

Official Selection

tiff

Toronto International
Film Festival 2022

FIPRESCI Prize Winner

A GAZA WEEKEND

DIRECTED BY
BASIL KHALIL



PRESS NOTES

93 MINS | 2022 | UK/PALESTINE
1.85:1 | 5.1 | DCP
Arabic, English, Hebrew

WORLDWIDE SALES
PROTAGONIST PICTURES

Israel is cut off from the rest of the world after the outbreak of a deadly virus. Gaza is the safest place now, and Israelis are desperately trying to seek refuge there, including British journalist Michael (Stephen Mangan) and his Israeli girlfriend Keren (Mouna Hawa). The couple pay a smuggler to transport them, via Gaza, and onto Cyprus. But they find themselves stuck in a basement in Gaza, with Hamas on their trail, and their lives in the hands of hapless Palestinian market traders Emad (Loai Nofi) and Waleed (Adam Bakri), and Waleed's long-suffering but resourceful wife Nuha (Maria Zreik).

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I've always been interested in absurd and counter-narrative stories. That's how I started with my first short film, *Ave Maria* (2015), and progressed onto *A GAZA WEEKEND*, both fit my twisted sense of humour: *what if the tables turned, and the weaker one holds all the power*. With *A GAZA WEEKEND*, I set out to make a fantasy film with its feet deeply planted on the ground. So, to all the bullies and ones in power out there, you better watch out and be nice to your weaker neighbours, or a day is bound to come when you'll need them.

This film started out as a conversation in 2009 on the beach at the Cannes Film Festival where I was having a casual industry meeting with a producer/distributor who asked me what I had next working in the pipeline... I had nothing! So, I lied to show off and came up with a pitch: *A comedy about a disease that spreads in Israel, and the only safe place is Gaza*. That's all I had. She asked what the title was -Swine Flu was popular at the time- so I replied: "*Kosher Swine Flu*." I know, not the finest of film titles. Yet somehow, she liked it and offered to put me in touch with someone at the Sundance Screenwriters' Lab to help me develop it. That meant that I now had to write it if I wanted a free trip to the US. Alas, I never got invited to the workshop in the snows of Utah, but instead got invited to a screenwriting lab they helped set up in the desert of Jordan with the Royal Film Commission, which was one of the best experiences I've had in the development of the script.

The fictional virus in the film is called ARS, which stands for acute respiratory syndrome and it was researched 11 years prior to Covid-19, modelled on the 2002 SARS outbreak. It just so happens that in Arabic *Ars*: عرس has that same kind of connotation as it does in British English, except in Arabic it means pimp, a common insult.

It was also very important for me that the humour from each character felt native to them, but also managed to translate well internationally. It was a fine line of crafting scenarios where the character's reactions are what carry the punchlines, rather than relying on just visual gags, or local jokes. I tried my best to offer something for everyone whether they be Palestinian, British, European, and even Chinese speakers.

A GAZA WEEKEND is inspired by the spirit and people of Gaza. It is in no way supposed to be seen as an accurate depiction or a social commentary on the life and hardships people face in Gaza. I am ever inspired by the ingenuity and steadfast of ordinary people there despite all the hardships they face — as the world turns a blind eye while they're being choked, year upon year and on all fronts. In the mainstream media which we consume we never see the people, we don't hear or identify with their everyday stories. We get shown victims, heroes, terrorists, or just uncivilised brown people who bring war upon themselves and who cannot be helped. There is more to Gaza than the news footage we are presented of black smoke and destroyed grey concrete buildings. I chose to reflect Gaza's vibrant street life, humour, colours and sounds through the set design, costumes, music, performances, and sound.

Every element in the film goes against what we've been accustomed to see. There is no life lived in black or white tones, everyone is seen in a human shade of grey, and I hope the conditioned viewer will walk away questioning it and themselves, maybe even asking "*what the f*** did I just watch?*"

When writing the scenes and directing the actors, I went for a very breezy and natural approach. Personally, I'm inspired by the styles of Roberto Benigni and Larry David, and gave the actors freedom to improvise, make mistakes, stutter, talk over each other (even swear) and just be in the scene. Many of the best moments in the film came out these experiments, and you can sense the genuine spontaneity of it all which keeps it natural, unpredictable, and approachable. I want the viewer to identify with the situation these characters are set up in, feel that maybe this could have happened to them too, had they been there in that moment. The genres of films I like are action, irreverent comedy, those featuring sarcasm, simplicity and unexpected spontaneity. The films of the 1980s and 90s that I grew up on really influenced my approach to the visuals and music.

For the music, I went for a mashup of different genres. My brief to the composer Alex Baranowski was: *so many things are banned from entering Gaza that people have*

resorted to up-cycling a lot of everyday items, I want that to be reflected in the music score and wish to avoid the "typical score" cliches. We ended up with a cocktail of: spaghetti western, classical Arabic, 80s synth, mariachi and orchestral, along with the odd sound of a toy and kitchen utensil.

For the closing song, I took the same approach. We collaborated with Bashar Murad who is a pop singer from Jerusalem to create a timeless song that would speak of our characters' life experiences and desires, while at the same time leave the audience with an uplifting sensation. Together we chose Nina Simone's "*I Wish*" which was translated into Arabic, scored with a gospel, Arabic and pop twist.

A GAZA WEEKEND took me 13 years to make, from start to finish, with countless obstacles popping up on the way. The only way to stay focused was to have fun making the film. It is not to be taken too seriously or literally.

