

# Film-maker's work took time to be accepted

Jocelyne Saab says movies about a wound – in this case the civil war – are 'difficult to watch'

Olivia Snaije  
Special to The Daily Star

Small and slight, a mop of dark hair framing her impish face, Jocelyne Saab struggles to keep up with a frantically energetic Dalmatian she's walking down a boulevard in Paris. "He chews up everything" she sighs, "he has eaten my films, and friends leave my apartment without their shoes."

This from a woman who has filmed, among others, Libya's Moammar Gadhafi, Amal movement founder Imam Musa Sadr, Progressive Socialist Party founder Kamal Jumblatt and Pierre Gemayel of the Phalange Party.

Jocelyne Saab was at the forefront of a generation of Lebanese film-makers who began their careers at the same time as the first rumblings of war in the early 1970s. After covering topics including Palestinian women and Kurdistan, Saab zeroed in on her own country in 1975 with a visionary documentary called *Le Liban dans la Tourmente* (Lebanon in the Whirlwind). Saab interviewed many of the people who subsequently become active protagonists in the war. In the film, Jumblatt decries a regime that is "falsely democratic," as a young Musa Sadr calls for change, saying that "the people are ready."

"Of course I had no idea how serious things were when I made this film," says Saab. Lebanon in a Whirlwind was aired around the world in the 1970s but was presented for the first time in Lebanon last summer, taking 27 years to finally pass the censors.

Saab has lived in Paris for



A scene from *Once Upon a Time in Beirut*. Saab says the people of Lebanon have yet to face the war

years and feels she has integrated the two cultures, but the bulk of her documentary and feature work has been on the Lebanese civil war. Ironically, although well-known in Europe, Japan and Canada, few of her films have been shown here. It wasn't until 1994 that one of them opened in Beirut – the feature, *Il Etait Une Fois Beyrouth* (Once Upon a Time in Beirut). "When we first came out of the maelstrom of the war, my work was not accepted. The war stopped but we still haven't faced it," says Saab. "I understand that the public doesn't always want to deal with these issues. Movies about a wound

are very difficult to watch." On the other hand, Saab says it is her role as a film-maker to work on memory. "I have two permanent obsessions, which have taken different forms as I mature: liberty and memory." Saab addresses the theme of memory in documentaries and feature films. By shooting in Beirut throughout the war, she progressively recorded its destruction, but also voiced a plea for tolerance and freedom. In 1984's *Une Vie Suspendue* (A Suspended Life), the character Samar, an adolescent refugee from the South, encounters Karim, an intellectual painter living in his patri-

cian house. In *Il Etait Une Fois Beyrouth*, recently aired on TV 5, Saab resuscitated Beirut on screen using scenes from pre-war films, as her principal characters, two young girls, search for images of their city before the war. At times, Saab has tried to distance herself from the war, seeking less psychological involvement in her work. Her prize-winning 1997 documentary shot in Vietnam, *La Dame de Saigon* (The Lady from Saigon), enabled Saab to be freer in her work. "After all, we have a right to live without this pathological weight," she says.

Saab has returned to the Arab world for her next two features, which will be shot in Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon, but with a more in-depth approach: "I've grown up since my militant days, but try to remain true to myself. I don't want to hurt anyone. While I see the stumbling blocks and social conformity, I am very careful to skirt these issues and this takes time. My friends ask me why I always pick such difficult subjects," she says with a shrug. As such, one of Saab's next projects is on pleasure derived from love – in an Egyptian context. Saab has been work-

ing on the screenplay for three years and will be ready to shoot next year.

"I've always dreamed of working in Egypt. Within the theme of liberty I chose one of the most difficult aspects of it – the freedom of one's body. I'm not a feminist, but the story is about the determination of choice. The film will be about a girl who is looking for her inner self, while being pulled simultaneously in the direction of modern life and archaic systems."

