

# Learning curve

Ed Stocker talks to the makers of The Price of Kings – Yasser Arafat, who say they have learnt a lot making the documentary series

The secret to the perfect working relationship seems to lie in finishing each other's sentences. For the British filmmakers Richard Symons and Joanna Natasegara it's proof of how tapped in they are to each other's mindset. Sitting in a London cafe discussing their documentary series on leadership – a gargantuan ongoing project focusing on 12 of the world's most renowned presidents and prime ministers – they often unwittingly interrupt each other to finish a point or clarify an idea.

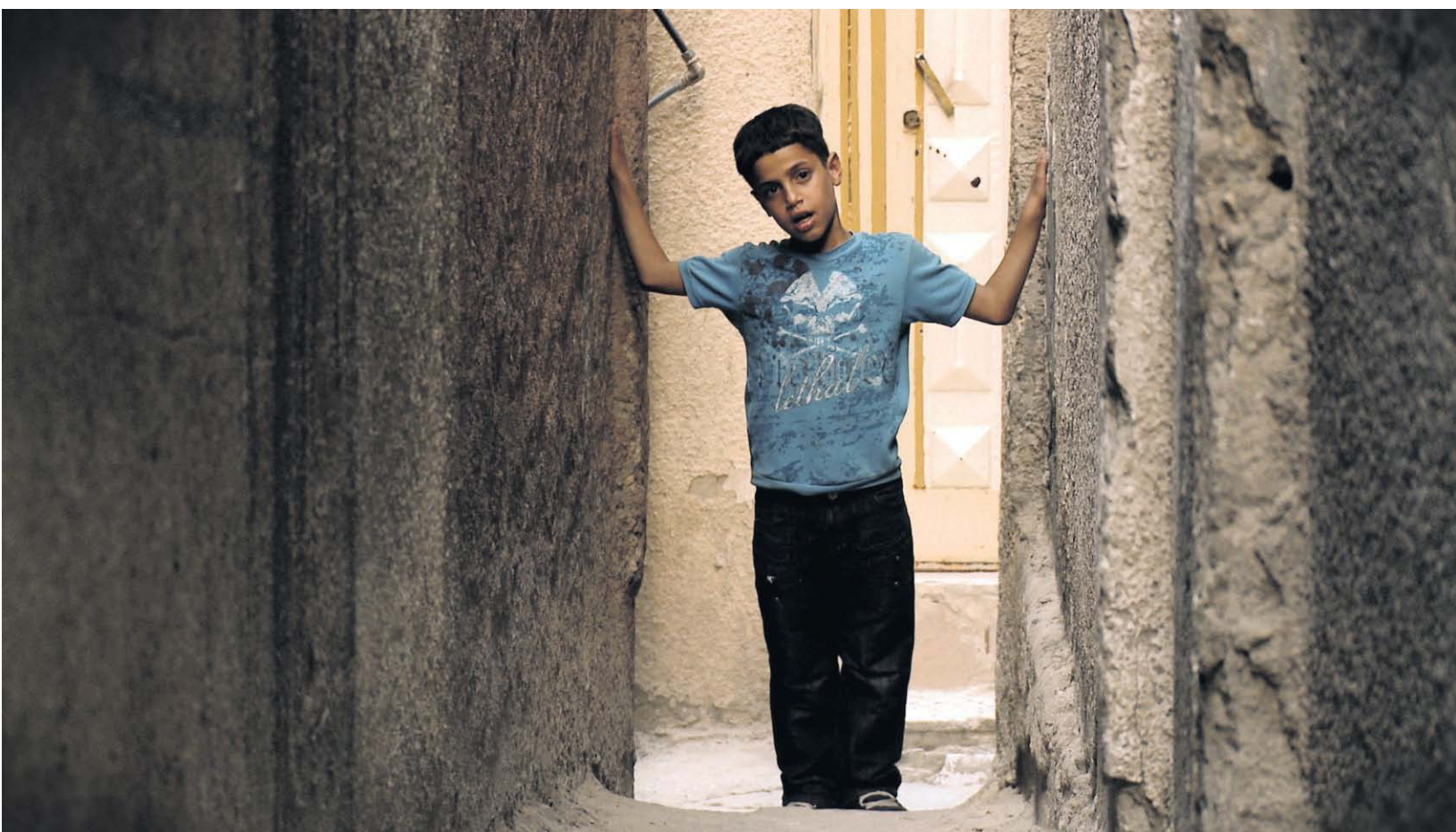
There's clearly a strong meeting of minds. But that doesn't mean they always share the same views, especially when it comes to choosing the leaders for their series. "We often disagree about leadership decisions, stars of leadership and how genuine the obstacles are that each leader faces," says the producer Natasegara, smiling. "And in our discussions we found that if the debate was of interest to us, it probably would be for other people as well."

