

CANNES 2009  
**Quinzaine**  
des Réalistes  
Société des Réalistes de Films



# A J A M I

A FILM BY SCANDAR COPTI AND YARON SHANI



*Jaffa's Ajami neighborhood is a melting pot of cultures and conflicting views among Jews, Muslims and Christians. The tragic fragility of human existence is experienced in the enclosed community of Ajami, where enemies must live as neighbors. No location better expresses the dramatic collision of different worlds. Back and forth in time, and through the eyes of various characters, we witness how impossible the situation actually is ...*

## SYNOPSIS

Sketching a graphic diary, sensitive 13-year-old Nasri depicts the tough daily reality around him in the enclosed community of Jaffa's Ajami, where age-old enemies must live as neighbors. When his uncle foolishly wounds a prominent clan member, Nasri's entire family is the target for revenge. Omar, Nasri's older brother, is determined to save his family, although he is distracted by his longing for the boss' daughter Hadir. Omar contemplates committing a crime for the money that promises to solve all his family's problems ...

Malek, a Palestinian teenager from a West Bank refugee camp, smuggles into Israel to find work to finance the surgery that will save his mother's life. Through his job at Abu Elias' restaurant, Malek is befriended by Binj and Omar, whose situation is more desperate than ever ...

Binj comes from a Palestinian family in Jaffa, but he dreams of a future with his Jewish girlfriend. Binj is forced to see another side to his situation when his brother becomes a suspect in the murder of a Jew ...

As a Jewish police detective, Dando is part of the continuous struggle to protect his small country from the "Arab Enemy." The loving father of a baby girl, his life has become complicated since his younger brother, a soldier, has gone missing ...





# COMMENTS FROM SCANDAR COPTI AND YARON SHANI

## ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

**Yaron:** The basic plot of AJAMI was already developed during my film studies at Tel Aviv University. The idea was to show different stories one after the other. Back then it had nothing to do with Arabs or Ajami. I knew that since the idea dealt with different perspectives, making it a Jewish-Arab story would make it very interesting. But like an everyday Jewish Israeli, I didn't know much about Arab society in Israel. I didn't know more than a few words in Arabic as most Israeli Jews don't speak Arabic at all. The actual screenplay had to wait until 2002, when I met Scandar. Back then I was the director of the Tel Aviv International Student Film Festival, and Scandar was making a short film for one of our special productions. When the festival ended, I asked him if he would like to do something bigger – writing a feature film together. Scandar was delighted, and we started working together in August 2002.

**Scandar:** The commitment to work together was intuitive and proved to be very fruitful, even though this was a project involving a complicated conjunction of identities and perspectives. It could never have been done by just one of us alone, and without the will to listen and relate to new ideas and perspectives of the other side. That is why the work revolved mainly on hanging out together, and gaining a strong friendship and trust. It wasn't just centered around writing sessions. In the beginning it was more about telling each other stories we knew that would eventually become the stories in AJAMI.

## WRITING TOGETHER

**Scandar:** On the mechanical side, once we decided we had a good story that could fit to the plot, one of us would write something and we would discuss it together. We used the reality of the Ajami neighborhood in Jaffa as the basis. Most of the stories were encountered in our everyday life in and outside Ajami. We had to adapt these stories to a very precise structure, all the while keeping them true to reality, out of respect to the real people of Ajami and to our method of working. We had to predict the actors' reactions to different situations that were known to every resident of the Ajami neighborhood (such as dealing with a police arrest of someone from the neighborhood).

**Yaron:** Yes, the script had to be very precise and very true to reality. The scenes had to be exactly how things happen in reality. If they weren't, everything would go wrong in the shoot. In order to be sure that our eventual non-professional actors would react according to the script, we had to know these characters very well and also the nature of these scenes, exactly how they happen in real life.

