

Ahed's Knee from Israel, made “with a sense of urgency”

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With certain honorable exceptions, passion and urgency *in a good cause* have been in short supply in the global film world in recent decades. That will change. It may already be changing, under the impact of glaring and malignant economic inequality, the lethal pandemic, the danger of war and dictatorship, and, decisively, the growth of popular opposition.

Israeli director Nadav Lapid explains that he wrote his remarkable, outraged film *Ahed's Knee* “with a sense of urgency—a feeling that urged me to write, to write it all down, to write fast, right through to the end. It was a feeling that had more control over me than I over it.”

The winner of the 2021 Cannes film festival jury prize, Lapid’s film opens in New York March 18 and other US cities April 1, including Los Angeles.

“Ahed’s Knee” refers to Palestinian teenager Ahed Tamimi and the incident in December 2017 in the occupied West Bank for which she was later arrested and sentenced to eight months in prison. During a demonstration in the village of Nabi Saleh against the expansion of Israeli settlements, Ahed’s 15-year-old cousin was shot in the head at close range with a rubber-coated steel bullet and severely wounded. Ahed, along with her mother and cousin, approached two Israeli soldiers—equipped with M16s, helmets and body armor—outside the family’s house and slapped, kicked and shoved them. For this and other incidents, Ahed was threatened with years in prison.

In April 2018, in response to the episode and Tamimi’s arrest, fascistic Israeli politician Bezalel Smotrich tweeted, “In my opinion, she should have gotten a bullet, at least in the kneecap. That would have put her under house arrest for the rest of her life.”

Lapid’s fiction film opens with a shot of a girl’s knee. The director explains, “It may not be the most

beautiful body part, but it’s a true combination of strength and fragility. I also liked the reference to Éric Rohmer’s *Claire’s Knee* [1970]. As I changed the name of Claire, I gave the film a specific time period—Ahed Tamimi’s. *Ahed’s Knee* takes place in a different world from Claire’s—in today’s world. These days, they want to break Ahed’s knees all over the world, so you need to go wherever needed and film them and enhance them.”

An Israeli film director, Y (Avshalom Pollak), first seen holding auditions to find the right actress with the right knee for his new film, “Ahed’s Knee,” has been invited to show one of his previous works in a town in southern Israel. He is met there by the young woman, Yahalom David (Nur Fibak), from the Ministry of Culture, who organized the visit. She is full of enthusiasm, describes herself as an admirer of his films and makes critical remarks about the Minister of Culture. Oh, and one thing more, she has a form he needs to fill out and sign in order to get paid. On it he must describe the specific topics he will discuss and promise not to raise any other.

What does this mean, he asks. Shall I discuss the “dumbing down,” the “abject stupidity of this country?” Later, she spells it out: no discussion of the Occupation, conflict, etc. Possible subjects include family, Judaism, love. He will later describe the ministry’s form as embodying “submission...servility...humiliation.”

During the film showing, Y and Yahalom go for a walk in the desert. In a critical, extended sequence, Y enters into what the director calls a “verbal trance ... a bit like some rap songs ... where words, almost naked without being accompanied by musical instruments, are both all-powerful and nearly unintelligible.”

It is one of the most scathing, eloquent and poetical

sequences in recent cinema. Again, it begins with the hated form from the hated Minister of Culture (Likud's Miri Regev) and its references to "appropriate" and "inappropriate" topics. Y goes off, something like this: "Suppose I want to discuss a nationalist, racist, sadistic, abject Jewish state whose sole aim is to reduce the soul, particularly the Arab soul, to incompetence and impotence, so it collapses against the state's oppression, and will be completely at its mercy? A state that is a deadly, congenital or contagious disease for its citizens?"

Yahalom answers frankly, "You'd be rejected and blacklisted." Y goes on, "What if my subject is a state that vomits out whatever doesn't conform and never takes it back, that brutalizes its victims with deepest baseness? ... A Jewish, nationalist, racist state. ... Vulgar, ignorant, cowardly, each generation worse than the other. A land killing itself."

Yahalom: "We'll reject you and report you. You'll be finished." The minister has said, she explains, "Smear the country, and you'll starve to death." Y then denounces the "minister of art who hates art, a government that hates human freedom, all human beauty, the ugliest of governments." This is only a small sampling of the dialogue. There are other important elements to the film, including the director's relationship with his dying mother and memories of military service, but this is what stands out above all.

Ahed's Knee was inspired by an incident in June 2018, similar in certain regards to the one dramatized in the film. Lapid was invited to show one of his works and asked to sign such a form by a young woman from the Ministry of Culture. He explains, "That seemed fishy to me. Especially these days when free speech in Israel has turned into a gloomy winter sun, growing dark and dying. And the leader of that anti-free speech campaign happens to be the Minister of Culture herself." Lapid signed the form and the event went off without incident, unlike the fictional screening in his film, which explodes into controversy. (As he remarks, "In the script I wrote, the film director goes down a road I couldn't possibly take. He's willing to sacrifice the Libraries' deputy director [Yahalom] to slow down the fast-moving fascist tank.")

In his director's notes, Lapid continues, "A few months later, the Minister of Culture initiated the law of loyalty to culture, forbidding the funding of any

artwork deemed unfaithful to the government. This law could be passed at any time. The relative democracy that still prevailed is gradually shrinking. We're experiencing the end of a certain Israeli mindset—true or false—that I grew up in. This definitely marks the end of Israel as I've known it."

Lapid, born in Tel Aviv in 1973, has previously directed *Policeman* (2011), *The Kindergarten Teacher* (2014) and *Synonyms* (2019). *Ahed's Knee* is an especially important film.



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