We did not set out to solve the injustice in Palestine, nor will we bring peace to the world. From the very beginning (even while pitching the project impromptu on the beach in Cannes) I set out to tell an entertaining story, one that just so happens to be set in Gaza. And why not? Too many can't bring themselves to watch a film from Palestine without politicising it, and I am sure many can easily find some political angles, but rest assured, I promise you that, politics is not a career path I seek to explore. For me, it has always been storytelling, film and TV where my passions lay.

LONG SYNOPSIS

At Israel's Institute for Microbiological Research, an Arab lab worker accidentally ingests a sample with her coffee, unleashing a deadly virus which sparks an outbreak of Aggravated Respiratory Syndrome (ARS) that results in Israel being shut off from the rest of the world.

It's Thursday, and among those attempting to flee the country are British journalist Michael (Stephen Mangan) and his Israeli girlfriend Keren (Mouna Hawa), but the pair are turned back at Haifa port because Keren doesn't have a "foreign passport".

Meanwhile, in Gaza, enterprising market traders Waleed (Adam Bakri) and Emad (Loai Nofi) are desperately trying to make ends meet. Their latest idea involves cutting up bras, dyeing them blue, and turning them into respiratory masks, a scheme that is nipped in the

bud by Waleed's overzealous policeman neighbour Saleh (Adeeb Safadi) who confiscates their goods on immoral grounds.

A dejected Michael meets with his Australian TV journalist friend Jonathan (Yousef Shuwayhat) who says if he has money, they can get out of the country via Gaza. And tells him that Emad, who he interviewed recently, is a big-time people smuggler. (He's not.) Jonathan calls Emad and badgers him into helping him and, eventually, Emad agrees, bringing Waleed, who lives with his long-suffering wife Nuhad (Maria Zreik) and daughter Nisreen (Gazal Khalaili), in on the scheme. They need bribe money to pay local fixer Abu Shanab (Anwar Khalil), who operates an underground tunnel, but Waleed has no cash. So he pawns some of Nuhad's jewellery, hidden inside a frozen chicken in their failing fridge, and gives it to Shanab as down payment.

That night, Michael and Keren drive to meet Jonathan, although Keren, as an Israeli woman, is not keen on going to Gaza — “if you get caught, you'll be fined ... I will be raped and tortured” — nor spending \$20,000 for the privilege. Michael insists they'll be safe and that there's a boat to Cyprus at the end of their journey.

When they meet Jonathan, Keren demands their money back. But Jonathan refuses. Then the Israeli military show up and start shooting. Jonathan drives off, leaving Michael and Keren to run for the tunnel entrance and hightail it across the border into Gaza where they find Waleed, Emad and Abu Shanab waiting. They take their temperature then clamber to the surface where the three Palestinians are freaked to find out Keren is an Israeli. Before they can send her back, the tunnel entrance is shelled, and they escape in Waleed's Volvo. Abu Shanab says he'll get Michael and Keren fake passports in the morning, and leaves. Waleed drops Emad off, then drives Michael and Keren to his home, hiding them in the basement. Waleed wants the rest of the money, but Michael says not until they're safely on the boat. But Waleed needs the money for their new passports and takes a photo of Keren.

Hearing noises, Nuhad and Nisreen appear. Nuhad is furious Waleed has brought Israelis into their house. “If their disease doesn't kill us, Hamas will.” Waleed counters that Michael isn't Israeli. And they'll be gone tomorrow. Nuhad tells him to sleep on his own in Nisreen's room.

The next morning, Waleed's neighbour Saleh and his busybody wife Amira (Shaden Kanboura) are having breakfast. She asks him why he wasn't at the tunnel last night catching people smugglers and he rushes off to work. Waleed gives Michael and Keren breakfast and bottled water, telling them: "The water from the tap is full of bacteria". Michael has lost his phone and suggests it might be in Waleed's car. Alas, it's been discovered by the authorities at the tunnel entrance, and Abu Shanab calls to tell Waleed not to come for the passports, it's too dangerous and not worth the risk before Saleh beats him up. Now that Abu Shanab is out of the picture, Waleed has to find another passport forger. He takes some more of his wife's jewellery and he and Emad drive to the docks to find a forger but are stopped at a checkpoint. Emad is rude to one of the policemen, who knocks him out and throws him in jail for two nights.

Back at Waleed's his faulty fridge catches fire and Nuhaad discovers her jewellery is missing. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. It's the police. They have photos of Michael and Keren and are searching for them. Both Nuhaad and Nisreen say they haven't seen them, just as Waleed returns home. Upon discovering that Saleh is their neighbour, the police leave. Nuhaad berates Waleed for taking her jewellery. "All you had to do was ask and not go behind my back." She takes Nisreen and drives to her parents, telling him: "It's us or them." Amira, the nosy neighbour, sees them leave and picks up the phone to gossip...

Waleed is at his wits end. He calls anyone who might have a boat but is out of luck. The electricity is cut off, his stomach rumbles, but the fridge is empty. He goes out for food. The TV news reports on the hunt for Michael and Keren and he sees wanted posters plastered to the walls. Back at home, he hands Michael and Keren food wrapped in newspaper and they see their faces on the front page. Waleed's mother turns up and asks if it's true he's got himself another wife and asks if he knows where Emad is and why he's not answering his phone. Emad's aunt has died, and the funeral is in Egypt. She finds Michael and Keren hiding and berates her stupid, imbecilic son for harbouring them, and tells him to get rid of them. Michael wants to know who she is, where Nuhaad is and what his plans are. Waleed says a boat is no longer an option. "Your photos are everywhere. The tunnels are sealed. The borders are closed." But he says he's working on it.