## THE TRAGIC AMBIVALENCE OF HUMAN REALITY

**Scandar & Yaron:** We wrote AJAMI because we wanted to tell the story of people we both know, and through them, perhaps convey something about all of us – the tragic ambivalence of human reality. There is no location we know of that better expresses the tragic collision of “worlds” than the streets of Ajami. Ajami is a melting pot of cultures, nationalities and opposite human perspectives. Our main goal was to show this reality in the most sincere way. Our stories are inspired by real events. Our actors come from the real streets and houses of this human environment and not from acting schools. Over the course of an intense 10-month acting workshop with over 300 people, the partici-



pants “became” the characters portrayed in AJAMI. This, along with a documentary-inspired way of shooting, show how surprisingly real fiction can be.

#### REALITY STRONGER THAN IMAGINATION

**Scandar:** In regards to the acting in AJAMI, our philosophy was that “reality can be stronger and more interesting than imagination.” Directing actors according to written scripts can be limited and superficial compared to reality. With AJAMI, we wanted to widen the boundaries of dramatic expression in a fiction film – to bring it closer to a pure and truthful depiction of the real world. During the filming of AJAMI, we tried to bring the actors into a conscious state similar to what happens in real life – a state in which we don’t know what will happen or what is expected of us. The actors reacted spontaneously, without written text or any awareness of plot. The words that came out of their mouths were generated from their hearts and not by a scriptwriter. They felt emotions without knowing that it was intended in the script.

**Yaron:** The method of working with the actors relies on the truthfulness of every detail. Unlike many fiction films, where you can say, “Leave it. It’s only a movie. It’s not real life...” In this case, it was about real life. Our goal was to make the actors behave like the written characters, without them knowing it. Our actors were not given scripts. They didn’t know where we were heading. We threw them into real live situations, and they reacted spontaneously, like they would in the real world.

#### A 10-MONTH WORKSHOP

**Scandar:** None of the actors in AJAMI had ever studied acting or appeared in a film before. Many of them come from a tough background, where violence and crime are part of everyday life.



Each actor in AJAMI was chosen according to his or her similarity to the character, in terms of personality and personal history. In the course of a 10-month workshop, the actors went through a psychological journey, experiencing the private history of their characters through role-playing and discussions.

**Yaron:** Our workshop started with some 300 participants. Many deserted along the way, but enough stayed on and became enthusiastic partners. By the seventh month, we basically had our main cast and the workshops continued primarily with them. In the workshops, the participants didn’t learn about text, goals, mise-en-scene or acting tricks. The focus was the psychological journey of the characters through dramatic role-playing to fully understand the character. Eventually, the actors deeply identified with their characters as an extension of his or her own personality. When the cameras started rolling, something magical happened – the actors forgot that they were in a fictional situation. It was as if they were not able to see the cameras around them. For a moment, their minds believed that what was happening was real. The emotions that came out of it exceeded our wildest imagination.

#### ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

**Yaron:** The actors in AJAMI were not given dialogue to learn, not even a script to read. And there were no rehearsals. Many filmmakers have used the element of surprise for certain scenes. AJAMI is based entirely on this principal. Throughout the film, the emotions you see are genuine. But unlike other improvisational experiments, AJAMI had a very precise script centered on a specific plot, thus requiring a precise emotional structure. So the acting had to create spontaneous emotions that would go hand in hand with the pre-written script. This was achieved by bringing the actors to each character’s emotional and psychological state as written in the script.



Scandar: The actors had to act and feel what was written. Without being aware of it, they ended up acting out a story that was completely pre-written. The result is a fiction film which shows “real” people acting and feeling “real” emotions in “real” situations, although they were never aware how they were secretly being directed according to a pre-written script.

#### DRAMA IN 23 DAYS

Scandar & Yaron: AJAMI was basically shot in 23 days. The whole dramatic content had to be shot in one period during which the scenes were shot chronologically. The only scene that was completed out of the 23-day period of shooting was the parking lot scene which had to be shot in a more classical way. So we did have 5 additional completion days, but this was more or less second unit footage.

