

Agents, informants, terrorists and diplomats scheme in 'Bethlehem'

By Michael Fox

The screw-tightening Israeli drama "Bethlehem" pivots on the personal bond between a Shin Bet officer and the Palestinian teenager he's cultivated as an informant.

That may sound like a bad case of misplaced trust by both parties. In the context of this harrowing film, where every character has his own agenda and loyalty is measured in days (if not hours), Razi and Sanfur's relationship is no more or less risky than any other.

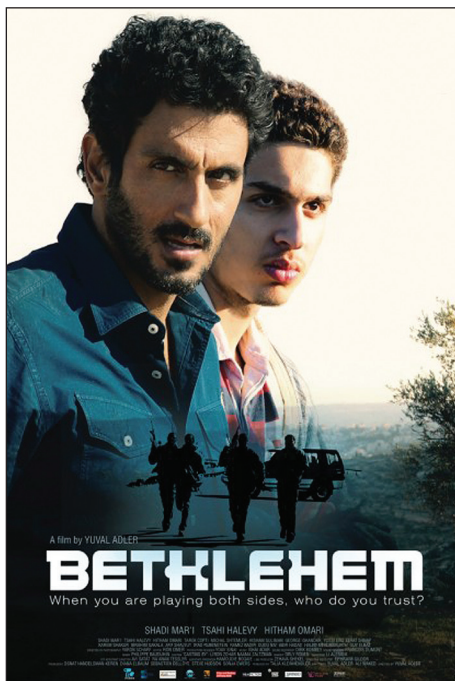
Consequently, the question that "Bethlehem" leaves us with is not a pleasant one: In a circumscribed world of impossible choices on both sides, how does anyone evade becoming a victim?

"Bethlehem" will be screened at the Hartford Jewish Film Festival on March 23 and 27.

Bethlehem 2The film garnered Ophir Awards for Best Picture, Director (Yuval Adler) and Screenplay (Adler and Arab journalist Ali Waked), and was Israel's official submission for the Foreign Language Oscar. Unlike "Omar," a Palestinian film that coincidentally also revolves around an Israeli handler and his Palestinian source, "Bethlehem" did not receive a nomination.

Both movies are riveting, rewarding and undeniably unsettling. "Omar" is the slightly richer film, thanks to a fraught love story threaded through the narrative that adds a dash of tenderness to the hair-trigger proceedings. "Omar" is also a slightly more political work.

"Bethlehem" presents us with a procession of single-minded characters who are unwavering in their short-term aims,



regardless of who gets hurt along the way. The presumed larger goals – protect Jews or kill Jews – gradually get pushed into the background by ego, ambition, power and suspicion.

Razi, the Israeli operative, has had Sanfur's ear for two years and evinces great concern for his adolescent informant. We're inclined to believe him – Israelis are good guys, right? – but Razi's main priority is eliminating the leader of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in Bethlehem – who happens to be Sanfur's brother. (It's almost too on the nose that the Israelis' code name for Sanfur is Esau.)

A successful suicide bomb attack increases the pressure on Razi from his boss, edging him into one risky decision

after another. His fixation reaches a peak in the mission to take out Sanfur's brother in Bethlehem that comprises the film's pulse-pounding centerpiece.

The Palestinians, meanwhile, display neither calm nor unity under fire. The Palestinian Authority is depicted as corrupt and opportunistic, playing Al Aqsa against Hamas with misappropriated funds and judiciously dispensed rumors. Indeed, the viewer wonders if any faction is in it for the cause, or for the money, power and street cred.

We come to accept that loyalty is naïve and imprudent in this toxic climate. Alas, Sanfur is desperate to prove that he's as brave and worthy of respect as his brother. At the same time, the only person who doesn't insult and belittle him is Razi.

But what is a Palestinian's life worth if his only friend is an Israeli?

And what are the career prospects for an intelligence officer who's so invested in his informant that he may be unwittingly developing another terrorist leader?

"Bethlehem" wants us to see that control is a dangerous illusion in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. Only after the lights go up do we realize that the sense of desperation that pervades this tough-minded film builds from every character's refusal to acknowledge that basic fact.

"Bethlehem" will be presented at the Mandell JCC Hartford Jewish Film Festival Sunday, March 23, 7 p.m., at Spotlight Theatres in Hartford and Thursday, March 27, 8:15 p.m., at Digiplex Destinations in Bloomfield. For tickets and other information visit hjff.org, call (860) 231-6316 or (860) 236-4571, or email tickets@mandelljcc.org.

Connecticut Premiere

BETHLEHEM

Sunday, March 23 • 7:00 PM
Spotlight Theatres, Front Street, Hartford
Encore Screening - Thursday, March 27, 8:15 PM
Digiplex Destinations, Bloomfield
Tickets \$11 In Advance • \$14 At Door

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