

BPFF 2012 opening night - Bidisha (chair), Ken Loach, Leila Sansour

Bidisha:

We are very pleased to have a committed and long time supporter with us the director Ken Loach.

Bidisha:

Something that is a feature of both films are the sinister aspects of a military occupation, the idea that many of these sabotaging or dismantling or movements happen in the middle of the night. The plucking up of people including children for spurious reasons and then their detention and in fact various corroborated evidence the torturing and the intimidation of children.

Ken Loach:

It makes you very angry really, and I felt the problem with seeing the film was what do you do with your anger. Anger clearly at what Israel is doing, obviously, but anger closer to home, we have the most sophisticated television channels we have ever had and we never see this. Why is that? How can our Foreign Secretary talk about Israel has the right to defend itself and Obama when we see this? It stands truth on its head.

The bias in our media is so intense. Activists do what they can and some are incredibly brave and you're just overwhelmed by their bravery but we just need to do much more really. I believe passionately we have to isolate Israel culturally and academically if we can.

Bidisha

Do you believe there has been a turning point in terms of international feeling about the situation following not just Gaza but the statehood status of Palestine at the UN and also the announcement of the developments to the use the great euphemism, the announcement of the settlements. Yes you are absolutely right that the official line may not have changed but events like this which are sold out and the great proliferation of events surely indicate that people are thinking differently about it.

Loach

Yes I think so, but I think public opinion is very fragile. Yes we have a surge now because of the gross, the gross act by Israel of demonstrating its immunity and the fact it gives two fingers to the world really, to the whole UN and nothing happens. It decides it's going to build a settlement and we hear not a peep from the people who are paying Israel and supporting Israel and I think public opinion is very fragile and that's the problem and the US has such financial clout that even Egypt now is not doing what obviously we would all want it to do. it's the realpolitik of the situation isn't it. The money that America pours in, not only to Israel, but to all those states around that might help the Palestinians obviously become dependent on American dollars as well. We just need clear political leadership and finally Miliband or one of them is managing to say something but it is woefully inadequate.

You desperately need principled, just the rule of law, the rule of law, really. But let's see, activists need to do everything they can.

Bidisha

The interesting thing when I was in the West Bank is that I continually met activists who proposed different methods of resistance and the one they felt to be most powerful as simple documentation. Speaking to children who had been picked up in the middle of the night. usually picked up for one reason which is throwing stones. Sometimes they're guilty but they are throwing stones because they've been tear-gassed or they've been shot and then they're tortured.

The other thing was to simply point out where there have been infractions of international law. Settlements are illegal, the law on that is very simple and there are no exceptions. The problem that they said is people don't believe them, or they said that they believe the situation is hopeless and they propose the boycott as being one way of trying to regain power, for the international community to say OK we do believe you.

Leila Sansour

The boycott obviously is a major and non-violent tool that we possess and I sometimes get very surprised by people who say they lobbied their government to act and obviously what they expect their government to do is to exercise pressure but here you have the ability to exercise pressure directly yourself so you should understand that you also present the power to act in that way. I think that it is extremely difficult for anyone who knows Israel very well to believe that Israel can be really intimidated by economic boycott although I stand for an economic boycott because I think it's still a message and will probably intimidate a couple of businesses and might protest, but the really I think I may be it's a peculiar thing to say although I don't think it's that strange a cultural boycott and an academic boycott might be much stronger thing to do because it does send a message to people who need to wake up in Israel because they are not awake these people are actually responsible for the fact that things are not changing. In Israel today there is literally no leadership. Different camp that could bring forward different message there's nobody on the map of Israeli politics who could sit with Palestinians and bring about peace. I have friends in Israel who live in Tel Aviv who disagree with settlements who disagree with all this who will watch this film but they do nothing about politics and there is no pressure on them to do it.

Bidisha

We acknowledge the existence of many Israeli supporters of peace, what are you saying simply because there's no one above them saying that they should take a stronger stand that they do nothing or is it subtler than that?