Michael tells Waleed to swallow his pride, go see his wife. Waleed takes Nuhaad flowers and she agrees to help — "from here on, I'm in charge" — saying that Emad's dead aunt is the solution. Michael and Keren will travel with Emad to Egypt for the funeral. Michael and Keren pay Nuhaad the rest of the money, then she convinces Abu Shanab to make

the passports. Emad turns up, having been released from jail, before Amira pops round, sticking her nose in where it's not wanted. She almost sees Keren who Waleed locks in the toilet which overflows when she flushes. After Amira leaves, Nuhaḍ goes to unblock the toilet and has a brainwave.

Saturday morning. Nuhaḍ puts her plan in motion. They disguise Michael and Keren then dump bicarbonate, vinegar and soap powder into the main drain which blocks up the cesspit, causing sewage to spew into the street. Saleh freaks out and rushes outside in his pyjamas, screaming at another neighbour who's responsible for cleaning the cess pit.

It's all the distraction that Waleed and Nuhaḍ need. Michael, Keren, and Emad join them in Waleed's Volvo. But Keren's niqāb comes off and Saleh spots her. He commandeers a delivery truck and gives chase, phoning his boss to get them to stop Waleed at the nearest checkpoint. But his boss tells him to go home. Samer (Samer Bisharat) waves Waleed's car through the checkpoint, to the fury of Saleh who turns up moments later. Samer jumps in the back of Saleh's truck, and they set off after Waleed, but find themselves stuck behind a donkey-pulled cart, so Saleh turfs out the deliveryman.

Waleed's car approaches another checkpoint. He jumps out, dons a welder's mask, and distracts the guards, so Nuhaḍ can drive through.

Saleh almost runs down Waleed. As he swerves to avoid him, a gas tank falls off the back of his truck and explodes, injuring Waleed.

Nuhaḍ heads for the border, but the car overheats, and they must stop, allowing Saleh to catch up. Nuhaḍ evades his clutches and leaves Saleh and Samer stranded. Emad hands Michael and Keren their passports and travel permits. But when they finally reach border control, there's a lot of police and people. Emad recognises one of the guards and he helps Michael and Keren to jump the queue. But Emad freaks out and refuses to go with them, leaving the pair alone. Not understanding anything the border control woman asks them, Michael and Keren are convinced they're going to be killed.

Saleh and Samer make it to the border on bicycles. Saleh demands that Nuhaḍ, Michael and Keren are arrested, but his pleas fall on deaf ears. Emad watches Michael and Keren through a massive wall-mounted fan in passport control. He blows his snuff into the fan, which sends it inside, causing everyone to sneeze. The guards freak, thinking it's the "Israeli

virus", and rush outside, allowing Michael and Keren to stamp their passports and enter Egypt.

Saleh grabs a policeman's gun and tries to arrest Nuhad and Emad himself, but is overpowered and restrained, as he has no ID to prove he is a policeman.

Nuhad gets a phone call telling her Waleed has been involved in a gas explosion and heads back.

Across the border, Michael and Keren wave down a passing truck and hitch a ride to safety.

Nuhad is with a bandaged Waleed when she sees a breaking news report that says Gaza's heavily polluted water cures ARS. Spotting a money-making opportunity, Nuhad and Emad bottle the local drinking tap water and sell it to the Red Cross.

Meanwhile, Waleed has imported some birds from Wuhan Zoo in China...

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Back in May 2009, Oscar-nominated writer/director Basil Khalil was at the Cannes Film Festival having a meeting on the beach with Philippa Kowarsky, then a sales agent. At the end of their meeting, Kowarsky asked Khalil what he was working on next. "I had nothing. So I just came up with an idea. To impress her," admits Khalil who was born and raised in Nazareth to a Palestinian father and British-Irish mother, but now lives in London. "It was a time of Swine flu, so I said, 'There's this virus in Israel and Gaza's the safest place in the world. And the virus, it's called kosher swine flu.'"

Kowarsky liked the idea a lot and suggested Khalil apply to the Sundance Film Festival's Screenwriters' Lab, a five-day writers' workshop that gives independent screenwriters the opportunity to work on their feature scripts with the support of established writers in an environment that focuses on the art and craft of screenwriting and creative risk taking. "I thought, great, free tickets to the US," recalls Khalil. "So, over the summer, I had to write a pitch, or at least a treatment, to get into that lab."

In fact, by winter 2009 Khalil wrote the entire script for what would eventually become *A GAZA WEEKEND*, but was turned down by Sundance, who, instead, sent him to one they co-ran with the Royal Film Commission in Jordan called Rawi, "which was really good."

After the RAWI screenwriter's lab in Jordan, Khalil was also accepted into the TorinoFilmLab in Italy in collaboration with Dubai Film Festival, where he workshopped the script some more, before he began work on a short film, *Ave Maria*, as a proof of concept for his feature which he was having trouble finding finance for. "It didn't fit their perception of what a Palestinian film could be. There were no soldiers, no checkpoints, no misery. It was a comedy. The humour and the naughty jokes are all very Palestinian. So the people there would get it, but Westerners didn't know if they were supposed to laugh. That's my whole thing. You're not sure if you're supposed to laugh, but you are allowed to laugh with them. So I moved to Italy and Spain and started focusing on the short film as a proof of concept. But I had no idea it would be that successful."

