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Ordinary Palestinians Struggle for Economic Survival in “9 Star Hotel” On P.O.V., Tuesday, July 22 on PBS

Hit Israeli Film Is Moving Account of Young Men Who Sneak Across Borders
And Dodge Police to Find Work

“9 Star Hotel’ resists casting [the Palestinians] as victims, or their unseen Israeli employers and security forces as demons. Rather, it presents – without rancor and with deep pathos – the irony of dispossessed young men . . . building someone else’s future.”

– Ann Hornaday, The Washington Post

A surprise hit in Israel and named best documentary winner at the 2006 Jerusalem International Film Festival, **9 Star Hotel** is an essentially non-political film. Israeli director Ido Haar resolutely directed his cameras in raw *vérité* style at a group of young Palestinians who live and hide in the hills around the community they are helping to build in Israel. Illegal workers, they hide from police at night while working on construction during the day. Since **9 Star Hotel** takes place on the border between Israel and the West Bank, politics, of course, cannot be far outside that frame, but they are experienced, discussed, felt from the point of view of the Palestinian workers.

The men are neither militants nor activists, but ordinary youths placed by history in extraordinary circumstances who emerge as fully human – flawed and sympathetic. Caught in a strange and dangerous no-man’s land between an Israel that must enforce laws to protect its citizens and a Palestinian Authority that can’t, or won’t, help them, they must risk capture and live in makeshift shelters simply to survive. They have youthful dreams, an uncertain future and family responsibilities. The brilliance in Haar’s achievement is to have touched a stubbornly human chord in such a politically fractious region.

Ido Haar’s **9 Star Hotel** has its U.S. broadcast premiere on **Tuesday, July 22, 2008** at 10 p.m., on PBS, part of the 21st season of P.O.V. (Check local listings.) American television’s longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television’s premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films, and is a 2007 recipient of a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking.

“9 Star Hotel” is the facetious name the men give to the pile of rocks that marks their nightly abode – a group of cardboard enclosures and tin-covered huts hidden in the brush-covered hills above the construction sites at the new town of Modi’in. But they have made a home for themselves, complete with pillows and even power generated by batteries they have scraped together. These dwellings form the film’s essential location, where the men talk, sleep, read, try to relax, and where boredom alternates with alarms and chases when the police approach.

Having gained their trust to an exceptional degree, Haar captures the young Palestinians in unguarded moments in their camp, on dangerous border crossings, at their work sites where they periodically have to disappear when inspectors show up, and on breathless runs from the police. In some ways, the situation is reminiscent of other borders dividing poverty from wealth, where “illegals” take great risks simply to work. But because this is the border that divides Israelis and Palestinians, the risks for both parties are even greater.

For Muhammad and Ahmed, who are the central characters in Haar’s group portrait, hopelessness and despair are the greatest threat. Yet the two men demonstrate astonishing buoyancy and good humor in the face of daunting obstacles. Ahmed, nicknamed “the merchant” by his friends for his industriousness in salvaging discarded objects, from computers to toy trucks, especially enjoys making light of their situation. He once worked legally with his father as a guard in Israel, but with his father’s death Ahmed not only lost his job but also became the sole breadwinner for his family, and now must sacrifice to support the ambitions of his younger siblings.

Muhammad is something of a philosopher, and the little encampment’s natural leader. He comments on the wider conflict, saying of Israeli policy toward Palestinians, “If you shut a cat in a room, won’t it jump at you?” But he also criticizes Palestinian culture: “We think backward; we never look forward.”

Mostly the young men talk of girls, food, family problems, the pressure to get married just as they are starting to notice the opposite sex, what life is like in other, better places, and the cat-and-mouse game they must play with security forces. (At one point, Ahmed injures his foot while fleeing police; he disappears from camp for a time and later returns, announcing that he has become engaged.) They also discuss the security wall being built by Israel that will soon cut them off from work at Modi’in.

The men’s sense of abandonment, and the gulf separating them from the Israelis who will occupy the new town, is starkly captured in the contrast between the darkness of the hills at night and the bright lights of new homes below. It is poignantly evoked when some of the men come upon Israeli children playing in the hills, building a miniature play camp. While the children wonder whether they are safe around the Palestinians or should talk to them, the men, who maintain a real camp, offer good-natured suggestions to the kids.

Another touching moment occurs when Muhammad and Ahmed sit under the stars and hope for a better life. They recount the impossibilities of moving away, of finding work or education in the West Bank, and talk of the barrier that will likely end the only work they have. What then? Ahmed begins dreaming of at least becoming a policeman for the Palestinian Authority, a job that would be steady if dangerous and low-paid. Then Muhammad reminds him that neither of them have enough education even to be policemen – and the two friends share a rueful laugh.

9 Star Hotel is not about political problems or ideologies. It is about the human suffering caused by unsolved political conflicts. It is a portrait of individual tragedy and resilience in the face of political contention.

“I grew up in a village on the edge of a pine forest, half way between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem,” said director Haar. “On my way home, I often saw men running frantically across the highway. The fear in their eyes haunted me, and I wanted to find out where they were running to, and whom they were running from.”

9 Star Hotel is a Koch Lorber Films release of an Eden Production.

About the filmmaker:

Ido Haar

Director

Ido Haar was born in 1974 in Jerusalem. His credits include two shorts, "Step by Step" and "Tricks." His first feature-length documentary, "Melting Siberia," received a Special Mention at the Jerusalem Film Festival in 2004.

Credits:

Director/writer: Ido Haar
Producers: Edna Kowarsky, Elinor Kowarsky
Cinematographers: Ido Haar, Uri Ackerman
Editors: Era Lapid, Ido Haar

Running Time: 56:46

Awards & Festivals:

- *Best Documentary* – Jerusalem International Film Festival, 2006
- *Best Film Award* – Buenos Aires Ninth Festival Internacional de Cine, Independiente Human Rights Film Competition, Argentina, 2007
- *Best Documentary Award* – Munich International Documentary Film Festival, 2007
- *Best Feature Documentary Award* – Vancouver International Documentary Film Festival (Canada), 2007
- *Audience Award* – Madrid International Documentary Film Festival Spain, 2007
- *Social Documentary Golden Award* – Shanghai TV Festival, China, 2007
- *Special Mention* – Festival international de films de Fribourg, Switzerland, 2007
- *Special Mention* – Sixth Alba International Film Festival, Italy, 2007
- IDFA International Documentary Film Festival, Netherlands, 2006
- Official Selection – Göteborg International Film Festival, Sweden, 2007
- Official Selection – DocPoint Helsinki Documentary Film Festival, Finland, 2007
- Official Selection – Melbourne International Film Festival, Australia, 2007
- Nominee – European film awards; European film academy Documentary 2007 -- Prix Arte, Germany



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and celebrating its 21st season on PBS in 2008, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through September, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought more than 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces special features for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. P.O.V. Interactive produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov has launched the *P.O.V. Blog*, a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The P.O.V. Website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

American Documentary | P.O.V. works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, P.O.V. offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, P.O.V.'s *Youth Views* works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training in order to use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, The Educational Foundation of America, The Fledgling Fund, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Lower Cultural Council, The September 11th Fund, and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.'s Diverse Voices Project is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston Thirteen/WNET New York.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.amdoc.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

DVD REQUESTS: Please note that a broadcast version of the film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.



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