Because of constraints placed on Saab by censorship, the going has been slow, and certain scenes will have to be shot in Tunisia.

Saab is also working on a feature in Lebanon, but is reluctant to say much about her project, except that it's indirectly related to the war.

Saab is also learning about a new way to film, concentrating more on aesthetic aspects.

"I always worked in the urgency of war, with bombs falling about, and didn't have time to pay attention to how things looked."

While she pushes forward with time-consuming projects that require patience and endless negotiations for funds, her films made from the 70s-90s are living a life of their own. There is a newfound interest in the historical dimension of her work, and requests for Saab's films are steady.

She is about to go to Brazil, invited by the Syrian/Lebanese community for a retrospective of seven of her films.

"I feel responsible for how this community will see Lebanon. I feel like an ambassador carrying a torch bearing the idea of tolerance and freedom."

## STAR SCENE



Mira and Peter Samaha



Gladis and Michel Samaha



Alexis Papadopoulos and Sarah Abi Najm



Nadim and Dima Samaha



Penelope and Marguerite Serf



Reine and Nabil Troublous

## 'Bluesician' brings New York sound to Monnot

Michael Hill exports sounds of the city

Ramsay Short  
Daily Star staff

Michael Hill is sitting in his hotel lobby telling me stories. He speaks quietly, his voice low, talking of the time he met Jimi Hendrix, and when he played guitar with B.B. King.

Hill tells of his travels playing the Blues around the world, of his young son, Seth, back home in New York, of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings – the former US president and his slave girl lover – of civil rights in America and the wrongs of war.

"The music, my music, is really all about the stories," he states. "It has to be about life, about saying something, about love, sex, romance, politics, justice and police brutality – about the stories of life."

He is truly a "Bluesician." For over 20 years Hill has been playing the Blues with his band the Blues Mob, and for four nights last week he was playing at Circus on Monnot.

His Blues is, in a phrase he coined years ago, New York Blues, encompassing the traditions and structures of the genre born in America's deep South, but adding the rock of guitar heroes like Hendrix, and the energies sucked up from the New York streets.

At Circus, playing with local Beirut musicians Chadi Nashef, Roland Ghobril, Nadim Bou Chakra and Abdo Sadek, Hill demonstrated that mixture, at



Hill: 'Let's represent the US with something besides bombs'

times making his guitar sing like a soprano in the slide tradition of Muddy Waters, but with a flavor all his own.

Live, Hill is a force unto himself. He talks to the crowd and they talk back, and he laughs infectiously. He is almost full of too much joy and not enough pain to sing the Blues, but then the injustices of life come through as he performs a slow tune titled *Evil in the Air*.

It is a tale about three black kids who stray from their local neighborhood and are chased by a gang of white youths. Two get away; the third is killed just because he's black.

Raised in the South Bronx, Hill's pain comes through. His

ability to write a song shines. His deftness of touch on the guitar resounds.

The vibe at Circus is good. He shreds the notes fiercely and yet retains a deep soulfulness.

"You know, when I was 4 years old my folks said we were going to Disneyland on holiday," Hill recounts to the audience. "But I said that I want to go to Lebanon!"

Hill is clearly enjoying his experience here. He has toured recently in countries including Turkey, Russia and Serbia.

"Despite fears many Americans have about coming to the Middle East, I believe that you can't just listen to what the media has to say, you have to find out for yourself," he says. "Last year after Sept. 11 we went to Turkey when other bands canceled because I thought to myself: 'Let's go represent the US with something besides bombs.' It's even more special here because I am playing with local musicians, meeting kids, and hanging out in the local clubs, playing with different people," he adds.

In a demonstration of his versatility, Hill leaves the Blues behind for a while to play the rock that influenced him to learn guitar in the first place, Purple Haze by Hendrix.

His guitar is supple and super-charged, driven and drunk, blues-rock-funk with an edge of the Bronx. He then hits Led Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love*.