Described by *the New York Times* as "the Middle Eastern answer to *Curb Your Enthusiasm*", *Ave Maria* premiered in official competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2015 before going on to screen at more than 250 film festivals, winning 40-plus awards and being nominated for an Academy Award for Best Live Action Short, with *Screen International* naming Khalil as one of the Top 10 Arab filmmakers to watch.

In total, *Ave Maria* represented four years of Khalil's life. But it succeeded in getting him to the next level when, in 2016, he met producer Amina Dasmal (*The Double*), who runs Alcove Entertainment, an independent film production and finance company based in the UK and the UAE, with executive producer Robin Fox. Dasmal had loved *Ave Maria* and was keen to work with Khalil. "When the short came out, I was doing rounds of meetings and they were the only ones who said, we've seen your short, we like it, whatever you want to do next, we'll do it. No matter what it is," he reveals. "And they kept to their word. And I said, well, I do have this project, here's a script. And I've been with them ever since..."

"He's very bright. He is very open. And the way he explores characters and people is without judgment," says Dasmal. "And he is interested in exploring things from new perspectives. That's what makes him unique. That's what makes this film unique. It's not been done before. Tackling that region and the backdrop of what exists there, and him

being sensitive to it all. And yet also, being able to weave this comedy in this mad way that I don't think anyone could do really."

Set over a long weekend in Israel and Gaza, *A GAZA WEEKEND* is, in Khalil 's words "a messy comedy, a trashy comedy. I like trashy comedies," he says. "My inspirations were *The Birdcage*, the Mike Nichols one, Roberto Benigni's *Johnny Stecchino* and *Life Is Beautiful*, that kind of messy comedy in a way that it's chaos, but it's real. It's the way we would talk and behave, it's not performed, and you don't feel the writer's hand. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is another messy comedy I absolutely adore, and I've been channelling through my style."

Despite taking place in both Gaza and Israel, *A GAZA WEEKEND* is most definitely not a political movie. Nor does it demonise anyone. "The essence of the film is people coming together despite potential differences, imagined or real, and overcoming that to work together, to serve and help each other," says producer Dasmal. "And Basil's done it with a lot of love and humour. That's very appealing to me because even when things are hard, laughter is essential to healing. I mean, he laughs at everyone. There's no goodies and baddies in that sense. And I think that's his charm and that's why the film's so fun and just very human."

"I'm showing an alternative reality to what everyone expects," says Khalil, "even the ones who hate anything Palestinian are going to try and find something wrong with it, and they're going to struggle. 'It's not demonising my people. It's not glorifying my enemies. How am I going to hate it?' I'm not trying to humanize the Palestinians for the sake because everybody hates them. I was inspired by my neighbours and my colleagues and myself and my partner and my family. They're just characters I've lived with and put them in the film. I hate movies that make statements. I'm not trying to make a statement. Maybe that's my statement. I'm just trying to tell a funny story and entertain people for 90 minutes."

"It was very important to him to humanise people in Gaza," continues Dasmal. "There is colour. There is love. There's life. They're not just a suppressed people existing as victims. They do amazing things. They're great people, they're caring and loving and nurturing and getting on with life. But I think he just wants people to watch the film and enjoy it. And take what they want from it. He just wanted to make a film from that region that's not been made before, and in a way that appeals to him."

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The cast of *A GAZA WEEKEND* is filled with characters who were based on people Khalil knew while growing up in Nazareth. "A lot of this film is inspired by Gaza," he reveals. "It's not extremely accurate to the way things are, but it's inspired by the people of Gaza who are surrounded and can't import or export anything. Everything's upcycled, recycled, they're just surviving and making something from nothing."

That said, Waleed and Emad, the two market traders and cousins who suddenly find themselves smuggling Michael, a British TV journalist, and his Israeli girlfriend Keren out of Gaza were initially inspired by David Jason's Del Boy and Nicholas Lyndhurst's Rodney from the classic TV sitcom *Only Fools and Horses*. "They're very good friends. They spend all their time together, working together, they're almost like family," says Dasmal. "I mean, they've been through everything together. They've known each other since they were very young and so it's a brotherly bond, and they really understand each other. But they're very different character types and they always need each other, as it relates thinking up the next business opportunity."

"Waleed is a wheeler-dealer type, but he's really bad at business and thinks he's amazing," notes Khalil. "Everybody can see right through him that he's a failure, and it's the women who must pick up the pieces to save his face and save their own face. That's why he's being berated by women throughout the whole movie. But you understand why he's doing it and you can't really hate it. He has good intentions, but he's a bit of a simpleton and it's that sweetness that keeps his marriage going because his wife knows he's trying his best, but his best is very limited. When I wrote it, he was supposed to be a bit cockier. But when we cast Adam, his acting took it to a slightly different yet interesting direction."

Adam Bakri is a well-known Palestinian actor who graduated from New York's Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute and made his first feature debut in Hany Abu-Assad's Oscar-nominated *Omar* for which he was awarded Best Actor at Malmo Arab Film Festival. Bakri also starred in Partho Sen-Gupta's *Slam*, opposite Keira Knightley in Gavin Hood's *Official Secrets*, and in the sci-fi series *"Hell's Gate"*.

"Waleed is an extraordinary character," says Bakri. "I found in him so much innocence, and a naivety that gave me so much freedom as an actor. His decisions throughout the film, and the way he deals with their outcomes, makes him a bigger than life character."

Khalil spent a long time auditioning for the part. "It is a hard role to carry, and there are very few actors who are available, who are Palestinian, who know the accent, and can perform it at that level," Khalil explains. "I auditioned people in the UK, Australia, Palestine and Jordan, and Adam's audition was the best."