Sansour

No, well the people within Israeli society who make these stands genuinely are a minority and I think because you see this on screen your sense of how many people might share

these views is exaggerated. It's not like that, the majority of Israelis just don't have a strong sentiment like this and even if they have a view like a lot of Israelis would rather settlements stop and there is peace, they understand the situation, but there is nothing that pushes them to do anything about it because you have your sushi places and your beach in Tel Aviv and it's all good life and nice why bother why derail your own life if there is no pressure.

Bidisha

Do you think there is a wilful blindness to the reality of life in Palestine? There are some stark images in the film. The sheer economic difference, the faux system of permits the great bit of genius of the occupation which means you have a system of permits that are not the same for every person in every situation on any day at any time and can be revoked for any reason at any time so it doesn't mean anything.

Sansour

The wall made it easier for Israelis to ignore everything on the other side because they just don't see it they don't rub shoulders with the Palestinians so you have less of a guilt trip if you are a person of conscience you just think it doesn't exist. We're just locked away behind the wall it's very simple.

Bidisha

What about the ethics of the filmmaking this is billed as a joint Israeli Palestinian production and part of that is that it has then been shown at many international film festivals whereas a lot more totally homegrown Palestinian work is really just shown when it's been enabled by people going into Palestine.

Ken Loach

If the films are available they ought to be shown and well done to everybody for putting on this festival and may it extend over the whole year and see lots and lots of Palestinian films.

Bidisha

That is happening it's part of the growth in consciousness.

Loach

The thing about the boycott is it's not a principle it's a tactic it's something you use when it'll have an effect and Israel presents itself as a great cultural nation and so to hit it there I think is very important to say you're not acceptable and so I think culture and the world of academia is a very suitable place to say no. There's also a campaign about football as well. UEFA are planning to hold the under 21 championship in Israel and some very brave footballers have signed a petition saying that it shouldn't be held and have been roundly abused and accused of anti-semitism of course, you know the automatic tactic. If anyone can tap into their computer...I guess it's there under PSC or some boycott way of getting

into it it's very good. And to find sportsmen coming forward is very unusual so any support that anyone can give on the computer to that say some of them have dropped out because the abuse has been so bad so we really need to support those who have put their names to it; the player Kanoute K-A-N-O-U-T-E was one of the leading ones.

Bidisha

Do you think that the embarrassment factor of the BDS of the boycott is enough to send a strong message.

Loach

It's never enough but it's a start isn't it? It's a start. It's just saying if and as you say it's not universal like every Israeli by any means and it's not individuals it's things that carry the imprimatur of the state or are promoting Israel as a kind of worthy member of the international community.

Bidisha

It's not a boycott of individuals. It's where the funding is from.

Loach

Absolutely not.

Bidisha

part of my cynicism again is I feel that we as people who work in the arts feel that the arts have tremendous power and my question is do those at the very top of the tree the politicians the economists those who are receiving billions of dollars worth of donation the building contractors who are actually using Palestinian stone to build the settlements do they care?

Loach

No I'm sure they don't give a monkeys do they. They don't care at all. I don't think they don't care at all. But one has to fight on every front. The boycott is one way, political pressure is another, I mean at every front.

Bidisha

Something that both films show up is the strange moment where you encounter soldiers and they're very odd encounters because they're often extremely young guys. Not all of them want to be there and I truly do believe that. Someone described military service in Israel as like being 3 years in prison which is apt but ironic at the same time. What is daily life under occupation like? Because it seems to be a very scrappy occupation but in actual fact it's actually very clever so that the army know when there are going to be demonstrations. When I went we were followed every single day and eventually shot at and tear gassed but it seemed as though it had arisen randomly.

