

FILM REVIEW

Avi Mograbi, dir. *Between Fences*. 2016. 85 mins. Hebrew, Tigrinya, English, Arabic (with English subtitles). Israel. Torch Films. \$295.

African asylum seekers crossed the Egyptian border into Israel in substantial numbers from 2005 until 2012, arriving mostly from Eritrea, Sudan, and pre-independence South Sudan. The State of Israel treated these forced migrations as an invasion and framed African asylum seekers as infiltrators. Since 2006, the Israeli governments prevented asylum seekers from securing temporary status and from legally working in Israel. Ongoing policy shifts and never-ending battles at the Supreme Court have led to their in-and-out imprisonment, increasing demands from the Ministry of Interior, and exploitive labor terms. A quote from the former interior minister, Eli Yishai, on August 8, 2012, expresses the state's general attitude: "The infiltrators' threat is just as severe as the Iranian threat... and until I can deport them, I will lock them up to make their lives miserable." One of the ways of making their lives miserable was to detain male asylum seekers indefinitely in the Holot detention center, which operated between 2013 and 2018.

The documentary *Between Fences*, directed by Avi Mograbi, chronicles a theater workshop of Sudanese, Eritrean, and Israeli actors, mostly conducted in a deserted military hall near the Holot detention center from 2014 to 2015. Together with Mograbi, the workshop was led by the theater director and actor Dr. Chen Alon, who practiced Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed techniques to bring the stories of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers to Israeli audiences. The group worked together for a year and started performing in 2015. The play "One Love" by the Holot Legislative Theater was performed numerous times across the country.

The film captures the making of the Holot Legislative Theater and provides a glimpse into the complexities of the process while shedding light on some of the obstacles that asylum seekers faced in their home countries, on their journeys, and while they were in Israel. From their capture at the Egyptian border to their ongoing imprisonment, the corrupt practices of the Ministry of Interior, and the helplessness of NGOs, testimonies in the film unveil a fraction of asylum seekers' everyday struggles, as well as the political realities from which they were fleeing. The encounter with Israelis who join

the theater group is gently framed and reveals unique spaces of getting to know one another.

Between Fences is mostly compiled of scenes filmed during the workshop. In between acting exercises, games, and rehearsals, a few of the actors take us through particular aspects of their lives as refugees. With loosely woven scenes of the directors' unsuccessful attempts to form a dialogue with detainees from Holot, the first half of the film projects distance, lack of communication, and a general feeling of stuckness. The music and the long repetitive scenes support the dead-end atmosphere. Forming the group proved to be difficult, since participation was scarce and the exercises were unnatural and without passion. The directors' attempts to talk with other detainees often ended up with the detainees expressing resentment toward the directors. The question of why, however, remains off-limits. As viewers, we are left with no real discussion of how the formation of this theater group was influenced by the tensions between citizens and those who have no legal status, whites and blacks, free people and prisoners.

After 45 minutes of relative awkwardness, something happens. The theater group begins to have a life of its own. The actors take charge of the scenes, speak in Tigrinya, and direct one another. Israeli participants join the group, and the actors seem to go through profound experiences together. But even then, meaningful discussions are left unproblematized. For instance, a role-reversal between Israeli participants who act as refugees and Eritrean and Sudanese participants who act as Israeli soldiers and administrators shows potential for a unique debate. After a role-reversal exercise, Awet, one of the actors, expresses his discomfort. "Why is it reversed?" he says. "We have the right color... It was not real." Alon responds, "Just because of skin color?" Mograbi then joins the conversation: "It is good to play the other side; it is a chance to see the full picture." This dialogue raises a crucial point. History warns us against depoliticizing skin color and treating blackness as a piece of clothing to be worn by whites, regardless of the purpose. However, this understanding is in direct opposition to role reversal, which is one of the basic principles of psychodrama. How does the group bridge over these highly conflicted standpoints? Unfortunately, this question remains unexamined as well.

The Holot Legislative Theater, its play "One Love," and the documentary *Between Fences* are impressive artistic and political projects, rare and unique in the Israeli cultural arena, performing art, activism, and bottom-up resistance to the Israeli administration's attempt at dehumanizing asylum seekers and instilling fear and resentment among Israelis. The film takes us through the unbearable fragility of the asylum seekers' status, living in acute temporality and completely exposed to shifting regulations of the state. It exposes the everyday pains of racism and the meaning of facing social rejection and fear based on skin color, ethnicity, and origin. It also warms the heart and shows the desire for human connection, for creation, and for offering resistance against the horrors of the world. Nevertheless, since crucial discussions of power relations remain unproblematized, the viewers miss out on the film's

full potential. The absence of these discussions when the tensions are as tangible as they are is yet another testimony to the fences that stand at the center of the film.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2021.27