"I watched *Ave Maria* and absolutely loved it!" says Bakri. "Then I read *A GAZA WEEKEND* and immediately felt I could give something to Waleed — and to the film. I was happy to audition. Basil has a unique vision and a phenomenal sense of humour. He was very specific about what he wanted and we shared a similar vision, so on set I felt free to bring that to the role and he gave me the trust and freedom to explore Waleed."

Rodney to Waleed's Del Boy is the bumbling Emad. "Emad is a very smart and intelligent young man who is very aware of his and Gaza's situation from the Israeli blockade," says Loai Nofi, who plays him. "His ambitions are limited because of that and he knows it, so he is pretty happy with his cut. He works happily at the stall and is not in a hurry to get married because he knows his mum will find a bride for him one day. But when the epidemic hits and the situation in Israel becomes intolerable, Emad accepts the job of people smuggling because it's a very big opportunity that will fix his life."

"He is smarter than Waleed and comes up with the good ideas, but never gets the credit," says Khalil. "He's a bit of a coward as well."

Nofi, like Khalil, hails from Nazareth, and his feature credits include *Zaytoun* and *Holy Lands*, as well as the TV shows "Zaguri", "The Good Cop", "Dumb" and "Mizrah Tichon Merkaz". "He's brilliant and I wrote the role for him," says Khalil. "Initially, he had very few lines, and a lot of his stuff was improvised, because he's got such energy. He's super witty and is very much like the character. He was such a joy to work with and really gave good colour to that role."

"Loai was fabulous," concurs Dasmal. "He's a wonderful actor. And from day one, he was so funny. The way Basil directs is he does a few takes of what's on the page, then is very encouraging of the actors to improvise and find what they feel what the character would say. And Loai was superb. He brings so much of the humour to the film."

"Basil is so talented," enthuses Nofi. "He knows what he wants. He's pleasant, kind, smart, funny, and gave me the freedom to do whatever I saw fit. We became friends and I hope I'll have the chance to work with him again."

Waleed's long-suffering wife is Nuhad, a resourceful woman who is forced to step in when her husband and Emad's plan to smuggle Michael and Keren out of Gaza threatens to unravel and land them all in jail. "She's a fixer upper, the silent observer," says Khalil. "She lets Waleed do his thing, lets him feel good about it. And when it's falling apart, she knows exactly how to fix it. She steps in."

"Nuhad is the engine of the family," says Palestinian actress Maria Zreik who plays her. "She used to work as a teacher before the school was bombed and is married to Waleed, who isn't stable and unable to settle in one profession. She is always having to tidy up after her husband's shenanigans, until she decides to steer the situation with her own hands to save her husband and family. She represents a strong Palestinian woman who does not surrender to the realities of her situations. Eventually she's the one who saves the day."

Zreik starred in Khalil's short film *Ave Maria* and made her acting debut in 2014's *Villa Touma*, which earned her the Best Actress Award at the Reggio Calabria Film Festival, and in 2017 was selected as part of the *Screen International's Arab Stars Of Tomorrow* in association with the Dubai International Film Festival. "She's a very sharp and fast actress," Khalil reveals. "The interesting thing is, ethnically, she's also half Jewish. Her grandmother is a Polish Jew who escaped the Holocaust to Palestine in the forties and married a Palestinian Christian, but she was brought up in the eyes of Israel as Palestinian."

"It is the third time I've worked with Basil," says Zreik, who first met Khalil when he worked as a script supervisor on *Villa Touma*. "We're good friends. I enjoy working with him, because he creates a cheerful environment and, at the same time, knows how to get me out of my comfort zone, which is the ultimate conditions any actor aspires to work under."

Aside from acting, Zreik also holds a bachelor's degree in law. "She works as an actress and a lawyer on the side because there's not enough film work going on there," continues Khalil. "But my brief to her as Nuhad, was, try to not bruise Waleed's ego, let him do his thing, then quietly take control without embarrassing him in front of the others and make it look like it was his idea, which is what most men in the world need."

Another strong, no-nonsense woman is Michael's girlfriend Keren, who, as an Israeli stuck in Gaza, is in complete fear of her life, believing, if she's caught, the authorities will "rape and torture" her. "Keren is based on me," admits Khalil. "I'm the blunt person who says what everyone's thinking. And so when people want advice — How does this dress look on me? — I just give it out, as sharp and painful as it is. But they know they'll get in the truth and not a fake compliment. And Keren knows everything's going to fall apart. She's the one who is bursting Michael's silly dreams. She's very practical and says, this is a stupid mistake. And she's right."

"Keren is an independent, successful woman," says Mouna Hawa, an Israeli-born Palestinian actress and singer whose film and TV credits include *Zaytoun*, *Between Heaven And Earth* and the Netflix show *Fauda*. "She's a control freak, very organized, goes down to every little detail, prefers to check things by herself rather than counting on someone else. The most precious thing in her life is her father and her dogs, and she doesn't need any one to save her. She loves Michael, they have a strong bond of trust and connection, they've been together since forever. But it's clear that Keren takes the lead, she is responsible for the major decisions in their relationship, he wants to get married, she prefers to have a trip around the world instead. Unwillingly she finds herself in the last place she would have wanted to be in — Gaza!"

