Bank and Jerusalem. But you also talked about the political message the filmmakers wanted to get across. Can you tell us a bit more about the politics of the film?

**AM:** Much of the film takes a documentary form and emphasizes the historical importance of Palestinian towns in the West Bank. Whereas the dramatic events of the movie all take place in the East Bank: in Amman, at the Dead Sea and in Jerash. But let's not forget that the filming of the movie took place after the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948. If now, 60 years later, the emotions about the occupation are still so alive, then how would you imagine it would be only nine years after the events of '48? So there was no predetermined political motive in the film. They just tried to awaken feelings about Palestinian cities - nationalist emotions for a lost country.

**ES & BW:** Although notorious as the country's first feature, the film is not in general circulation. Did the group achieve what they set out to achieve through making the film?

**AM:** The film was played in the most important movie theatre house in Amman at the time, which was in Jabel Webdeh. There was good attendance but they discovered that the money they were getting for tickets did not cover at all the money they had paid for the production.

They needed financial support to even think about making another movie. But no one gave them that financial support. They very quickly became frustrated, besides they had to make a living. They all split up. Mustafa Najjar opened a garage and they closed the office in Amman. The mistake they made was that when they closed the office, none of them thought of saving the equipment - so it was all thrown away. The only thing Mustafa Najjar kept was the 35mm, he saved the trailer, and forgot the whole experience.

**ES & BW:** You saved this film from completed disappearance. You mentioned to us that when you were researching the history of Jordanian cinema back in the 80s, you found out that Mustafa Najjar still had the only surviving copy of the 35mm film.

**AM:** Yes, it took a very long time to find the movie. The film itself was in a very bad condition. It was dry and broken in parts because it wasn't stored properly. So I took it to professionals at Jordanian Television who tried to fix the film and, through telecine, they were able to make a VHS copy of the movie.

At the time I copied the movie several times. I gave one to Mustafa Najjar. He was very happy. For days and days he kept on calling his relatives and had them over to watch the movie, especially as he was also an actor in the film.

**ES & BW:** What happened to the original film?

**AM:** I handed the 35mm film back to Mustafa Najjar because he suddenly realised he had a valuable thing and he wanted it back. But later on when I needed the reels again to make a better copy, I contacted him – by then he was an old man – and found out that tragically he had lost it... He forgot where he put the film!

**ES & BW:** So the only surviving copy of the film is the VHS telecine you made in the 80s?

**AM:** Yes. A few years ago there was an honorary ceremony for the pioneers of Jordanian cinema. They tried to contact Mustafa Najjar, however, they discovered that he had died two years earlier. His son came in his stead and he told me that they'd searched and searched for the film after his father's death but they couldn't find it. It's likely that the film was lost years earlier when his workshop had been sold after his retirement.

Sadly, the original print – we don't know where it is. It's probably impossible to find now.