It's just days before the pair are to fly to the Dubai International Film Festival for the Middle Eastern premiere of the first film in their *Price of Kings* series, focusing on the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. So far they've completed filming for three leaders, with documentaries on Israel's Shimon Peres and the ex-president of Costa Rica, Óscar Arias, to follow early next year.

Showing in the Arabian Nights category, the Arafat film retells the peaks and troughs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through an impressive roster of interviewees that includes Peres, Fatah's Tawfik Tirawi and – the biggest coup of all – Arafat's widow Suha.

"We were incredibly lucky in that Suha Arafat agreed to sit down for a series of interviews as she's never done before," says Natasegara. "Nobody has spent three days over a series of interviews really talking to her about her husband and their relationship."

Despite the fact that the film explores key moments in the past few decades of the tumultuous Israeli-Palestinian relationship – from the highs of 1993's Oslo Accords to the lows of the Israeli president Yitzhak Rabin's assassination in 1995 and the siege of Arafat's compound before his death in 2004 – the filmmakers are keen to stress that the documentary isn't political. This is a personal history, they argue, retold by its protagonists. It's designed as an educational tool; an



The Price of Kings – Yasser Arafat explores key moments in the past few decades of Israeli-Palestinian relationships. Photos courtesy DIFF

attempt to understand why leaders make the choices they make.

The result is a moving and well-handled documentary; no mean task given the weight and complexity of the subject they were handling. "Something that runs through all the films we make is very human conflict between conscience, morality, religion and looking after your fellow men," says Symons, the director and owner of Spirit Level Films, the production company behind the project. "We were certainly very aware [of the sensitivities of the subject matter] and wary of that. But one of the reasons we got incredibly candid responses from Suha Arafat and Shimon Peres – and the rest of the contributors – was that this isn't a political documentary. We were there to learn."

There's no doubt that the filmmakers coax an extremely frank interview from Arafat's wife and she is frequently moved to tears. Talking about the birth of the couple's daughter, who had to leave hospital wrapped in bulletproof protection, she explains that it caused

the Palestinian leader to readdress his priorities and realise that violence couldn't continue to envelop future generations. It's a fascinating revelation about a leader who is often remembered for the wrong reasons and continues to be misunderstood.

Indeed, of the initial three films in the *Price of Kings* series, Arafat and Peres are higher-profile names than the ex-president of Costa Rica, Arias, even though the latter managed to unite his country and help bring an end to the cycle of violence in Central America. "What's interesting is that the leader you've heard of least is the one who made it," says Natasegara. "We forget success and remember failure."

Although Arafat left behind a divided leadership and failed to achieve peace in the Middle East, reading history books or newspaper headlines often doesn't give the full picture, the pair argue. An interview in the film with Arafat's nephew, Dr Nasser Al Qidwa, shows there was a lot more to his character than the public was aware of. After Rabin's assassination, Al Qidwa couldn't



understand Arafat's mortified, silent reaction at losing an Israeli leader committed to peace. "He looked at me in a way as if to say I understood nothing. And clearly he was right," Al Qidwa says.

"I would never have thought that Arafat was so attached to Rabin and

that was such a genuine reaction," says Natasegara. "The fact that it was private and nobody knew about it is a terrible shame because maybe if the Israeli population had known, they may have been more prone to push Peres into action and to get what Rabin started finished."

Part of the secret behind the filmmakers' success is their use of a piece of equipment known as the "interrotron", the name given to it by its pioneer Errol Morris, the director of *The Fog of War*. The equipment uses a camera combined with an autocue screen. But instead of words, Symons face is projected on to the screen while he and Natasegara sit behind a curtain asking questions. Interviewees engage directly with Symons face, instead of a camera lens.

Despite its name, Symons says the set-up is nothing like an interrogation. "It feels like you're having a really, really honest conversation, one-on-one, with somebody in an intimate setting," he argues. "We're trying to get that feeling of sitting across a table and chatting with someone honestly."

The pair are animated about the film getting its Middle Eastern premiere in Dubai – and the fact that Suha Arafat will be attending in person to introduce it. They have already shown the film to the Palestinian leadership with positive results and although Symons says they're "slightly nervous", both are keen for feedback from a regional audience. It's all part of what remains a work-in-progress project and they're encouraging members of the public to suggest other leaders they should consider for forthcoming films.