"I love Keren," says Dasmal. "She is not going to tolerate any nonsense. Everyone talks about the need for strong females, and I'm proud of the women in this. They're so different, Keren and Nuhad, but end up in a very similar space. They're the ones that drive this story. They're the ones who say, we're going to get this across the finish line. But alongside the men they love. And that's so wonderfully charming."

"Keren goes through a big change during the movie," adds Hawa. "She has to make a lot of compromises, accepting to lose control, and gets the chance to know an Arab family, and see their struggle, and yet experience their generosity, sharing their last piece of food with her. She sees them as humans for the first time. One of the main things that attracted me to this movie was Basil's sarcastic way of presenting the story, it's a very cheerful and unique vision of a tragedy. It's not a film that lectures you with political slogans, nor victimizes Palestinians. It criticizes everyone. It was important for me to play Keren not from a stereotyped point of view, but to really try to understand her battles and inner self, her dreams and fears." "I auditioned quite a lot of actresses, both Israeli and Palestinian, for Keren, and Mouna, who's Palestinian, nailed it, because she knows them

more than they know themselves, because she sees them from the outside, in terms of the Israeli psyche towards Gaza." Says Khalil. "And she was brilliant."

Much like Waleed, Keren's boyfriend Michael is well-meaning but a trifle hapless. "He's with Keren for all her perceived faults, but values her honesty," says Khalil. "She doesn't bullshit. So he knows, he can trust her. Unfortunately, he has to live with her parents. She likes her dad. She wants to look after him 'cause she's got a bully of a mother and sister, a bit like Cinderella's sisters. And so feels protective of her dad. He works in a foreign news agency in Israel and doesn't feel he belongs there. He's trying to get out as quickly as possible, but he's not going to ditch her. So he has to twist her arm and find a sneaky way of getting her out."

Michael is played by Tony and BAFTA-nominated English actor, writer, and performer Stephen Mangan, who's starred in films such as *Rush* and *Breathe*, as well as hit TV shows such as "Green Wing" and "Episodes". "He's a Brit in Israel, in love with and dominated by his Israeli girlfriend," laughs Mangan. "He's probably not the best to have around in a crisis. Would do anything for a quiet life. Unfortunately, fate has other plans for him. He ends up being smuggled into Gaza with his girlfriend by a hopeless pair of Palestinians. The blind leading the blind."

"I liked him very much in *Episodes*," says Khalil, "and his character in that, playing a TV writer, was the type of character Michael was supposed to be, a bit unsure, but has ambition and has plans. And so he was always top of the list. But there were some issues of availability, and he became available quite a few weeks before the shoot, which was nerve wracking for me. Cause I was on location and about to shoot in three weeks and we still didn't have our Michael. And then things opened up and we got him. We were super lucky. I can't imagine it with anyone else."

"Stephen and Mouna had such a lovely chemistry," says Dasmal, "and that was something we were very conscious of not getting wrong, how their dynamic would translate. And Stephen was brilliant at it. He's so generous as an actor and played Michael exactly tight. As a character Michael could have gone in a few directions depending who played him, and Stephen got it exactly how Basil had imagined."

Mangan also brought "a lot of his own lines," to the character, says Khalil. "Because he's a writer, I would sometimes be, so this punchline, I wrote it in as a place holder. I don't

know how to deliver it and he'd give it a few goes. I would always shoot a few takes for safety, and then on the third take, I would say, Okay. Let's have some fun. These are the parameters. Just go with it and come up with your own shit. And they would always do well. But Stephen was a level above from his years of writing comedy or performing it. The Hamas/humorous joke was his, along with him talking about the coffin, saying it reminds him of Keren's mother. Things like that brought naturalism to the character and didn't feel scripted because they weren't scripted."

"Basil is a genuine collaborator," says Mangan. "He's not precious about his script and always open to ideas from actors. Someone like that is a treat to work with."

Part of what makes Waleed and Emad's task to smuggle out Michael and Keren even harder is the fact the former's next-door neighbour is an officious policeman called Saleh while his wife is the local busybody and gossip, always sticking her nose in where it's not wanted. "Saleh was based on one of my neighbours from back home, both him and his wife. He wasn't a policeman, but they were so much in love; it was really sweet. Again, this is not what the Western gaze expects from a Hamas policeman or an Arab man — sweet and lovey-dovey with his wife. Also, he's supposed to be the bad guy, but he's not, he's just a normal guy. In fact, Saleh is the only honest policeman out of a corrupt and inefficient system. But because he's honest, nobody believes him, because he's not on the take."

Cast as Saleh was Syrian actor Adeeb Safadi who starred in Muayad Alayan's 2018 feature *The Reports on Sarah and Saleem*. "He auditioned, but Basil knew all these actors from their work, and just loved Adeeb for this," says Dasmal. "Lovely man, great actor, gave everything to this character. As an actor, Adeeb has a gentleness to him that I think comes through with Saleh — he's desperately trying to do the right thing. And Adeeb was able to capture that. Saleh could have been quite unlikable in another way. But Adeeb has got the most wonderful smile."

"He's brilliant," says Khalil. "He's from the occupied Golan Heights and is considered a refugee. He started drama in Damascus, way before the revolution happened there, and he's very physical as well. He did all his stunts himself. He was really up for it. He gave it a hundred percent and was super easy to work with. Always jolly."

STRANGER THAN FICTION

This upbeat attitude was crucial to A GAZA WEEKEND's cast and crew who began filming in and around Haifa, Israel in February 2020.

"What a glorious place," says Mangan who was attracted to the film in part for the opportunity to work in Israel. "Fascinating mix of cultures, great food — very important for actors — and a chance for me to see life in and around Haifa well away from the tourist trail."

