

An interview with Palestinian filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel, director of *To a Land Unknown*: “Do we want to actually respect and embrace our humanity?”

David Walsh
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The WSWS spoke recently to filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel, the director of To a Land Unknown, in a video call.

David Walsh: Congratulations on making a very strong and moving film. When we spoke last in 2018, as you may recall, you were somewhat depressed about the possibilities. In fact, you said, if I can quote, “I travel around the world and I’ve seen the way the industry works. I’m quite disillusioned with it.”

So after a number of shorter films, how did you finally manage to make this longer work?

Mahdi Fleifel: A good point. I think when we spoke last I had made the decision to stop for some time, or at least I told myself I wanted to try something else.

I went to university. But it’s like you have this stone in your shoe ... I couldn’t let filmmaking go. I relaunched the project with a new producer, this time an old friend of mine, Geoff Arbourne. He is British, and lives in Cape Town. He makes documentaries, but he’s quite untraditional in a sense.

Geoff proved to be a producer worth his salt. He joined in January ’22 and the film premiered in Cannes in May ’24. I wasted four years with other well-regarded, respected producers. They would leave you hamstering in a wheel in so-called development mode, while they worked on several other projects. Geoff said, no, I’m going to put everything into this. We’re going to realize this. True to his word, he was able to raise funds.

We realized there was no way we could wait until the entire financing was in place, which is the classical method. All the Danish producers I was working with insisted everything had to be in place. The seat belt has to be on, no risks, and of course they rely heavily on money from the taxpayers, from the Danish Film Institute. But as soon as the Institute responds with a rejection letter, they wash their hands like Pontius Pilate, and off they go.

We chose the *other* old school way—of beg, steal and borrow. Geoff went to a lot of private equity. He went to Palestinian activists, or people with interest in Palestine. Roger Waters from Pink Floyd, for example, was one of the people who helped. Several film funds came through, and we secured financing in France, Germany and Holland.

The irony is—Geoff being British, no UK money; myself being Danish, no Danish money.

But we managed to do it. The crazy thing is the short time between the first day of principal photography, November 7, 2023, and the premiere on May 22, 2024—six months and 15 days.

It was like we had a gun to our heads, we jumped in the water, the sharks were behind us and there was only one way. And we did it.

However, as I’ve said in other interviews, this is not a formula for other projects, we hope.

My doctor certainly wouldn’t recommend it. We’re talking high blood pressure, high cholesterol, overweight, mental instability, all of that. I don’t think we want to do it this way again. But it was a great experience and given the broader situation we were in ... we were in the midst of pre-production when October 7 happened in Gaza.

DW: What was the impact of those events?

MF: As you know, we’re now living in a different world. There’s a world before October 7 and a world after. What’s happening in Palestine ... it’s as though we’re seeing things in Technicolor now, it’s as clear as day.

Essentially, it’s put our humanity into question. The cost is the rivers of blood, the Gazans are paying for this. It’s horrific to witness. But if we zoom out, it’s really making us question our very humanity. Where do we go from here?

Do we want to actually respect and embrace our humanity? We have these laws, we see what’s happening with the International Court of Justice. Are we going to respect these laws that represent how we have progressed as the human race, or are we going to discard them and just turn our world into a jungle? That for me is the question we’re faced with now.

DW: As far as the ruling elites go, the answer to your question is obvious. There are no “red lines.” The pressing issue is for the population to draw conclusions about what sort of society they want, because this system is going to hell.

MF: Yes, they keep pushing things farther and farther. As much as I’d like to hope for something better, the present reality is making me quite pessimistic.

DW: Let’s put that aside for the moment, and let me ask you about the film.

Ordinarily, I ask a filmmaker about the origin of the idea for his or her film. But in this case, it’s not necessary because your entire history, personal, artistic, has clearly been working toward this. There’s *A World Not Ours*, then short films—both documentary and fiction—that follow characters who have made their way out of refugee camps in Lebanon and arrived in Athens. This film is clearly a kind of culmination of a process.

In 2012, when we first spoke, you pointed out you had been trained as a fiction film director and that you made your first documentary almost by accident.

MF: In the end, either way, we’re trying to tell a story. Something I learned early on was expressed in the Stanley Kubrick quote to the effect

that filmmaking is problem solving. It's not really rocket science. We want to tell a story. So we start with the basics, the characters, the themes, the script. Then once that's in place: who's going to embody these characters? The pre-production commences, and so on and so forth. For me at the beginning, it was a matter of following that route and trying not to compromise, as much as I could with the resources I had.

I was really adamant not to slack on casting, on locations, on the choice of the camera we film with, on the sound in post-production, the editing, the sound design, the music. There are a lot of stages in fiction. For a documentary, I'd go out and shoot for several weeks, months, years, collect material and come back, and then I'd sit with my editor and we'd carve a story out of it. Once that was in place, we'd go to the sound studio, and later fix the color. That's it. With fiction, obviously, it's a much more elaborate process, involving a bigger army, and it's much more demanding, tiring.

