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Jon Snow, News Anchor, Channel 4, UK

PRODUCTION DETAILS

Production Name: **Open Bethlehem**, a 90 min feature documentary by Leila Sansour

Producer: Leila Sansour

Date of Completion: September 2014

Country of Production: Palestine, United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates

Country of Filming: Palestine, USA, United Kingdom

Production Company: **Planet Bethlehem**

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LOGLINE

Open Bethlehem follows Palestinian director Leila Sansour's extraordinary journey to the legendary city of Bethlehem, the place where she grew up. Armed with a camera and a family car that keeps breaking down, she sets out to make an intimate portrait of a historical town in peril. Ten years on, with 700 hours of footage, the result is nothing like she had expected.

FILM SYNOPSIS

Film director Leila Sansour returns to Bethlehem to make a film about her hometown, soon to be encircled by a wall. She left the city as a teenager thinking that Bethlehem was too small and provincial. She never wanted to return but this time she is making an exception. She intends her film to be a tribute to her late father, founder of Bethlehem University, and a man regarded as a hero by his town's folk. As Bethlehem approaches ruin, her decision to flee this sleepy town, taken much to her father's regret, comes to haunt her. Armed with her camera and a dilapidated family car that keeps breaking down, Leila plans to make an epic film about a legendary town in crisis but just few months into filming her life and the film take an unexpected turn when cousin Carol, Leila's last relative in town, persuades her to stay to start a campaign to save the city.

As the pair launch Open Bethlehem Leila finds herself trapped behind a wall in the very place she so much wanted to leave. The face of Bethlehem is changing rapidly with potentially detrimental consequences. Reports predict that if trends continue the Christian community of Bethlehem, a city that provides a model for a multi faith Middle East, may be unsustainable within one generation. Leila's plan to stay a year stretches to five, and is only resolved when she realizes that, sometimes, the biggest dreams take flight from the smallest places.

'Open Bethlehem' is a story of a homecoming to the world's most famous little town. The film spans five momentous years in the life of Bethlehem, revealing a city of astonishing beauty and political strife under occupation. The film draws from 700 hours of original footage and some rare archive material. The making of this film has led to the creation of the largest visual archive of Bethlehem in the world and it is planned to turn the collection into a museum.

While telling a personal story, the film charts the creation of a campaign to compel international action to bring peace to the Middle East. As the credits roll, there is snow over Bethlehem. Leila has stayed long enough to realize that she is home for good and her battered little family car takes to the sky. Sometimes, if you want to fight for a better world, you may have to work miracles!

THE PRODUCTION

"MIDDLE EASTERN CHOIRS BLEND WITH JAZZ MUSIC"

Most of the music in this film is original soundtrack created by acclaimed music composer Florencia Di Concilio who has scored more than 20 award winning feature films and documentaries in recent years. To produce the score of Open Bethlehem Florencia worked very closely with film director Leila Sansour to bring together Jazz, Middle Eastern church choirs and the sounds of the ancient pastoral Canaanite flute.

The tune for the theme song, which closes the film, is a reworked old Russian ballad sung by celebrated British soul singer David McCalmont. "We couldn't get a better singer. From the very get go, our dream was to get David to sing it. We were overjoyed when he accepted and even more so when we heard the final result". Melody Maker journalist Taylor Parkes once described David's voice saying *"One day he will open his mouth and a cathedral will fall out"*. The lyrics were written by the film's Director, the first song she has ever written.

Josephine Siedlecka, Editor of Independent Catholic News, who watched the film as part of a test screening in the UK said, *"I think they have managed to pull off something really magical with the music. For those of us who know the town, they have managed to evoke the incredible mix that is Bethlehem. It is both rural and urban, parochial yet international. Bethlehem is part of the Middle East but it belongs to the world"*.

"SURVEY: AMERICANS BACK BETHLEHEM BUT NOT SURE WHERE IT IS"

Early on, as we started making this documentary, the team decided to commission a nationwide survey in the United States about American perceptions of Bethlehem. The findings were stunning and in total contrast to another survey we commissioned in Bethlehem at the same time.

