



The End of Revenge

Ajami, Israel's Best Foreign Language Film Oscar nominee, rewards close attention. The elegantly structured film begins near the beginning, but its following chapters skip through time, showing the repercussions of a decision before the events that led up to it, and carefully placing the players on the stage of its tragedy. Writer-directors Scandar Copti (who also acts in the film) and Yaron Shani – a Palestinian and an Israeli, respectively – set their complex tale of overlapping lives in the Ajami neighborhood of Jaffa, which they describe in the film's press notes as “a melting pot of cultures, nationalities and opposite human perspectives.”

Ajami begins with violence: A 15-year-old kid is shot in front of his apartment. A neighbor, Nasri (Fouad Habash), explains that it's retaliation, but the shooters were confused; they meant to kill Nasri's older brother, Omar (Shahir Kabaha). To stop further violence, the family turns to a powerful local businessman, Abu Elias (Youssef Sahwani), who brokers a peace that will cost Omar and Nasri's family far more money than they have. From here, the story spreads outward, looping in a boy working illegally in Abu Elias' restaurant; a Palestinian man caught between his friends and his Jewish girlfriend (women's roles here are limited to love interests and weeping mothers); and a cop searching for his missing brother.

Copti and Shani do little hand-holding for the audience, throwing us right into the action and expecting us to keep up with who's Arabic, who's Jewish, and who is friends with or related to whom. These things are of utmost importance to the characters, key pieces of their identities that tie directly into the choices they make, no matter how wise, impassioned, misguided or tragic those choices may be. Copti and Shani steer clear of moral judgements, and their documentary-style film – shot with nonprofessional actors reacting to situations, not reading from a script – is deeply convincing in its depiction of the way its characters' lives are colored by uncertainty, love, fear, family and the ever-present tension of overlapping worlds that don't always understand each other. *Ajami* (120 minutes, not rated) opens Friday, May 14, at the Bijou. ★★☆☆☆ – Molly Templeton

GIANT FIGHTING LIZARDS! And a Lot More

According to press materials, the Archaeology Channel's International Film and Video Festival is “the only juried competition for cultural heritage films in the western hemisphere.” From the 100 entries for this year's festival (submitted by 32 countries), 19 films and videos were selected to show at the Hult Center's Soreng Theater over the course of the five-day festival.

Many of the works shown during the festival are hour-long documentaries – just enough to give you a taste of the subject without immersing you in it entirely. *Lost Nation: The loway* is a quiet look at the history of the loway tribe, from their existence before European settlers through a major treaty signing and on to today, where elders work to retain the culture and language of the tribe. On the opposite side of the world is *Death of the Megabeasts*, an Australian doc that grabs you immediately with GIANT FIGHTING



(computer generated) LIZARDS. then backs off to explain its purpose: figuring out why Australia's megafauna, which included a marsupial lion and giant kangaroo, died out.

The Future of Mud is a look at the masons of Djenne, Mali, that's part documentary and part fiction; as is explained at the end, some of the film's subjects are playing themselves, while others are improvising fictional characters – which helps explain why the film's look at the coexistence of ancient masonry and modern ideas and technology feels a little too pat.

Longer films at the festival include *Standing With Stones*, which follows Rupert Soskin as he tours the U.K., exploring some of the British Isles' many stone circles, barrows and other ancient structures, and *When the Egyptians Sailed on the Red Sea*, in which a team of archaeologists and shipbuilders strive to recreate a ship shown in a bas-relief. The ship was sent by Hatshepsut to the land of Punt; the replica doesn't go quite so far (and no one's entirely sure where Punt was), but once the film gets through the background and on to the shipbuilding, it's fascinating. The shipbuilders mostly use the same tools that've been used for thousands of years; the ship, which “wallows like a pig,” is both beautiful and ungainly on the water.

The Archaeology Channel's International Film and Video Festival runs May 18-22 at the Hult Center. Tickets are \$12 per day (or per session on Saturday), \$25 on Friday (including awards reception) or \$70 for the whole shebang. See www.archaeologychannel.org for the full schedule. – Molly Templeton

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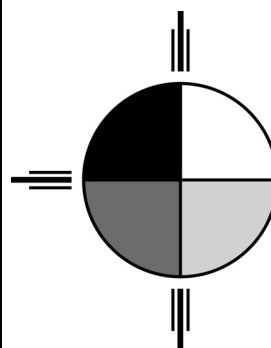
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