You're at it for a longer period of time and you have to be on top of it. I think the choice of who you work with—in this case, the partnership with Geoff as lead producer—that was the beginning of everything. Then came the question, who do we want to work with? The production team on the ground, and the assistants and the creative team. All these decisions backfire if you miscast or find yourself in the trenches with the wrong cinematographer. You're doomed then, you know.

Working as a fiction director is more like what I imagine a football manager does. It's a bigger picture. It's not just about the team out on the field playing, but the whole organization. If you want to win the championship, you can't focus on one aspect of play. I was aware of that and wanted to embrace that, and kind of lean into all the fears, all the challenges that came along.

Fiction allows you a space in which to play with your imagination. There's this old saying, it's Alfred Hitchcock, I think: in fiction, the director is God, but in documentary, God is the director.

You have authority in many aspects, but at some point, you have to let go and then the film starts to reveal itself to you. You have to obey what it's trying to do and how it's trying to reveal itself.

Pre-production was a nightmare. I've heard it's usually a nightmare, and production was tough, it was challenging, but it was enjoyable. Once we were all in the water, we found that actually there was great camaraderie and there was good chemistry. With the cast and crew, there was a real solidarity.

Of course, with the backdrop of what was happening in Gaza, we felt this was actually the best we could do, to try and tell this story the best we could.

Trying to finish the film within three months or so for the Cannes Film Festival in May—editing, sound design, color—that was another nightmare. So it was a sandwich. Nightmares at each end, and in between the remarkable filling.

My biggest fear was that after so many years, 10, 12 years, however long it took to make this, people would come out of the theater and go, "Well, that was interesting."

Securing the launch at Cannes was important, and it turned out we were the biggest delegation in the history of the Directors Fortnight [Quinzaine des cinéastes]. We had some 45 people, cast and crew—everyone turned up. Then we had apparently the longest standing ovation in the history of the Directors Fortnight, nine minutes ... something.

The reviews were very generous. The film was compared to *The Bicycle Thief* [1948] and *Midnight Cowboy* [1969]. So in a way ... I can retire now ... it's all downhill from here. Ha-ha.

DW: I wanted to ask you about the Cannes festival experience.

MF: It was amazing. It really was. We were very well covered. The publicist said to me that we won the grand slam. We received nothing but positive reviews. In *Screen Daily*, *Variety*, *IndieWire*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *The Film Verdict*.

The thing about Cannes is that you can go there and disappear. That's the fear for a lot of filmmakers or films, especially the smaller ones that don't turn up with a public relations campaign and the whole cavalry behind them.

But in our case, I think we came out well. That has to do with both the film itself and the general situation in Gaza, too, I guess.

It was a humbling experience. Everyone came out feeling—we did it, we went all the way. And now we picked up our first awards last week in Malta, Munich, Galway and Taormina. That's four awards already since the premiere.

It's been invited to 50-plus festivals so far, and counting. In terms of sales, I don't know. It's a bit tricky with a film like this, with any film really. This industry is not about risk-taking. The first thing I learned, especially when it comes to distributors, is that nobody's willing to take any risks.

Along the same lines, I met cinematographers who asked, why do you want to shoot on film? Because it's better. Most people in the industry want to be able to go home at night, sleep eight hours, and not have anything to worry about. Some cinematographers don't want to worry about the lab results. Is it coming back looking good or not? The same thing with the producers or financiers, with the distributors. Do I want to take a risk with this? Money speaks louder than ... anything.

DW: But it was rewarding.

MF: Yes, and especially if everyone gets a chance at it again. I hope I get to make at least a couple of more films before I leave, which will make their way to audiences. There's a limit to how much you can do.

Films should affect people for years. A film should be like a document of its time.

I'm surprised to this day when people come up to me and say, I watched *A World Not Ours* recently and I was so moved by it. That was a dozen years ago, and it still works? That's what you hope for. That's the standard I've set for myself as a storyteller.

DW: The film looks at the undocumented, the stranded, people affected by economic problems, drugs and family and moral pressures. It has a moral, social impact. I assume you feel some responsibility toward these people.

MF: Obviously, that's the difference between documentary and fiction. With documentary, these are real people, real lives. You document their lives. But when the film is finished, their lives go on. In the case of Reda in my documentaries, after three films I made with him, he died of an overdose here in Athens. His wife sometimes calls and says, "I see that the films about him are on Netflix and I'm worried about my children having to watch their father using drugs on camera."

Whereas in fiction, that's it. It's your creation, your responsibility.

DW: The fictional Reda's drug use in your new film almost seems a measure of his conscience, that is, he resorts to drugs to block out the memory of things he's done or has to do.

