

Children trapped in the Middle East conflict

Promises, directed by B.Z. Goldberg, Justine Shapiro and Carlos Bolado

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Any documentary that sensitively deals with the plight of children caught up in the Palestinian and Israeli conflict deserves acknowledgement. *Promises*, a 106-minute documentary directed by B.Z. Goldberg, Justine Shapiro and Carlos Bolado and currently screening in selected Australian cinemas, is one such work.

Shot in Israel and the West Bank Occupied Territories in 1997, 1998 and 2000, a period of relative calm following the Oslo Accords, the film chronicles the lives of several Palestinian and Israeli children. It was the work of relatively inexperienced filmmakers who brought the children together as friends.

Goldberg studied filmmaking at New York University and worked as a journalist in Israel. He was inspired to make the film after he saw Palestinian children playing the “*intifada* game” while working as a television soundman during the first uprising in Palestine. Some of the children would play-act as “Israelis”, beating up or shooting the “Arabs”. The “Arabs” demonstrated or threw stones.

Promises traces Goldberg’s journey to Jerusalem and the West Bank Palestinian communities where he gradually befriends seven children aged between 9 and 13 years. The three Palestinians—Sanabel and Faraj, from the Deheishe refugee camp near Bethlehem, and Mahmoud from Jerusalem—and four Israelis—Shlomo, Moishe and twin brothers Yarko and Daniel—all live within 20 minutes of each other.

Faraj speaks about the land taken from his grandparents by the Israelis and hopes one day that it will be returned. Mahmoud, whose father owns a grocery store, is a Hamas supporter. Sanabel’s father, who is a journalist, has been imprisoned in an Israeli

jail for over two years without charge. Goldberg accompanies the family on their monthly trip to the prison, rising at 5 am for the long journey, made even longer by the constant border controls and checkpoints. They are allowed to visit for half an hour.

Of the Israeli children, Shlomo is an ultra-orthodox Jew who studies the Torah 12 hours a day. Moishe comes from an extreme right-wing Jewish settlement and tells the filmmakers that he hates all Arabs. Yarko and Daniel, who are secular Jews, have a more enlightened outlook. They are fascinated when their grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, tells them he does not believe in god.

Promises exposes some aspects of the apartheid-like repression of the Palestinian people, including the endless military checkpoints for those employed inside Israel or attempting to visit relatives. Those without documents are searched and turned back. The documentary contains several deeply moving scenes, particularly when the Palestinian children explain how friends and family have been killed or injured by heavily armed Israeli soldiers. It also records the hopes and fears of Yarko and Daniel, who discuss each morning which bus to take to school, worried that it might be attacked by Palestinian suicide bombers.

Although hardened by the constant threat of armed conflict and bloodshed, most of the children, however, retain their natural exuberance and enthusiasm. For example, Yarko and Daniel’s curiosity about Faraj is aroused when Goldberg recounts the Palestinian boy’s tearful reaction to losing a running race in which he represented the Deheishe refugee camp. The twins, who are volleyball players, lost the finals while representing their own school and immediately empathise with

Faraj. Goldberg proposes the twins meet Faraj, Sanabel and their friends.

Moishe and Shlomo are unwilling to meet the Palestinian children. Back in Deheishe, Faraj is also reluctant. Sanabel challenges Faraj, saying, “I don’t know of one Palestinian child who tried to explain our situation to an Israeli.” The Palestinians finally agree to meet Yarko and Daniel, who enter a refugee camp for the first time in their lives.

They play soccer, talk about their experiences and eat at Faraj’s house, laughing and joking like ordinary children. This meeting, however, becomes serious when Faraj tearfully explains his fear that when Goldberg returns to the US everything will be the same and their newly forged friendship will fade. Everyone is visibly moved, not just by Faraj’s sadness but also by the bitter reality of his comments.

These scenes undermine mass media and fundamentalist claims that Arabs and Jews are naturally antagonistic. They also demonstrate that the real obstacles to forging and maintaining these friendships are external and political, factors that the children themselves cannot resolve. This is reinforced towards the end of the film.

In a sombre epilogue shot in 2000, the children are a few years older and their friendship has lapsed. Deteriorating political conditions have made it more and more difficult for them to meet and the twins have stopped returning phone calls from Faraj. Faraj and his companions become disillusioned that they will never be able to reestablish their friendship. Faraj tells the camera that peace is not possible in his lifetime and has stopped thinking about the future because the grueling environment in the refugee camp does not permit him to “dream”.

Promises, which was nominated for an Academy Award this year, has a number of affecting moments, particularly when placed within the context of the brutal military operations now being unleashed by the Sharon-led Israeli government against West Bank towns and refugee camps. It provides a stark portrait of the difficulties confronting Palestinian children and the unrelenting repression of their communities. Unfortunately it also leaves many questions unanswered.

Shapiro told the PBS-POV web site that the filmmakers decided on a “non-judgmental” approach:

“We didn’t want to make a film to ‘educate’ or convince an audience to take a particular side.... The beauty of being a documentary filmmaker is that your job is to ask the questions, not to engage in polemic. So we listened, we didn’t challenge. Taking sides is easy. Listening with an open heart is more interesting, more challenging.”

However, this method provides a rationale for not examining the essential causes of the Israel-Palestine conflict. It weakens *Promises* by tending to reduce everything to moral issues. In fact, the documentary provides no more than a cursory overview of Palestinian dispossession and no explanation of Zionist ideology. Without this, no understanding, or humane solution, is possible. Instead of exploring these issues, audiences are simply left with the ideas of the children—the innocent victims and those without the means to discover the complex political history that produced these events.

In the early part of the 20th century sections of the Palestinian Arab and Jewish working class and intelligentsia were animated by the conception of a united struggle for a democratic, secular and socialist perspective in the Middle East. Inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917, they formed the Palestinian Communist Party and conducted a difficult but principled battle for this perspective before the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy politically disoriented the organisation in the late 1920s. Some reference to the historic efforts of those attempting to combat Zionism and other nationalist ideologies in the region would have strengthened the documentary dramatically.

Despite its limitations, *Promises* deserves to be seen for its portrayal of those children who try to live through, and rise above, the impact of Zionist oppression.



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