Sansour

The most important thing to maybe understand about how you particularly live your life with regards to like a military machine that controls your life is the immediate realisation that first of all the Israeli army operates in a way that a lot of power is given to the different units on the ground so there's a lot of decision that can be taken by the unit itself at the moment but somehow in a strange way they are all on the same page they just want to make your life difficult so anything they can see that can cause that they know how to do it. The chaoticness of life because as you said the permit system changes every day so if you were dependent you were going to plan to do a business meeting in this town at this point and you're going to apply for a permit you find that on Thursday the law change and you can't have a permit because for this or if you got a contractor to work on the land all these things basically laws keep changing all the time throughout my life they became harsher and harsher and more and more ridiculous for example in Bethlehem today there are no medical faculties in the town because historically it was part of a larger area where people would use the medical facilities in town and now they will face problems getting permits and we in Bethlehem used to get more specialised medical services in Jerusalem so we have to apply for medical permits more and more over the past 5 years. First you get a medical permit you stop being able to get to clinics you stop only specific hospitals can service you and then you can only have it if you are in very very bad shape and then if you have it OK but you can't travel in a car now you have to walk through a checkpoint even if you're old so slowly it becomes prohibitive to even consider travelling.

Bidisha

Strange this is how clever it is because there are now checkpoints between a town and a cemetery or there are diversion roads so that if you want to bury your dead and walk what would be 60 seconds is now a 12 km road. Just to point up the perversity the strangest thing that happened to us was we were deliberately delayed for 2 hours at a checkpoint for laughing. We were joking about something and a soldier said to another lets hold them up for 2 hours. How dare you have a good time at a checkpoint basically.

Sansour

I was at a checkpoint once in fact going to a hospital and I really had to be there on time and in front of me there was a family was greeting somebody from the family had died in Jerusalem an old woman was going to hospital she was barely standing on her feet and the checkpoint was supposed to open at 5.30 but it did not open until 6.30 by this point everybody was quite tense and there's a lot of workers, 3,000 workers approximately every day have to pass to get to Jerusalem so there was a lot of pressure on the checkpoint and people were jostling and trying to push through and the soldier was about 17 years old and he said you I can't remember his words something like you are a barbaric race and he slammed the gate and sort of said I am not opening until you start behaving yourselves and that was it so we just stood there what can you do.

Bidisha

It's normal

Sansour

It's very very normal it's not the worst thing that can happen to you at this checkpoint so.

Bidisha

We didn't realise we were being called pigs and dogs because only a few of us spoke Hebrew and we said what are they calling us? And they're saying go through the turnstile pigs every time.

What would you like people to take from these films but also from this festival? You have an audience who are committed who are interested who may not all be activists and that is not a crime, not being an activist is not.

Loach

I just hope people feel like I do which is it's intolerable and if governments don't act then civil society has an obligation to in whatever form, whether it's boycott, whether it's activism just keeping your anger intact really.

Q

I'd like to thank the speakers and the organisers for a fantastic event. If you're feeling upset and outraged by what you're seen there is something you can do about it. In Bristol we're got a Palestine Solidarity Campaign we can give you more information and it would be great if you could come and join us and some of us will be standing outside in the foyer if you want more information if you want to speak to us. I would just like to say that I'm not as negative about the boycott campaign as has been coming across from the panel I think the boycott campaign has had some really big successes for instance Veolia there has been a big campaign against Veolia you probably see them they do a lot of the refuse collection, they run services into the West Bank from Israel and other things and they have lost I think it's £6 billion of contracts in this country because supporters of Palestine campaigners have campaigned to stop those contracts being given to the and Veolia is actually talking about selling up their subsidiary that is operating in Israel so the boycott can be very successful also with the coop. I don't know if people know the coop supermarket no longer will buy any products not only from the settlements in the West Bank but any companies who operate within that area and again that's another great success so I'm not so cynical keep boycotting.

Q

Really my feeling watching that film is anger as concerned you get really angry when you see stuff like that. On a more positive point of what could be done. I think there is something very popular these days called the internet social media facebook twitter and I'm thinking what can we do we need to get the message to the people in power the people in power are politicians how do you get to politicians making clear that your vote will

affect his future that's the only way we can do something and it can be done very easily 5 minutes in front of your computer send there's 50 people here if between their friends and family they have 10 people that's 500 and if these 500 get in touch with another 10 people that's 5,000 imagine 5,000 letters landing on 10 Downing Street tomorrow that will start to have an effect.

