

Film Review: 'Iraqi Odyssey'

Single-monikered helmer Samir uses his extended family as archetypes of the Iraqi diaspora in this overlong yet surprisingly engrossing docu.



Revolutionary hope, coups and counter-coups, then exile: Such is the distressingly common pattern for millions of middle-class Arabs from the mid-20th century until now. Single-monikered helmer [Samir](#) uses members of his extended family as archetypes of this diaspora in his overlong yet surprisingly engrossing docu, "[Iraqi Odyssey](#)," designed to capture the vicissitudes of Iraq's troubled history via one clan's personal take on the last century. The perfunctory use of [3D](#) and excessive running time won't attract more viewers, but fest programmers understanding the need to demystify a nationality often seen only in one-dimensional form should take a look.

Two versions of the multi-lingo pic exist: one with Arabic narration and English subtitles, the other with English voiceover and Arabic subtitles. Unfortunately, the grating delivery of the actors hired to do the English voiceover, spoken as if part of a theater production for children, requires considerable mental adjustment and won't expand the film's audience base. Samir's previous docu, "Forget Baghdad," about four Iraqi Jews, will likely have seen more traction than "Odyssey" can achieve, though as part of a growing number of pics dealing with the Arab diasporic experience (Philippe Aractingi's "Heritages," to name one recent example), the film occupies a valuable niche and deserves recognition.

"Odyssey" is loosely organized into three chapters, with the first two sections blending into one another as they introduce the family in both past and present forms. The Jamal Aldin clan are Sayyids, meaning they trace their descent from the Prophet and include prominent figures in Iraqi public life. Samir's branch, starting with his grandfather, became secularists during the anti-British resistance immediately following the Arab Revolt, and later, under the aegis of the Communist Party, advocated for the fall of the Hashemite monarchy.

Post-coup stability didn't last long, and in the coming decades the tenuous political situation resulted in many Jamal Aldins leaving the country. Samir's mother was Swiss, so the family moved to Zurich;

others led more peripatetic lives, heading to Beirut, Lausanne, Paris, Kuwait. Following his communist sympathies, Jamal Al Tahir moved to Moscow, where he remains. A family reunion in Lebanon in 1969, several years after the Ba'athist regime took control at home, had them questioning whether they'd ever return. Some, like Samir's father, did go back, but the country under Saddam Hussein wasn't a healthy place for a middle-class, politically progressive family of intellectuals.

The final chapter of the docu traces members in places as far-flung as Auckland, New Zealand, and Buffalo, N.Y. A few dream of returning; others have no illusions. Traveling across the globe while overcoming undoubted logistical hurdles, Samir captures his family in all their warmth and resilience, along with a hint of wistfulness, of fond remembrances when the Arab revolutions of the 1950s offered hope that an equitable, liberal society was possible. The failure of those dreams provides an inescapable, and disturbing, silent commentary on more recent unrest in the region.

Many of the facts Samir presents are fairly basic, though it does provide the Jamal Aldins with a sense of nationhood – given the similarities in general experience between this family and countless others from Lebanon, Syria, Libya and Palestine, the docu's insistence on grounding their story in history wisely keeps the chronicle Iraq-centric. Still, the running time of two hours and 43 minutes is unquestionably self-indulgent; thankfully the clan's charisma keeps attention from lagging too much despite frequent opportunities for trimming. Interviews are against a black background, allowing for superimpositions of words, photographs, and clips (the 3D is meant to make for more interesting and varied visual planes as accompaniment to the talking heads, yet feels superfluous). An impressive amount of archival material, nicely edited and accompanied by appropriate music tracks, acts as both family album and chronicle of a lost world.

Film Review: 'Iraqi Odyssey'

Reviewed at Abu Dhabi Film Festival (competing), Oct. 27, 2014. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — TIFF Docs; Rio de Janeiro Film Festival — Panorama.) Running time: **163 MIN**.

Production

(Documentary — Switzerland-Germany-UAE-Iraq) A Look Now! (in Switzerland) release of a Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion, Coin Film, SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen/SRG SSR, WDR Westdeutscher Rundfunk production, in association with Sanad Fund, Furat al Jamil. (International sales: Outlook Filmsales, Vienna.) Produced by Werner Schweizer, Samir. Co-producers, Herbert Schwering, Furat al Jamil. Executive producer, Joel Jent.

Crew

Directed, written by Samir. Camera (color/B&W, HD, 3D), Lukas Streb, Pierre Mennel, Yuri Burak, John Kelleran, Kirill Gerra, Samir, Saaeb Hadad, Ali Alfatlawi; editors, Sophie Brunner, Ali Alfatlawi, Wathiq Al Ameri, Samir; music, Maciej Sledziecki; sound (Dolby Digital 5.1), Reto Stamm, Al Seconi, Martin Wilson, Don Feigel, Roman Platanov, Maxim Malin; sound designers, Henning Hein, Jef van Even; 3D animation, Wamidh Al Ameri; line producers, Christine Kiauk, Victoria Kaskova, Anna Sharova.

With

Samira Jamal Aldin, Sabah Jamal Aldin, Souhair Jamal Aldin, Jamal Al Tahir, Tanya Uldin, Samir. Voices: Ellen Wagner, Tom Zahner, Ann Malcolm, Laura Zonka. (Arabic, English, German, Russian dialogue)

<http://variety.com/2014/film/reviews/film-review-iraqi-odyssey-1201367364/>