The encore is Chuck Berry's rock classic *Johnny B. Goode*, before a solo number of his own. The old-timers in Circus to see him love it, the young respond just as much. Hill's singing is spot on. The tune is another story.

"You know I feel goodness all around me in the world, I see it. And though there is pain too, there is beauty. I focus on the beauty, but am aware of the pain," Hill explains. "So in my life and in my music it is about these positive vibrations and the stories of life all around."

In Hill's fifth album to be released next year those stories appear again. In a nod to Hendrix, it's called *The Electric Storyland*.

## Northern Ireland – the pain of war's end

As the *Beast Sleeps* tells of sectarianism's foot soldiers

Jim Quilty  
Daily Star staff

It is emblematic of the difference between quality and hype that one of the best films at this year's European Film Festival is also one of the few that hasn't racked up an impressive-looking list of prizes from other film festivals.

Audiences differ about what makes a good movie, of course, and audiences and critics are often irreconcilable about whether a film is worthwhile or worthless. But if a checklist of quality were to include such criteria as gripping acting, writing, and unadorned cinematography, then you won't do any better than Harry Bradbeer's "As the Beast Sleeps."

Set in Belfast in the mid-1990's, the beginning of the Northern Ireland peace process, *Beast* focuses on a group of friends who grew up on the unionist side of the civil war – those defenders of the Protestant homeland, the Ulster Defense Association, or UDA.

This film is a rare accomplishment, dramatizing how a changing political agenda splits a militant movement into respectable politicians, discarded militants, and criminals – that is, militants now stripped of ideological and political cover for their activities.

For all its political and sociological acuity, though, Bradbeer's film is a dramatic tour de force. A contemplation of the themes of loyalty and friendship, *Beast* would hold you even if your country hadn't gone through years of conflict.

At the center of the story are husband and wife Kyle and Sandra (Stuart Graham and Laine Megaw) and their best friend Freddie (Patrick O'Kane).

Like the children of other civil wars, Kyle and Freddie had no opportunities for advancement. Along with the other lads in their squad, though, they became local heroes through their exploits killing, maiming and robbing Catholics.

When the political leadership of the Irish Republican Army, the IRA, and unionist camps decide that conflict was no longer in their interests, paramilitary commanders are given the difficult task of demobilizing foot soldiers like Kyle and Freddie.

Not only are they unable to integrate into the already depressed job market, they lose all the privileges their former status used to confer on them – like free drinks at the Protestant pub they used to supply with war booty.

The UDA leadership – as embodied by Alec (David Hayman) – have abandoned violence for political respectability. To do their bosses' bidding, though, field commanders like Larry (Colum Convey) who

dedicated years to transforming the young men of the Protestant neighborhoods into foot soldiers for Ulster, must couch the demobilization in short-term, tactical terms or else risk losing control over the men.

Since the paramilitaries don't know how to do anything but to be thugs, though, it is inevitable that some choose "rogue" criminality over the further loss of self-respect that comes with unemployment.

Like them, Larry knows full well that the gangsters that make up the UDA leadership are hanging the lower echelons out to dry to secure their own future. When he is ordered to punish any UDA men who break the truce, he agrees but only in return for a secure place in the party himself.

At the bottom of the political ladder, as loyal to the party – its goals and politicians alike – as he is to his friends, is Kyle. Made a militant by the circum-

stances of his upbringing, he isn't driven by blind hatred of the Catholics but by the needs of a man in his late 30s faced with declining prospects.

To him falls the responsibility of minding Freddie. Less intelligent, more visceral in his hatred and more volatile than Kyle, Freddie despairs of the truce all the more easily and itches to get back into combat.

Civil conflict is less fashionable these days, but Freddie's character is not condescendingly drawn and the friendship between these two rather different men is convincingly portrayed. Basically a sympathetic character, Freddie has a childlike relationship with Kyle's young son and wife. His actions, good and bad, are driven more out of a sense of loyalty than the selfishness that characterizes his political beliefs.