"Haifa is my hometown," says Zreik. "Working there is always a pleasure. I get to wake up at home with my family, shoot at the streets and neighborhoods I grew up in, seeing people I know during filming. And there's great food — my mama's."

"Waleed's home was in Ibbilin, a Palestinian village that has, in the last five years, had a lot of movies shoot there," says Khalil. "The people are super friendly and nice. Normally you get troublemakers getting angry, blocking the streets, or wanting money. But in that village, everyone's so friendly. We had a lot of support from the council; they let us shut down the street. And the lady who owns Saleh's upstairs house as well as Waleed's gave us free reign for about a month. Waleed's basement was shot in a different location, in the basement of a convent in Haifa, which was interesting. We went back to the nuns again."

For those who've seen Khalil's short, the nuns who feature in the opening scenes of A GAZA WEEKEND are played by the same actors who played the nuns in *Ave Maria*. "In Israel, in Haifa, and Palestine, I had a lot of friends who worked on *Ave Maria*, who came back for this, whether it was the production designer (Rabia Salifiti), the sound recordist (Ibrahim Zaher), the production manager (Sana Tanous), a lot of the actors. It is a small community. And they all work on each other's films."

"Working in Haifa felt right," says Bakri, "mainly because Basil and the team chose the right locations that made us all feel like we were truly living in Gaza."

Back in February 2020, however, the idea of a deadly virus that locked down countries and their borders, forcing people to quarantine and don surgical masks, was just a narrative conceit that Khalil and his co-writer, Daniel Chan, had first hatched in 2009. "I did a lot of research on the SARS outbreak, which is a version of COVID, and spoke to a

scientist at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine,” says Khalil. “So I researched, how does it infect people? What are the side effects? How do governments react? As well as quarantine and masks.”

By the time, Khalil started filming, with characters in Hazmat suits and wearing bras as face masks, that fiction had become reality as events in, first, China with the Covid-19 outbreak, which rapidly spread to mainland Europe. “There were things that were written in the script that started to appear in the news,” recalls Dasmal. “At first it was, this is a bit surreal. At that time, like the rest of the world, we thought it was at a distance from us. But I remember two specific images I saw. One was people in hazmat suits, almost identical to an image we have in the opening, which we shot on the first day. And then Basil found another image of somebody wearing a bra as a mask, which is something Basil’s had in the script forever. We were all slightly in shock that what existed in the film we were going through in real life, the fact Basil wrote that this virus will shut down borders and airspace and travel. It was incredibly perverse.” “It was an absolutely surreal experience,” recalls Bakri. “It was quite unreal to walk off the set and see people wearing masks!”

“It was super weird,” agrees Khalil. “We would look at the footage we’d shot, and then the next day it would be on the news — people wearing bottles for masks, or bras and panties, because they were running out. Literally as we were shooting the opening scene where you’ve got queues for hospitals and panic, the exact same things were happening in China and Italy.”

“Basil’s ability to remain calm and collected as our film about a global pandemic ran smack into an actual pandemic was remarkable,” notes Mangan. “How crazy that we were making a film about this, and it actually came into being as we were shooting. Remind me not to do a film about earthquakes.”

Eventually, after 21 days’ filming, however, production on A GAZA WEEKEND was brought to a sudden halt, as the Covid epidemic finally reached Israel. “It happened very quickly,” says Dasmal. “It was almost like, okay, we’re fine for tomorrow, we know we can shoot tomorrow. And then, that evening, we were being thrown out of hotels. Hotels were like, You have to leave. We’ve been told to close. It happened in 24 hours. And then we all came back home and thought, much like probably the rest of the world, oh, this’ll be a couple of months. We thought, maybe we can start shooting in July and started to aim for that. And then you realised it’s not going to be a couple of months. And we just couldn’t

make it work. There was always a stumbling block. It was just impossible, at times, to imagine we would ever finish it."

"We had a few attempts to resume," recalls Khalil. "Once in July, in August, September, twice in October, once in November, once in December, and every time we'd cancel either hours before I'd fly out or the day before. It was either a new variant or changing rules. We had to get a special visa for Stephen to come into the country, cause Israel wasn't allowing foreigners in. Every time there was a change or something would happen." Then, in January 2021, it was decided that the production would need to finish it in another country. "Could we do Dubai? Could we do Jordan? We studied both and Jordan was the only option."

And so, in March 2021, almost a year to the day that the production originally shut down, filming restarted in Jordan, to finish off the final ten days. "Jordan often will double as the West Bank in films, so plenty has been shot there, and we knew that could work," recalls Damsal. "They had just lifted the lockdown. And we had this window where we thought we can get in now. That was very stressful, but we got there. And we got it done."

"We had to get special permits for everyone," notes Khalil. "Jordan was operating a curfew from 7pm until 7am next morning. And we had to figure out ways to bring in extras. Cause we had limits on numbers, on gatherings. And we would do tests every few days and waiting for the results. We were super nervous because any infection could have shut down the production and we would've lost a lot more money, because we did lose a lot of on the one-year shutdown. Fortunately, our financiers, Film Four and BFI, really believed in the film. They could have pulled the plug a long time ago. But they kept it going."

"Luckily, everything that happened was for the benefit of the movie. The script became better because Basil was more familiar with the harmony between the characters, my dialogue with Stephen was much better, the film became more feminist, more specific. Overall, it was a gift. What filmmaker gets the chance to stop, look at the bigger picture, think about it for a whole year and make it better? Personally, the second time round, I felt I was wiser and more mature to deal with my character. I'm so grateful for that."