#### CONFUSING FICTION WITH REALITY

Yaron: AJAMI was shot scene by scene, chronologically like it was a real chain of events in the real world. The film crew had to jump from one location to the other and back, so that each actor would experience his personal story just like in real life. That way, each actor acted a scene after being charged with the emotions of the previous ones. This progression created a very strong and clear dramatic logic in the mind and hearts of the actors, and generated emotions as in real life.

Scandar: The actors often confused a fictional scene with a real live event. Sometimes it became so real and personal, that we had to physically stop the scene so that no one would be injured. These real and spontaneous emotions were captured by the documentary-style camerawork. For example, in the opening scene when young Nasri’s neighbor gets shot by unknown assassins, none of the actors knew anything about the shooting. When the

kid got shot, the emotions of horror and surprise overwhelmed all of us. A woman from the neighborhood who witnessed the shooting began crying because her own son had been murdered the same way in real life.

#### THE POLICE

Yaron: The policemen in the film were played by real former policemen. There is a lot of hostility and mistrust between Ajami’s Arab residents and the Israeli police. It is fueled by the national tensions between the Jewish establishment and the Arab minority in Israel. Eran Naim, who fought Palestinians as a young soldier in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) and who was a real-life policeman, can easily relate to that. In AJAMI, when Eran’s character arrests an Arab drug dealer, he is attacked by young Arabs from the neighborhood. When we shot the scene, Eran wasn’t informed about what was going to happen. As a former policeman, he did what he was trained to do – arrest a criminal on the street. That’s when the young Arabs came out to defend their friend. We didn’t need to direct anyone – the scripted violence was inevitable.

#### THE FRESHNESS OF THE ACTING

Scandar: Every take was unique and couldn’t be reproduced. The best take would be the first one, where everyone would really react with their hearts. After the first take, the actors would know what was about to happen and the whole idea of “living it” would not work anymore. We made a second take only when the outcome of the first take did not go with our plans.

Yaron: In order to set the scene in a different direction, we changed the stimulus, like secretly giving a certain actor a different psychological motivation. With this new motivation, the actor would go into the second take, surprising the other actors



with a new behavior, and setting everything onto a different course. This way we maintained the freshness of the acting. It was like a first take.

**Scandar:** Most of the time we shot the whole scene in one take with two cameras. We had to manipulate the set in order to limit the possibilities of the action, so that the two cameras would not get in the way of one another. It took a lot of preparation and planning.

#### HOURS AND HOURS OF FOOTAGE

**Scandar & Yaron:** The first assembly was about 40 hours of multi-camera footage, which is 80 hours of single camera. From this point we had numerous possibilities for each scene, like in documentary editing. Sometimes we had takes over 30 minutes long. In these takes we had so many options and directions. The entire editing process took about a year. The edit was like exploring the dramatic potential from scratch. It was like polishing a diamond from a huge chunk of coal. The original script seems naive and simple when compared to the finished film, even to the rough footage itself.

#### GENERATED AND GOVERNED BY POLITICS

**Scandar & Yaron:** From the beginning, AJAMI was a project that was going to be about the human side of this community. We felt that dealing with the human side is the only way to address the big issues that are behind everything. But all the social problems revealed in the stories in AJAMI are generated and governed by politics.

#### IT TAKES TWO

**Yaron:** Throughout the entire seven-year process of the making of AJAMI, we worked closely together. We rarely divided the work between us, only when there was no other way. No one ever decided something without discussing it with the other. If we had not been two, we wouldn't have succeeded in making such a rule-breaking project – a complex plot involving hundreds of non-actors working without a script, a fiction film shot with two cameras on a very tight and crazy shooting schedule, and in chronological order! I learned to speak Arabic, and I met a lot of amazing people. I was exposed to an amazing world that I never had access to before.

**Scandar:** Probably neither one of us could have been strong enough to face such a project alone. If one of us broke down, then the other was there for support. Not every project suits this kind of partnership. This was a very unique project and we are proud of what we did together. That's the most important thing.