At root, the strength of *Beast* rests in the believability of these characters, and its ability to render their predicament with clarity and even-handedness. Credit for this accomplishment rests partly with the principal actors, who created these characters for the stage version of *Beast* and reprised them for this film.

The lion's share of the credit, though, resides with Belfast playwright Gary Mitchell, who devised the story as an award-winning stage play and then helped adapt it to the screen with director Harry Bradbeer.

The film works primarily as solid human drama, but it is tempting to recommend it also be made required reading for students of "failed states."

Mitchell does a fine job of sketching the intimate relationship between militancy and bare-faced criminality, the path leaders follow to political respectability and the ironic relationship between peace and increased social dislocation.

This is a great film, especially for those sick of civil war.

As the *Beast Sleeps* shows Nov. 25 at Sofit Center at 8pm

سنة الرواد  
المناسبة لعيد ميلاد السيد المسيح  
والمناسبة لعيد الفصح  
2002

في 11/11 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "سماح" اغان وعزف الشابين التونسيين امين وحزرة المرانسي عود وقانون براقيهما اليفاعي.

في 17/12 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "البيشري" سماح مفاص مشرفي مع ابن حليم الاستاذ شاهر الحلبي والمطربة ندى الربيع، يقومان الكواويل والقصائد والموشحات والقطايق والشعر الصوفي المفضل.

في 14/12 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "ممثلين خليفة" امسية غنائية للطلاب الاصيل.

في 19/12 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "احمد جمال" من الاستاذة يودي لتبار المغربين مثل السيد درويش، عبد الوهاب وغريهم.

في 21 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "خالد الغيدان يغني الشيخ اياموسيد درويش" اغاني الطرب الاصيل وخاصة اغاني الشيخ اياموسيد درويش.

في 22 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "باسم رزق" غناء - براقيده احمد الخطيب، ايفاعي.

في 25/24 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "فرقة حبايبنا" امسية غنائية للشيخ اياموسيد درويش.

في 26 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "رمزي ابو كامل" وفرقة موسيقى وصنوعات.

في 20 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "شحاتين يا بلدينا" بقيادة زياد سحاب - عزف وغناء، ليش.

في 15 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "ايلى رزق الله" غناء - براقيده زياد سحاب، عود واحمد الخطيب، ايفاعي.

في 15 الساعة 8:00 مساءً "هلة الجزايرية" طرب اصيل واغاني الراي.

للمحفل: 22/12/2002  
الساعة: 8:00 مساءً  
الساعة التاسعة لثلاثاء - يقدم المحفل في "مقهى كواويل"

AL-FAJR AL-BAHAR AL-BAHAR AL-BAHAR AL-BAHAR AL-BAHAR  
AL-FAJR AL-BAHAR AL-BAHAR AL-BAHAR AL-BAHAR AL-BAHAR



Paramilitaries at play: Kyle, right, tries to keep Freddie from hitting an opponent during a soccer game

## Another year, another Beaujolais

Jihane Akoury  
Special to The Daily Star

"Le Beaujolais Nouveau est arrive" (The new Beaujolais has arrived) is an announcement as recognizable as "Gentlemen, start your engines."

To celebrate the arrival of Georges Dubouef Beaujolais Nouveau-Villages, Bistrot de Beyrouth in the BCD kicked off the season with a special dinner, thus taking part in what has become an international race to be the first to serve the new wine of the harvest. Every year, at one minute past midnight on the third Thursday of November, more than 1 million cases of Beaujolais Nouveau begin their journey for immediate shipment to be distributed and savored around the world – and one of the most frivolous and animated rituals in the wine world begins.

Photos by Mahmoud Kheir

## JUST A THOUGHT

There is a great deal of difference in believing something still, and believing it again

W.H. Auden, British poet

(1907-1973)