The survey, in which 15,000 Americans were canvassed and carried out by top US political pollsters Zogby International, showed that only 15 percent of Americans realized that the biblical Bethlehem is a Palestinian city and even fewer still guessed that its inhabitants were a mix of Christians and Muslims, or that Bethlehem was located in the West Bank.

The Zogby survey showed strong support for the town in the US, where 65.5% of the population wanted the UN to list it as a world heritage site. It is worth mentioning that Bethlehem was finally listed as a world heritage site only in 2012.

To read more about the survey visit:

<http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/897171788.html>

Our film crew has also conducted 150 interviews in the streets of London at the same time producing a humorous montage of people's perceptions. One woman said: *"I don't know where it is, but I strongly believe the men there must be very attractive"*. The clip did not make it into the film but it is part of our press kit and promotional film take-outs.

"THE FAMILY HOUSE"

Open Bethlehem is a personal story of the director who returns to her family home in Bethlehem after more than 15 years abroad. Her father built the house where she grew up. It was built big, like many houses conceived by Middle Eastern patriarchs with an eye on consolidating the family name. Leila's father had big dreams but the house she returns to is totally empty and abandoned.

In the Director's own words, *"One could argue that my father was a very traditional Middle Eastern man which immediately conjures up all kinds of stereotypes. The making of this film has made me question my relationship with him. Pitching my story in Europe, I was often told my story seemed more like the tale of a returning son than that of a daughter. This came as a surprise but, also, a revelation.*

"I still do not know what feminist lessons we can learn from it but I think my father was gender blind, strangely enough, not unlike other Middle Eastern father figures of his generation. I was the oldest of his children so, as I see it now, I was brought up as the heir. It was daunting to work on a film that had to reckon with his memory from inside the very place he built as part of his grand plan. Like most independent filmmakers, I had very few resources, in fact, looking back, I would say this project was simply not possible to realize, but I had this one big castle, my father's home. It served as my studio and as the building that housed the whole film production, its people and its spirit. My father's home is not brimming with a crowd to keep his legacy, but it has helped me create something which, I hope, will be equally long lasting".



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When I started making this film, I wanted to capture a vanishing Middle East – the open and pluralist Middle East of my childhood, which is disappearing through wars and sectarian strife. I come from Bethlehem, the legendary biblical town of the Christmas carols. For most, Bethlehem is myth. For me, it is a real place right in the heart of the Middle East, a little town currently fighting for survival. It seems strange that Bethlehem's plight goes unnoticed by those who so passionately sing its name. Some would argue that the sacred Bethlehem of the bible and the real life town do not have anything in common but take a better look and you will be surprised. My intention with this film was to create a portrait of the city between past and present, one that captures and celebrates the magic of Bethlehem and inspires people to act so that Bethlehem remains with us, both as a place on earth and as an aspiration of *"Joy and Goodwill to all"*.

My initial plan was to stay in Bethlehem for one year. It wasn't just any year; Israel had started building a wall that would change the face of Bethlehem forever, with consequences to the social fabric of the city and the whole region. Bethlehem's citizens were emigrating fast, and Christians were leaving fastest of all. If this trend continues the Christian community of Bethlehem will be unsustainable within one generation. I had direct experience of this myself. I grew up in Bethlehem among a large Christian family alongside our Muslim neighbors. By the time I started filming, all my relatives, save for one cousin, had left town. She remained because she was stubborn.

From the word go, and despite our very limited resources, my plans for this film were ambitious. What I didn't know was that they would become even grander as my plan to make a film of a year in the life of Bethlehem turned into a life changing campaign to save the city. I also didn't know, at the time, that the Arab spring was just round the corner and that our own struggle will acquire a much more pressing and urgent nature.