## ABOUT THE DIRECTORS

*AJAMI represents a unique reality of both the Palestinian and Israeli cultures. The film's co-directors, Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani, reflect the two perspectives of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite their different sociopolitical backgrounds, both Scandar and Yaron share the same passion for cinema and humanity. They established a solid friendship while collaborating on the cinematic adventure of AJAMI. Submerged in their violent reality, together they penetrated the inner world of the people living in Ajami, Jaffa's largest Arab neighborhood.*



Yaron Shani



Scandar Copti

## YARON SHANI (WRITER-DIRECTOR)

Yaron Shani is an Israeli Jew, born in 1973. He graduated the Tel Aviv University Department of Film and Television with his thesis film *DISPHORIA*, a 40-minute drama, which won the Audience Award at the Babelsberg International Student Film Festival, as well as a Special Jury Mention at Karlovy Vary. The film was broadcast on ARTE and ZDF (Germany), and participated in several other international festivals. As the director of The Tel Aviv International Student Film Festival in 2002, he met Scandar Copti, and they both started to develop their first feature film *AJAMI*. In that time, Yaron had directed and edited documentaries and 3D films for Orpan Group, shown in museums and cinema theaters all over the world.

## SCANDAR COPTI (WRITER-DIRECTOR)

Scandar Copti is a Palestinian citizen of the Israeli state, born and raised in Jaffa. After graduating from the Israeli polytechnic "The Technion" as a mechanical engineer, he decided to leave his profession and pursue his childhood dream of becoming a filmmaker. After studying acting and scriptwriting, Scandar made *THE TRUTH*, a 12-minute mockumentary which was produced by the Tel Aviv International Student Film Festival, and was acclaimed for its bold political statement. *THE TRUTH* was screened at the 2003 Artists Against Occupation in Montreal, and was purchased by the Israeli Channel 8, but was eventually censored and shelved.

Since then Scandar has written, directed and edited several fiction, documentary and experimental short films. His video art works were screened at the Israeli Center for Digital Art, the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art and at the Redding Art Fair 5 in Tel-Aviv.



## MAIN CAST

Omar **SHAHIR KABAHA**  
Malek **IBRAHIM FREGE**  
Nasri (Omar's Younger Brother) **FOUAD HABASH**  
Abu Elias (Omar's Boss) **YOUSSEF SAHWANI**  
Hadir (Abu Elias' Daughter) **RANIN KARIM**  
Dando (The Policeman) **ERAN NAIM**  
Binj (The Guy with the Goatee) **SCANDAR COPTI**  
Shata (Omar's Friend) **ELIAS SABAH**  
Anan (Works for Abu-Elias) **HILAL KABOB**  
Ilham (Mother of Omar & Nasri) **NISRIN RIHAN**  
Dando's Mother **TAMI YERUSHALMI**  
Dando's Father **MOSHE YERUSHALMI**  
Dando's Sister **SIGAL HAREL**  
Sido (Omar's Grandfather) **ABU-GEORGE SHIBLI**

## CREW

Written, directed and edited by

**SCANDAR COPTI  
AND YARON SHANI**  
**INOSAN PRODUCTIONS  
AND TWENTY TWENTY VISION**  
**MOSH DANON,  
THANASSIS KARATHANOS  
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BURKHARD ALTHOFF,  
DORIS HEPP  
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ZEHAVA SHEKEL  
KAI TEBBEL  
MATTHIAS SCHWAB  
ITAY ELOHAV  
YOAV SINAI  
RAN AVIAD  
RABIAH BUCHARI**

Produced by

Producers

Co-producer

Commissioning Editors

Director of Photography

Line Producer

Sound Design

Rerecording Mixer

Sound Recorder

Art Director

Second Camera

Original Music

## TECHNICAL DATA

Format 35mm / 1:1,85 / 120 min / Dolby Digital /  
Arabic and Hebrew with English and French Subtitles



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