For now, Symons and Natasegara are working flat-out putting the finishing editing touches to the next two films in the series with Helena Bonham-Carter on board to add a new voiceover to the Arafat and Peres films.

So can they divulge which leader they'll be focusing on for film number four? Natasegara toes the official line, firing back that presidential schedules are private and to be confirmed. Symons, however, can't resist giving a little taster. "It feels like we'll be travelling to Africa next," he says with a twinkle in his eyes.

● **The Price of Kings – Yasser Arafat** is showing at **First Group Theatre, Souk Madinat Jumeirah** tomorrow at 8.45pm, in a screening that will be introduced by Arafat's wife Suha; it will show again at the **Mall of the Emirates** on Saturday at 12.30pm. For more information, visit [www.priceofkings.co.uk](http://www.priceofkings.co.uk) and [www.dubai-filmfest.com](http://www.dubai-filmfest.com)

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## Habibi demonstrates a major new talent in Arab cinema

Susan Youssef's film *Habibi* is inspired by the 7th-century Sufi parable *Majnun Layla*, a story of forbidden love. Youssef has updated the poem, it's now a story about two students in the West Bank who are forced to return home to Gaza, and whose love for each other defies tradition.

The full Arabic title is *Habibi Rasak Kharban*, which translates as "Darling, your head is broken". It's easy to see why the title has been changed to the more catchy *Habibi*, but the beauty of the full translation is that it captures the essence of the female director, who when we meet to discuss the film, is fun, gregarious and full of laughter.

Youssef has previously made an animation film, a documentary about American Catholics who go to Guantanamo Bay and also two narrative shorts. The jump in genres and change in styles means that it is difficult to put her into a box. The same could be said of her eclectic life story; she was born in Brooklyn, New York, and grew up on Staten Island. "The amazing feeling of growing up Arab American is that there were two sides to life. There was the home life, the community



Habibi is the story of two students who are forced to go home to Gaza. Courtesy DIFF

centre, my Lebanese friends on the one side and then there was life at school. I went to a strict Catholic school and that was extremely isolating and strange, and in a 90-girl class, I didn't have a single Arab classmate."

The 34-year-old didn't go to Lebanon until she was 22, when she moved to Beirut to become a schoolteacher as a summer job.

In addition to teaching, she also worked for a local paper: *The Daily Star*. While she was there, she met a lot of filmmakers and learnt more about Palestinian refugee camps in the south of the country. Her life as a filmmaker had begun.

Originally she wanted to be an actor, but by her own admittance, she was "a horrible actress". She began writing stage plays and was ac-

cepted into the Tisch School of Arts in New York. Unfortunately, she couldn't afford the tuition and went to public university instead.

"I made a short film about my grandparents at home," she recalls. "My father was furious that I submitted the film to film schools as it was about his parents and I was showing it to outsiders. I got into the University of Texas in Austin, and decided to go there as it was cheap and a good school." She received a masters in fine art, was a Presidential Scholar and is a Fulbright Fellow.

She was living in Texas when the attacks on the World Trade Centre took place. "I was working as a cocktail waitress at the time in a dive bar and they turned on the TV and it was very weird and my whole family was in New York and I was in Texas. There was a lot of hate crime at the time. And then that summer of 2002 was when I went to Palestine for the first time."

Inspired by the Middle East, she began making films about the region. The short film she made at university won several awards and the decision to become a director was made. Her short film *Marjoun*

and the *Flying Headscarf* was one of the first fiction films in the US to feature a veiled protagonist. It screened at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006.

*Habibi* seems to be a culmination of all her interests: a story about the Middle East, rooted in academic history and centring around love. Youssef says: "I'm really interested in research. It's wonderful to be able to go back to an original text and being an Arab American filmmaker I feel very conscious of all the odds that are against us. For this

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film, I didn't just go to the poetry because it gave credibility to the film; the main reason I used it was because the poetry is so phenomenally beautiful that I felt everyone should read it. The next projects that I plan to work on all refer to texts."

She insists that the film, despite its setting and a riveting scene in which the protagonists are searched by Israeli guards as they try to flee Palestine, is not a political film and wants people to watch without preconceptions. "It's a film about a couple who have obstacles to their love."

As for her own ever-changing biography, Youssef currently lives in Amsterdam with her south-east Asian husband, whom she met while waiting for a train. Nothing is ordinary in the life of one of the major new talents of Arab cinema.

● **Habibi** is showing at the **Mall of the Emirates cinema 12** on Saturday at 6pm; it will show again at the **Mall of the Emirates cinema 1** on Monday at 8pm. For more information, visit [www.dubaifilmfest.com](http://www.dubaifilmfest.com)

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