

## 2024 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

# *The Teacher*, from the occupied West Bank, and *Empty Nets* from Iran: “The system ... is perverted”

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*This is the second in a series of articles on films from the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 24-28) that were made available to the WSWs online. The first was posted April 30.*

The ongoing Israeli mass murder in Gaza and stepped up brutality and repression on the West Bank provide immediate, living context, if such be needed, for British-Palestinian filmmaker Farah Nabulsi’s *The Teacher*, a drama-tragedy set in the Occupied Territories. The urgent, moving film is Nabulsi’s debut feature. Three years ago, her short film *The Present* garnered an Academy Award nomination and won a BAFTA.

In *The Teacher*, a mural pays homage to “Our Martyrs” in the school where Basem (the remarkable Saleh Bakri, from a well-known Palestinian acting family) teaches young men who have already spent time in Israeli prisons.

Basem takes a special interest in brothers Yacoub (Mahmoud Bakri, brother of Saleh) and Adam (Muhammad Abed El Rahman), who come home from school one day to find their house is under a demolition order by Israeli authorities. On top of that, they are then presented with a bill for the operation and the threat of imprisonment if they can’t pay! “Most of the houses in the village have demolition orders, including mine,” Basem tells Lisa (Imogen Poots), a British social worker who has come to work at the school. “They carry out the demolition orders and then charge the homeowners for the demolition.” (A new twist on the “bullet fee.”\*)

Adding to the suffering, Yacoub is shot when he tries to prevent an Israeli settler from burning down an olive grove. At the same time, a young American who left the US to fight for Israel has been taken hostage by a Palestinian resistance group, which is demanding 1,200

Palestinian prisoners in exchange for his release. Basem’s secretive interaction with the fruit seller (Muayyad Abd Elsamad) indicate that he maintains his ties to the resistance movement.

The teacher’s life is also wracked with personal tragedy. His 16-year-old son was arrested years ago alongside Yacoub, but was tried as an adult by an Israeli court, given a sentence of eight years and subsequently died in prison.

Filmed mostly in the Nablus (West Bank) area, the movie is tense, enraged and provides a sense of what Palestinian men and women experience on a daily basis under Israel’s horrific occupation.

“I came across a story about an Israeli occupation soldier who was abducted in 2006 by Palestinian fighters and he was released over five years later for over a thousand Palestinian political prisoners, of which hundreds were women and children,” Nabulsi explained in an interview with *Arts & Culture*. “I remember thinking at the time, what a huge imbalance in value for human life.”

“If you ask any parent what your child is worth to you, they can’t put it in numbers. I found that universal dynamic very interesting...In the case of Basem, and indeed Adam, with his loss as well, there is no recourse to justice,” Nabulsi continues. “And it culminates what you see in the court scene, this idea that if the only people that Palestinians have to turn to for justice are one and the same as those complicit in the crime itself, the system is rigged. It is perverted.”

Nabulsi told the *Hindustan Times* that her parents “are Palestinians. They never shied away from their children knowing our origins, heritage and identity. I was always

kept aware that a gross injustice had been done and there was a military occupation and a settler colonial enterprise that had been taking place in our historical land. But the difference was I wasn't compelled to take further action in my life until I visited Palestine."

The immense moral and political pressures brought to bear on the Palestinian population, as well as the conflicts and fissures they engender, bring to mind similar strains and terrors for people in those portions of Europe and elsewhere under Nazi rule during World War II.

This is a moving and valuable film.

### ***Empty Nets from Iran***

Directed by Iranian-German filmmaker Behrooz Karamizade, *Empty Nets* is set in rural Iran, on the shore of the Caspian Sea. Young lovers Amir (Hamid Reza Abbasi) and Narges (Sadaf Asgari) want to marry, but societal obstacles abound. Amir comes from a poor background, while Narges's family is wealthy and essentially want to sell her to the highest bidder. Amir's mother does everything to support her son, but is aware of the futility of the situation.

After losing his job at a restaurant for standing up to his boss, Amir's search for employment is so desperate that he resorts to working at a far-away fishery. A talented swimmer, he joins other men who sign on to the cutthroat, dangerous and highly exploitative enterprise. By day, they catch fish entangled in the sea's garbage. At night, the boss's special crew, including Amir, illegally poaches and sells caviar from endangered sturgeon. The business is so lucrative that Amir is prepared to risk arrest to secure the money to marry Narges. "If you betray us, I'll cut your tongue out," threatens the amoral, malevolent fishery owner.

Amir's innocence is compromised by the shady underworld, and smashed dreams lead to dire consequences. *Empty Nets* is an affecting film. Cinematographer Ashkan Ashkani adds to the strong, suggestive atmosphere, contrasting the natural turbulence of the ocean to the violence of an irrational social order.

In an interview included in the production notes for *Empty Nets*, director Karamizade notes that it "was important for me to make a film about young people in Iran because, from my point of view, they are the social group confronting the biggest and deepest problems. And just as important as the problems themselves is the almost insurmountable lack of future perspectives they are faced with. Because what's worse than having no perspective, not being able to dream? Although the current protests have brought the younger generation into the international

spotlight, it's important to acknowledge their problems are structural and multi-layered.

"It was in some sense predictable that this pressure and discontent among young people in Iran would eventually be unleashed. That tragic inevitability of this generation's situation was a reason for me to shoot *Empty Nets*. I wanted to say something about the unfulfilled dreams and wishes of an entire generation."

Karamizade elaborates: "I tried to bring out the daily struggles for the main character Amir, the many setbacks he must overcome and how they lead him to drift into the criminal world. Although Amir does everything to win over his great love Narges, at the same time he is distancing himself from her and their common dream. Because of the social structures and how they inspire Amir's own choices, own actions. In the end, Amir becomes a different person. A person Narges can no longer love.

"An ever-widening gap between rich and poor and restrictions that can drive women in particular, and lovers like Amir and Narges, to break the law..."

"That's when the idea of the nets and the fish came to me. I see in the nets and the fish wriggling in them a figurative metaphor for the lives of people—especially the younger generation: the daily problems, restrictions and hopelessness all wrap themselves around young people like a fine-meshed net. All they can do is wriggle in it, like trapped fish, gasping for air."

Another worthwhile film.

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\*Certain governments, including the Nazi regime in Germany, have been known to charge the families of prisoners executed by firing squad the cost of the bullets used to end the lives of the condemned. This is known as a "bullet fee."

*To be continued*



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