

MAI MASRI

A PALESTINIAN FILM DIRECTOR



An Encounter with Mai Masri
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Mai Masri was born in Amman, the daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother, and she grew up in Beirut. Yet, she affirms that her sense of identity was very clear to her right from the beginning: "I feel Palestinian wherever I am." Upon completing her high school education in Beirut, she left for the USA in 1976 to work for her B.A. in film studies. Despite the fact that she was only seventeen, her parents did not object to her studying abroad

because the country was at war. Moreover, she would be living with her brother who was studying in the USA. Masri's choice of a film college major surprised her family, which is business-oriented and has no artists at all; yet no one tried to stop her. "I believe I was privileged. Never have I felt that my brothers enjoyed more rights than I did, and education-wise we all had an equal opportunity."

Many events indirectly affected Masri's choice of specialization, especially the wars of 1973 and 1975 in Lebanon, and the Palestinian resistance which was very strong then. "The whole region identified with the Palestinian cause ... Moreover, Beirut was a rich cultural and intellectual center ... All of that had an indirect effect on my sense of identity as well as my decision to study film." To Masri, film is not just an instrument, it is an art, a means of expression and communication through which one can convey the feelings and suffering of people. "I liked film for the multiplicity of its sides. A film maker can be an artist, a sociologist, and an anthropologist at the same time." Determined to pursue her dream of becoming a film maker, Masri fled to the USA and there she enjoyed the rich experience of meeting people from different cultures and nationalities. She was the youngest in her program but this did not discourage her. She attended three different universities at the same time, trying to get the most out of her stay. Nevertheless, when she left school, she did not feel equipped to make films... "I felt I was starting from zero... In film you inevitably learn through trial and error. Practice is what counts."

In 1981, directly after graduating, Masri came back to Lebanon where she met Jean Chamoun (now her husband) and they started working together. Working with Jean was very liberating and challenging. "He believed that I could do the job and I felt that I had to do it right." They made their first three films with the help of only one assistant, doing all the technical work themselves.

Their first film "Under the Rubble," is about the siege of Beirut and was produced in 1982. It involved three months of working through assaults, bombardments, and massacres. "I witnessed the events of the Beirut invasion in 1982 as a person and as a film maker, which is very important. Making a film should be the result of a life experience. You should become involved and committed to what you are doing." After their first film the Masri/Chamoun team began to develop their own style of working. In order to become independent, they purchased their own equipment, and thus were able to produce more films with less funding. More importantly, they would become capable of working "from within," since they were free to take off to any place and live among the people for several months until they

had gained their trust.

This new style of working resulted in their second film, "*Zahrat El Kandoul*," which is about the women of South Lebanon. Masri was fascinated by the Southern Lebanese women whom she found "very eloquent, interesting and poetic." She was impressed by their perseverance in strife. Masri maintains that "*Zahrat El Kandoul*," which is not a documentary in the classical sense, is the film from which she learnt most.

A turning point in her career was the "Children of Fire," a docu-drama about the *intifada*, the Palestinian uprising, from the children's perspective. After 17 years, Masri found herself back in her hometown of Nablus to produce a film about her own people. Masri and her English crew faced many problems with the Israeli soldiers; it was very difficult to get into Nablus, which was under curfew at that time. "The soldiers refused to allow us in as journalists, so we entered Nablus secretly... I had the protection and help of my family and my relatives. The inhabitants were overjoyed "to see a crew witnessing and filming the atrocities that were taking place during the occupation." The crew felt attached to Nablus, and they were made to feel at home.

Masri, who lets us witness the Palestinian uprising through the eyes of Hana and Fadi, spent much time trying to find children capable of expressing themselves eloquently. She was very impressed by 11-year old Hana. "She had vision and depth, and I felt at times I was listening to someone older than me." Fadi was equally special. "It's not common to find a five-year old who is as articulate and bright ... Fadi, whose world revolved around war, arms, and stones, was representative of all the Palestinian children who lived through the *intifada*."

A major concern during the filming was the safety of the children. Masri tried not to expose them by conducting most of the interviews indoors. Moreover, only children under five years were filmed throwing stones. Masri recounts the incident that affected her most: an 18-month old baby was shot in the eye and she survived. The Israeli soldier shot the baby deliberately because the girl carrying her had defied him by refusing to move. About "Children of Fire," Masri says "it is the film I feel most attached to, it's a personal experience which involved my own town in a very special period."

Most of the Masri/Chamoun characters are women because



BIOGRAPHY MAI MASRI

- Hanan Ashrawi: A Woman of her Time*1995
- Hostage of Time*1994
- Suspended Dreams*1992
- Children of Fire*1990
- War Generation-Beirut* 1988
- Wild Flowers: Women of South Lebanon*1986
- Under the Rubble*1983

"women are more inclined to express their emotions and be frank about their feelings. Women recount the whole human aspect, they admit failure and show weakness, unlike men who are socialized to shun their emotions."

Masri maintains that she never faced gender-related problems, for she has always worked independently. However, she asserts that this is not the general rule, for women do face a lot of discrimination in the film business. She explains that editing and montage are often considered a woman's task whereas camera work is reserved for men. When Masri did her first camera work, people thought she was crazy for it involves a lot of responsibility. In addition, it is rare to find women doing such work in the Arab World. Masri adds that there is a prevalent misconception that camera work requires physical strength and muscles. "It has nothing to do with muscles, it is a matter of creativity, vision and feeling ... trying to catch that artistic image ... how to look at something in reality and be able to frame it in a way that gives it the strength it deserves. You can create a lot just by putting two images together, by the length of the image, the use of music."

Masri told us how she manages to combine a family and a career.

According to her, having children is a turning point in one's life; her two girls are her priority and they come before her career. "I didn't want my career to get in the way of enjoying my children, raising them, and having fun with them." Yet, Masri says that she would not give up her career because she has children. To her, being a mother affects the quantity of material one can produce, which implies that one has to be very creative in using one's time. "I am fortunate for I am independent and I work at home most of the time except when filming, so that gives me an advantage." When doing Hanan Ashrawi's film, she was away from her family for almost three months and it affected her very much. "... it was difficult even more for me than for them."

The Masri/Chamoun team is currently working on a feature film, their first. Masri expressed her eagerness to write her own script based on the various stories she has heard in Lebanon and Palestine in the course of her work. "There are a lot of stories at the back of my mind, so many human experiences that would make fantastic films. The next step ... is to find the time to sit down, concentrate, and write."