MF: It's one of the "three logical exits" that I made a film about. We resort to things to try and escape whatever it is, the pain, the overwhelming feelings.

Basically, everything I've been doing up until now was field research for a PhD and then finally I finished, I submitted my dissertation. But I haven't turned into Dr. Fleifel, ha-ha.

DW: You have a character named Chatila. Is that what parents do, or does he name himself that? [Chatila or Shatila is the name of a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut that was the site of a horrific massacre of thousands of Palestinians and Lebanese Shias in September 1982, carried out by Lebanese fascist forces, with the direct assistance of the Israeli military.]

MF: I met a guy named Chatila out here. I believe he was nicknamed that, probably because he was born in '82. I always thought that was such a cool name. Now I know that people pick up on it and assume it's a

reference to the massacre, and it is, in a way. But I just liked the name.

DW: But what's interesting in the film is that he has no response when Tatiana says it sounds like a girl's name. You get the feeling that he's part of a generation that's somewhat immune to patriotic and nationalist appeal, more hardened, more cynical, if you like. He doesn't jump in and say, "No, no, I'm named after the massacre in the 1980s." He just moves on.

MF: Like a lot of these Palestinian guys here, they're so sick and tired of it all. Even me, you know, you jump in a cab here and the driver says, "Hey, Palestine, what's going on over there?" Where do we start, with Adam and Eve?

Look at the present situation in Gaza. There's such a vacuum. The events of October 7? You leave the Palestinians to rot and die in a cage, what do you expect is going to happen? They're going to send Christmas cards? You cage an animal and starve it for x amount of time, it's going to try and break out. Or, if you open that cage, it's going to lash out at you. Many people don't seem to understand this very basic human nature.

DW: There's a low level of historical knowledge. You have to educate people and your film is part of that process, it's not primarily about history, but it certainly is a socially and morally enlightening film.

Where are they living in Athens, the characters in the film? Is that place a squat?

MF: It's actually a derelict school that we found just around the corner from where I live here in Athens.

So I'm now between Copenhagen and Athens. And most of the film was shot within a 10-minute walk from my home, which also made for an amazing production experience. I'd wake up in the morning, grab my coffee and walk to the set or wherever it was we were filming.

DW: One of the kids, Malik, is only 13. He's on his own. Is that typical?

MF: It has happened. I've heard of stories like that. They're sent over with someone. Once they arrive, they're supposed to be reported or put in a detention center with others. But somehow he slipped through the cracks. This kid was actually from Gaza, and he had arrived here with his mum, his brother and sister three years ago on a boat from Turkey.

So he had that experience and we found him here in Athens, whereas the other actors, they came from different backgrounds. Aram Sabbah had never acted before. He is a professional skateboarder from Ramallah. Mahmood Bakri, of course, comes from a well-known acting family. He has done a couple of films before. Mahmood and Aram had a tremendous chemistry between them.

It was actually easier to work with the non-actors than with the actors, because the thing about actors is they want to act, which most of the time is the worst thing they can do.

DW: What are the conditions like in Greece now?

MF: It's a right-wing government. Property is going up like crazy. Much of Athens is now sold to Chinese, Israelis, Turks and Lebanese and other foreigners. It's still reasonable, but it's getting more and more expensive year after year. I like it here.

For me, it's the place that I found closest to home. It's the Mediterranean, right? Unlike Denmark, I step out of the house here and immediately people look like me. There's an edge to it, it's not perfect. Copenhagen is close to perfection. After three months up there, I feel like I'm in a retirement home, and I need to go somewhere and live again.

DW: Can you speak about the poem by the Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish?

MF: The character Abu Love was based on a guy, a Gazan poet that I met in Paris, who was a bit of a drifter. He once said to me, "I'm not a poet. I'm a poem."

When the characters are waiting, they're killing time, what else would they do? This is where he would be reciting a poem. Then the question became, which poem? I said to the actor, I would like you to suggest some

things to me. I had the idea that it could be Darwish because, you know, what else? I thought it would be interesting if this guy was to recite it, because he's a Syrian Bedouin.

That's the one we settled on. It's an edited version. The poem is much longer than that. But it just made sense, right? "The mask has fallen." That's a good line. It speaks to many things today.

DW: To be honest, the conditions presented in the film and the economic and moral pressures at work are so similar to conditions you could find in many places around the world, in the US, in Europe, in Greece of course.

MF: I hear you. That's what I hope for, that people watch it and recognize something common, general. In my work, as much as I can, I try to demystify the Palestinian cause.

You know, we're not special. We're just a people. We want dignity. We want to live in dignity and freedom. There's nothing more to it. And it's not a big ask, you know.

DW: No, it isn't. But the only thing is it requires the overthrow of everything.

MF: Exactly.



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