"Many things happened to shape it, but shaped it for the best," reflects Damsal. "Often, you'll have to compromise in filmmaking, sometimes in a direction you don't think you'd like, but with this, we had such wonderful actors and characters, you wanted to see more

of them. So they all came to the forefront, and you started to have more of an ensemble feel rather, and I'm really glad it ended in that way."

CAST AND CREW BIOGRAPHIES

Adam Bakri (Walid)

Adam Bakri is a Palestinian actor who hails from a family of artists. He studied English Literature and Theatre Arts and graduated from New York's Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute. His first feature film was 2013 Oscar nominee *Omar*, by Hany Abu-Assad, for which he was awarded Best Actor at Malmo Arab Film Festival and was nominated for Best Performance by an Actor at Asia Pacific Screen Awards. Also, he was nominated for Best Actor at Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival for his role in the film *Slam*. Adam co-starred with Keira Knightley in the film *Official Secrets*, for which he was nominated for Best Screen Couple (shared with Keira Knightley) at Women Film Critics Circle Awards. Bakri's most recent work is the sci-fi series "Hell's Gate", which is now screening on Shahid platform, marking his first role in a series.

Maria Zreik (Nuhad)

Maria Zreik is a Palestinian actress. She made her debut in *Villa Touma*, which earned her the "Best Actress Award" at the Reggio Calabria Film Festival, as well as putting her in the spotlight of Palestinian cinema. Since then, she has appeared in several feature films, TV series, ads and theatre plays, including the lead role in *Ave Maria*, which earned an Oscar nomination in 2016.

In 2017, Maria was selected as part of the Screen International's "Arab stars of Tomorrow" in association with the Dubai International Film Festival and was nominated for Muhr Feature Award for Best Actress.

Aside from acting, Maria holds a bachelor's degree in Law.

Mouna Hawa (Keren)

Mouna Hawa is a Palestinian actress and singer, born and raised in Haifa. In 2007 after graduating from the Samuel Robin music conservatory, Mouna was a lead singer in a couple of bands and music projects and was a part of a folklore dancing group.

in 2012 after graduating from Beit-Zvi academy of high performing arts, Mouna began her acting career on stage, she performed over 20 theatre productions including children shows and musicals, taking the lead role in 'Who Killed Asmahan?' for which she won the award for best actress in the Palestinian Theatre Festival for her role as the famous singer Asmahan. Mouna's first feature film in 2016 was *Bar-Bahar* (in between) for which she won the Israeli Academy Award for best supporting actress. She is also known for starring in the famous TV series "Muna" and 2019 feature film *Between Heaven and Earth*.

Loai Noufi (Emad)

Loai Noufi was born and raised in Nazareth. At 18 he went to study acting at Beit Tzvi academy in Tel Aviv. During his final year of studies, he was picked up for a small role in *The Lemon Tree* by Eran Riklis. After that he worked with Riklis on his 2 following films, *Zaytoun* and *Dancing Arabs*. Loai is most known for his roles in the Israeli TV series' "Dumb" (HBO Latin American), "The Good Cop" (Netflix), "Zaguri Empire" (HOT TV) and the new season of "Fauda" (Netflix).

Basil Khalil (Writer and Director)

Academy Award & Palme d'Or nominated writer and director Basil Khalil was born and raised in Nazareth, to a Palestinian father and British-Irish mother. After studying for an MA at Screen Academy Scotland, in Edinburgh, Basil worked on a number of television productions in London. His first short film *Ave Maria* (2015) premiered in official selection at the Cannes Film Festival, then went on to receive an Oscar nomination and screen at over 250 film festivals, winning several awards. The film was described by the New York Times as; "The Middle Eastern answer to 'Curb Your Enthusiasm'." *A GAZA WEEKEND* is his first feature that he's been developing since 2009

Amina Dasmal (Producer)

Amina Dasmal founded Alcove Entertainment with producer Robin Fox in 2005. Alcove Entertainment produced *The Double*, a comedy written and directed by BAFTA-award nominated Richard Ayoade, also co-financed by BFI and Film4 starring Jesse Eisenberg and Mia Wasikowska. *The Double* debuted at Toronto International Film Festival 2013 and was selected to screen in competition at both London Film Festival 2013 and Tokyo International Film Festival. Alcove Entertainment's first feature *Cochochi*, a production with Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna's Canana, won the Discovery Award 2007 at Toronto Film Festival & Grand Jury Prize 2008 at the Miami International Film Festival.

subsequent films include Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers*, awarded Grand Jury prize at CPH:DOX Film Festival 2009 and distributed by Warp Films. *The Caller*, a supernatural thriller directed by Matthew Parkhill, was picked up by Sony Pictures for distribution after premiering at the 2011 Berlinale Film Market.

CREDITS

BFI FILM4 and AFE present

In association with TWICKENHAM STUDIOS with the support of THE ARAB FUND FOR ARTS
AND CULTURE - AFAC
An ALCOVE ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION

PRINCIPAL CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

EMAD.... LOAI NOUFI

MICHAEL.... STEPHEN MANGAN

KEREN.... MOUNA HAWA

WALEED.... ADAM BAKRI

NUHAD.... MARIA ZREIK

SALEH.... ADEEB SAFADI

Directed by

BASIL KHALIL

WRITTEN BY

BASIL KHALIL

DANIEL CHAN

PRODUCED BY

AMINA DASMAL

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

ROBIN FOX

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

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