Q

thanks for the speaker. Just a brief comment about some of you who have experience what's happen lately at the UN. As a Palestinian this is not like the end of occupation not the return of us not the dismantle of the wall and not the return of Jerusalem however this is very important step because at least for the future our cause wont be forgotten for example like the Kurdish and Palestine will become imaginary on flags, on songs and stuff like this so thank you very much.

Q

I think there will be lots of different ways people can do things it depends on what your strengths are really.

Bidisha

Exactly.

Q

There's an organisation starting up in Bath linking professional organisations, schools any links between the baynes(?) area and the greater Bethlehem area as a means of getting people aware of what's going on so if anybody wants to get involved in that sort of thing anything that widens awareness of what's happening and write to your MPs as everybody says. The more people become aware the more will happen.

Bidisha

It's more crucial in Bethlehem than ever because it's the one place where you can really see the wall wrapping around you it's one inch from your face at any time. The main road of Bethlehem imagine you're high street just imagine a wall across it just straight across it and that's what Bethlehem is like the street has been divided into four fifths for settlers and one fifth for Palestinians and it's so ramshackle that it's insulting so they don't even put up nice barriers they put up sort of plastic barriers and they just shepherd the Palestinians down that one fifth so yeah I absolutely support what you say and I hope many people will come to you and talk to you about it.

Q

Thank you for showing this film for organising this event I am from Kurdistan and I am very pleased that my Palestinian friend actually mentioned us as the forgotten people indeed we are but I remember myself I am from Kurdistan Iraq I remember myself as a child on the streets of Kirkuk going out demonstrating at the age of 10 calling for justice

for freedom for the Palestinians and for Palestine but at the same time when I grow up slowly I realised that the government in Iraq although it was sending us pushing us onto the street to call for the freedom for the Palestinians was actually killing us and gassing us its own people for that I mean many Arab countries for decades they used the Palestinian cause by justifying their own dictatorship in the country and I believe films like this will surely penetrate into the hearts of people because this hits me this brought back everything to my life of how much injustice is done in Palestine since my own childhood and up to today it carries on and I am wondering if this has been shown in the Arab countries because of course there is a need for real support for eh Palestinian cause to come form that part of eh world as well because on one hand they may say publicly we are against Israel but deep down we know they are supporting Israel and they are dealing with Israel I just wondered how much this film is being shown around the Arab countries.

Bidisha

It is my understanding that it has been shown internationally including in teh middle East but I don't know the specifics on that.

Sansour

I don't know every country it was shown but I often receive by email information that it's shown here there and everywhere and I'm sure it is shown a lot of films like this are shown all across the middle east and you're right to start with i have to say I have very very great sympathy for the Kurds it came late because understanding the Kurdish issue is a very difficult route for a lot of us as a Palestinian particularly maybe I do have a special sensitivity and affinity to your cause what you said as well, the Arab world many Arab countries use the Palestinians leaderships in the Arab countries have used the Palestinian cause as an excuse to do whatever things they were trying to achieve in their own systems but in order for the Arab world to be effective it has to change the Arab world currently is ineffective and we can only hope tat the changes that are happening today will create a new map and will create a new unfortunately sadly not very soon for all of us maybe not soon enough for Palestine and I think for the Kurds it will be even longer route unfortunately but let's hope that these changes will usher in a new future in the Middle East I hope so very much.

Bidisha

I'm very tempted to end on that because it's a very good.

Loach

It's the great, it's one of the great causes of our time really I think we just have to keep it in the front of our minds and our collective responsibility to do something about it because we can't let it go when you see things like that. I agree with what our friend down here said about the boycott movement it does have successes it can have more if we all fight for it but we just have to support these people there's no question they have to be supported.