

Julian Schnabel's *Miral*: A Palestinian girl's personal and political awakening

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Directed by Julian Schnabel, screenplay by Rula Jebreal

Based closely on Rula Jebreal's semi-autobiographical novel, Julian Schnabel's most recent film, *Miral* (2010), tells the story of a Palestinian girl's coming of age in Israel during the First Intifada (uprising) in the late 1980s to the signing of the first Oslo Accords in 1993. In treating her personal and political awakening as intertwined, the film has an intensely felt authenticity that is often moving, if sometimes over-earnest.

And given a cultural milieu that consistently marginalizes or disputes the veracity of Palestinian accounts of life in Israel, the film is quite courageous for including in its narrative references to the historic crimes of the Israeli state, albeit brief ones. Largely as a result, Schnabel's work has been savaged with bad reviews, accused of not taking a "balanced" position and even of portraying "terrorism" sympathetically.

While critics are entitled to their opinions, much of the criticism of *Miral* seems motivated by concerns other than its artistic and dramatic quality; some is downright specious. For instance, the choice of the non-Palestinian actress Freida Pinto (from *Slumdog Millionaire*) to play the lead character Miral was stupidly deplored.

Artist/filmmaker Schnabel has tended to choose biographical or quasi-autobiographical subjects for his films. *Basquiat* (1996) was a biopic about Haitian-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat's meteoric rise and fall in the decadent milieu of the New York art world of the 1980s. *Before Night Falls* (2000), based on poet and writer Reinaldo Arenas's autobiographical novel, treats the experience of being homosexual in the politically repressive context of Cuba in the 1970s.

And *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007) adapted

the memoir of French fashion editor Jean-Dominique Bauby who became paralyzed from a massive stroke that left him with "locked-in syndrome." Schnabel's visual lyricism was well suited to its subject. The latter film won the Palme D'Or, among other awards, and Schnabel won as best director at the 2007 Cannes film festival.

The newer film begins by explaining that "miral" is the name of a red flower that grows by the side of the road. "You've probably seen millions of them"—in other words, they are at once everywhere but go unnoticed. The story then backtracks into the stories of three other women—Hind, Nadia and Fatima—before becoming the story of Miral herself.

At Christmas Day celebrations in the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem in 1947, Hind al-Husseini (Hiam Abbass) mingles with wealthy American expatriate Bertha Spoffard (fittingly played by Vanessa Redgrave) and meets Colonel Edward "Eddie" Smith (Willem Dafoe) of the US military. As a member of the Palestinian upper classes, Hind moves in a world that is cosmopolitan, yet insular, and unprepared for the disaster about to overtake it. She also enjoys a degree of independence uncommon for a woman in traditional Palestinian society.

In April 1948, Hind comes across a group of terrified children who have survived the Israeli massacre in the village of Deir Yassin. Hind takes the children to her family's estate outside Jerusalem's Old City, which she then turns into the orphanage Dar Al-Tifel. It soon houses thousands of children lost, abandoned or orphaned in the "nakhba" (Arabic for catastrophe), in which three quarters of a million Palestinians were driven from their villages by the ethnic cleansing and war attendant on Israel's declaration of statehood.

Hind struggles to bring stability to the lives of the traumatized children she cares for through firm discipline and education. However, outside the walls of the

orphanage, life is far harsher for many young Palestinians. Nadia (Yasmine Al Massri) runs away from sexual abuse by her stepfather in a hillside village, works as a belly dancer in a Tel Aviv bar, and ends up in prison for punching an Israeli girl on a bus who calls her an Arab whore.

There she meets Fatima (Ruba Blal), imprisoned for a far more serious act of retaliation against the Israelis. Recognizing that Nadia needs help, Fatima convinces her family to take Nadia to their home in Jerusalem after she is released. Her brother Jamal (Alexander Siddig) is smitten with Nadia and marries her, even though it is clear that the troubled young woman doesn't love him, and is not able to care for her child, Miral.

Thus, Miral (Freida Pinto) ends up at Dar Al-Tifel, where she grows up with Hind at the orphanage during the week, returning home to Jamal her father, with whom she has a particularly close relationship, on weekends.

On many levels, the film ties the personal development and motivations of its characters into their broader context—in this case, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—in a way that is believable and organic. On one level, Miral may be acting out of her own difficult childhood experiences, but there are millions like her whose childhoods were, in ways both direct and indirect, impacted by the series of wars, expulsions and occupation that have maintained the state of Israel.

Her adolescent rebellion meshes with politics as she becomes caught up in the first Intifada, which began in 1987—when she was 16—with mass protests against the Israeli occupation. And while her embrace of Palestinian nationalism is tinged with the naïveté of a sheltered schoolgirl, she is moved to fight out of a genuine sense of injustice at the plight of the refugees she meets while teaching in the camps in Ramallah.

Miral's involvement with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)—a faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) that opposed negotiations with Israel at Oslo (1993)—raises political and historical problems that neither she nor—as it turns out—the director is equipped to handle.

The bloody internecine conflicts within the Palestinian nationalist movement are complex and potentially deadly as she quickly learns. The inclusion of scenes of her detention and torture by Israeli security forces no doubt contributed to the negative outcry over the film.

While the dead end of Palestinian nationalism as a means of ending the Israeli occupation is a source of disappointment, even of personal grief for Miral as a

character, the fact that these experiences are not fully understood on a higher level by either Jebreal or Schnabel makes these the weakest, and most stilted, scenes of the film. If nationalism and individual acts of violence lead nowhere, then which way forward? The film is unable to answer this, or even pose it, in a convincing manner.

Generally, the results are stronger on the individual and aesthetic levels. Schnabel, who first came to prominence in the 1980s as part of the neo-expressionist art scene (which he treated critically in *Basquiat*), brings his sensibility as a painter to filmmaking.

He often lingers on a striking visual image without sound in such a way that it takes a moment to realize what we are seeing. The heightened color and camera angles give a vivid sense of the world seen through a particular person's eyes—a technique familiar from *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*—that also works well here, as *Miral* is on its surest footing as a personal narrative.

The film also captures telling details of Israeli life under military occupation, as when a young Israeli soldier waves the obviously Jewish Lisa (engagingly played by Schnabel's daughter Stella) through the checkpoint with a casualness that would not have been accorded to Miral if he had recognized her as Palestinian.

The film's lack of objectivity at key points is admittedly made more difficult by Schnabel's personal relationship with Rula Jebreal. A certain romantic glow is extended not just to figures like Hind al-Husseini and Jamal, both of whom from Miral's perspective were clearly loved and admired, but to her politics as well. Despite this limitation, *Miral* is an otherwise honest effort to convey a Palestinian woman's coming of age in Israel with its difficulties and contradictions.



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