A lot of people hold the belief that all the good things prevail in the end. I would like to think that they do, but I am also a realist so I cannot ignore the fact that they don't always. Many great cities have been committed to the cemeteries of history through acts of war and major social shifts. Take Constantinople or Alexandria, the examples are many. With these cosmopolitan cities gone, all of us, across the world, have lost something precious. We have lost successful models that show the way to a world where we can live and work together despite our differences. These cities, just like Bethlehem, did not happen randomly,

overnight. They were a result of centuries of negotiations and historical incidents that created these magical spots. When they get undone they don't necessarily come back. Today, Bethlehem's inhabitants are Christians and Muslims. The two communities live side-by-side sharing both the cultural and sacred space of the city as well as a political fate that will decide the future of all Palestinians. In the current climate of sectarian tensions, Bethlehem is a model for the Middle East. But will Bethlehem stay around much longer? In contrast to our neighbors this is a place where the West and especially the United States can exert an enormous influence. Maybe all good things could prevail thanks to the tools of the 21st century: The power to communicate, to alert people and make them act powerfully as a global community. Maybe, if we succeed in telling this story we still have a chance to save Bethlehem. Only time will tell but we want to make sure that we give it our best shot.

Additional Note

While telling a personal story, this film charts the creation of Open Bethlehem, an initiative that works to compel international action to bring peace to the Middle East. Since its launch in 2005, Open Bethlehem has built a large base of supporters through a campaign focused on a symbolic document called the Bethlehem passport – an honorary citizenship of an iconic town. The passport was created in partnership with the Bethlehem Governorate to invite engagement with the city and the wider cause of the region and to promote Peace and Goodwill to all. This film will be accompanied by an audience outreach campaign that will make the passport available to a wider public by inviting viewers to become citizens of Bethlehem. The passport will act as a means of joining "Friends of Open Bethlehem" and a pledge to act as an ambassador for the city.



THE FILM MAKER

Leila Sansour is an acclaimed filmmaker with an unconventional portfolio. She is the founder and CEO of Open Bethlehem, an organization that works to bring international commitment to the resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian question using Bethlehem as a gateway into the situation. She is a well-known speaker on issues of the Middle East. She has written articles and given talks at the British parliament, The Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs (UK), The Royal College of Defense, The Carter Center, Amnesty International and many other venues.



Leila holds a masters degree in philosophy. She began her career in television working as a producer and commissioning editor for MBC and then moved to produce 15 episodes of Aljazeera's leading documentary series 'Encounter in Exile'. She is best known for her feature - length documentary, 'Jeremy Hardy versus the Israeli Army' 2003, a tragicomic film shot with celebrated British comedian Jeremy Hardy. The film received four - and five - star reviews in the national press before its release across cinemas in the UK and its tour in the US as part of Amnesty International's Roaming Film Festival.

Leila's latest film 'Open Bethlehem' (90 min) was released in the UK at Christmas 2014 and in the US for Christmas 2015. The film was shot over five years in Bethlehem during the building of the Israeli wall and has resulted in the gathering of the largest visual archive of the city both past and present. Parts of this collection will be displayed in phases on the film's website as part of a curated online museum project related to the film.

Quotes

"One of the most remarkable and moving documentaries I have seen. The tragedy of Palestinians encapsulated in the life of one town - Bethlehem. See the film then go to Bethlehem and see for yourself" Jon Snow - News Anchor Channel 4 [\[Link\]](#)

"The One Film to Watch this Week" The Guardian [\[Link\]](#)

"Undeniably Potent and Poignant" Radio Times [\[Link\]](#)

"Absolutely Essential Viewing" Edinburgh Reporter [\[Link\]](#)

"Powerful" Time Out London [\[Link\]](#)

Key Links

The Trailer: []

Where is Bethlehem: []

Premier Interviews: []

FILM CREDITS

Director, Producer and Writer

Leila Sansour

Executive Producer

Waël Kabbani – Iambic Dream Films

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Nicholas Blincoe

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Nidal Al Atrash

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