

The Band's Visit

Here's an antidote to the ongoing grimness of the Arab-Israeli conflict: a modest cross-cultural filmic gem that scales back—way back--a tense region's conflicts to concentrate on small human relationships. It is *The Band's Visit*, from Israeli filmmaker Eran Kollrin, which shows what happens when a military band from Egypt, on an exchange visit to Israel, ends up on the wrong bus.

The visit of the band of eight players from the Alexandria Ceremonial Police Orchestra begins badly when they land at an Israeli airport with no one to meet them. They eventually board a bus to the wrong town, an isolated desert hamlet where they are a subject of curiosity and little else. No one expects them, no one expects anything of them.

The band's supremely dignified (and up tight) leader Tewfiq (Sasson Gabai) tries to put things right with little success, but he and his group are looked after by Dina (Ronit Elkabetz), a café owner and spirited soul who finds their puzzling presence intriguing in her boring town. There are no buses until the next day, so the band members end up staying at Dina's home and bunking with several other locals.

The movie is a catalogue of deft gestures and interactions between the mostly reticent Egyptians and the easy-going Israeli townspeople. An exception is one voluble young Egyptian ladies man, Khaled (Saleh Bakri). Communications are testy, but heartfelt; and interestingly, most of the dialogue between the band and the townspeople is in English. In the case of Tewfiq and Dina, the day and night result in a growing warmth between them, a touching of souls, if not a total immersion. A fragile bond is formed, and some good memories are left behind between these otherwise estranged folk.

As implied by the qualifiers used above, this film is not a laughter, but a wry comedy of cross-cultural wariness, a sweet fishes-out-of-water story (though the town doesn't evidence much water!). It is saved from being almost too low-key by the believable performances of its principal players, lead by a severe Gabai as Tewfiq who quietly yields to the openness and animation of Elkabetz as Dina. It makes, gently, a number of points about how we are all the same under the skin, as when Khaled advises a town nerd (Shlomi Avraham) on how to approach a girl, or when Dina exchanges reminiscences with Tewfiq about how her family used to love to watch Egyptian shows on television. And it has a triumphal finale when, at last, the band gets to play to an enthusiastic Israeli crowd—not oompah music but traditional, classic Arab tunes.

This is a film for the world's optimists, those who want to look at the best side of people, even purported enemies.

(The film is rated PG-13, with a running time of 87 mins.)

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