



Sabbag, left, and the favorite of the Venice paparazzi Flavia Bechara as the young Druze woman who falls in love with an Israeli soldier in *The Kite*

FILM FOCUS

Film maker flies high in Venice and at home with *The Kite*

Lebanese cinema benefits from Randa Chahal Sabbag's critical acclaim at international festival

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Special to The Daily Star

The day Randa Chahal Sabbag won the Silver Lion for her film, *The Kite*, at this year's Venice Film Festival, was not only a personal triumph but also a triumph for Lebanese film. Although France usually funds Sabbag's films, whether documentaries or features, they are almost always about Lebanon.

The director will be receiving the Chevalier of the Order of the Cedar from President Emile Lahoud's office later this month in recognition of her work; but despite this Sabbag remains a controversial figure in her own country.

As *The Kite* opens in Lebanese cinemas from tonight, it will be a revelation to the public on several levels. This will be the first time that one of Sabbag's films is released for the general public. Her 1999 film about the Lebanese civil war, *A Civilized People*, has yet to be shown in Lebanon. At the time, the censors cut 50

minutes out of the 97-minute film, reducing it to uselessness according to Sabbag.

The Kite's subject — living in divided territory after an occupation — may be a topic Lebanese have left behind since the Israelis withdrew from the South. Whether one likes it or not, the very idea that Israel is now firmly enmeshed in the affairs of the region is food for thought. Furthermore, the public will discover not only the gorgeous young actress, Flavia Bechara, who drove the paparazzi mad in Venice, but also brilliant actors whom Sabbag has repeatedly used in her films, particularly Lilian Nemy and her own brother, Tamim al-Chahal. And, although Ziad Rahbani's talents are evident to everyone, seeing him wax philosophical in an Israeli officer's uniform is definitely new.

The Kite is a fairy tale Sabbag says. It's an impossible love story that takes place on the Golan Heights in the Druze village separated by the Israeli occupation.

The film is a visual trip to the Mount Hermon valley. Sweep-

ing arid landscapes are punctuated by the sound of the wind and voices of the villagers communicating with each other across the border by megaphone. The panoramic views of the valley are contrasted with intimate shots of a woman singing and making *kibbeh*, a prostitute's red shoes, Lamia's younger brother brushing his sister's hair.

The idea for the plot came from a Druze area on the Golan Heights called the Valley of Laments and Tears.

"It's a sort of no-man's land where there's no telephone and people communicate with each other using megaphones. I chose the subject because of the absurdity of the situation. I like the continuity in communication even though there's barbed wire separating the people," Sabbag said in her first interview with a Lebanese newspaper before the film's premiere.

She transposed the Golan Heights to the Mount Hermon area in Lebanon, which is similar in geography. The Israeli soldiers in the film are Druze, as

they are on the Golan Heights.

Lamia, played by Bechara, is a 16-year-old schoolgirl promised in marriage to her cousin who lives in Israel, a short walk away through the barbed wire. She is given special permission to cross the border when she is married, and again to come back to her village having repudiated her husband. In the course of her comings and goings, she and the young Israeli soldier assigned to the border fall in love.

When *The Kite* was screened at the Venice Film Festival the international audience that viewed it had no problem with a subject that could be painfully delicate in Lebanon.

"People didn't really understand the nuances," says Sabbag. "For the Germans, Russians and Koreans, it was simply obvious. They saw a village cut in half and that was that."

But in Lebanon, the audience is bound to look further. Sabbag predicts that the public may have a problem with this Romeo and Juliet situation.

"In people's minds, Lamia

cannot fall in love with an Israeli soldier. Even if he's Druze, he's still in an Israeli uniform. It's a truth that they deny."

Sabbag freely admits that she also makes the Druze in her film do things they would never do in actuality.

"Taboos are broken. This girl goes across, comes back, rebels against her husband, his family and her own and undresses in front of a soldier. The dialogues the women have, the things they say into the megaphone would never be heard among the Druze."

But as Sabbag says, it's a fable and must be taken as such, though the messages are deeply poignant. The people on both sides of the border live in a sort of vacuum suspended in time. They have been torn apart and are waiting for something that will never happen. They valiantly try to maintain ties, but the cultural differences are already irrevocable.

Sabbag evokes the East-West contrast between the still traditional village in Lebanon, and their more Westernized

counterparts living in Israel. "I don't know what Israel is like, but I had to break down the cultures a bit by showing clichés like a swimming pool or a child's slide in Israel," Sabbag explains.

"I needed two elements like these that weren't war-like or aggressive."

Sabbag's anger about the civil war has considerably abated since she made *A Civilized People*.

"*The Kite* is a pacifist film, without concessions. There are no slogans, there's no good guy or bad guy. The film is like a dream, from beginning to end. Of course people are going to say I haven't taken a position."

But this is exactly the strength in Sabbag's film. Beside the beautiful landscape, the film, while dream-like, emits rapid-fire messages opening the possibility for discussion and debate on a myriad of issues.

The Kite is on general release from Tuesday and premieres tonight at UNESCO Palace in the presence of the director at 6pm

STAR SCENE



Abdo Jeffi, Mario Saradar and Fady Amatory



Karine Mansour-Obegi and Toufic Aouad



Chirine Sfeir



Joumana Hachem, Khalil Tawil and Maria Saradar



Mirella Karam, Fady Daouk and Mona Ghazzaoui

Director's brother has menacing charm in role of Israeli officer

Actor's experiences during civil war have informed his movie work

Lebanon has its own Jean Reno and doesn't know it.

Something about actor Tamim al-Chahal recalls French director Luc Besson's fetish actor, Jean Reno, the sensitive killer in *La Femme Nikita* or Leon (*The Professional*). Onscreen, Chahal exudes tenderness and barely contained violence simultaneously that is similar to Reno's. Chahal, however, is even more menacing.

Tamim al-Chahal became an actor unwittingly. The filmmaker Randa Chahal Sabbag's younger brother was in his early teens when the Lebanese civil war began.

"He was the last of the siblings and completely overprotected by our mother," says Sabbag of her brother. "But it took him 30 seconds to go from being a baby to a hoodlum." The 45-year-old Chahal, who still gets into the occasional brawl in a bar, spent most of his adolescence during the war on the streets of Tripoli.

"I was very much involved in what was happening," Chahal says, explaining he was affiliated with umbrella groups of the Communist Party at the time.

When Sabbag had the idea of using her brother in her film, *Les Ecrans du Sable* (*Screens of Sand*) in 1992, it was primarily to get Chahal out of Lebanon.

Sabbag recalls being on location in Tunisia and sending people to pick her brother up at the airport: "I told them, 'He's my little brother, be careful, don't lose him.' When he arrived he frightened them."

His role was that of an Italian chauffeur and bodyguard. It was Sabbag's first feature film but she immediately spotted his talent. "I saw he had incredible presence, the camera liked him," she remembers.

Chahal describes his state of mind when he began acting: "When the war ended, I was all



Menacing tenderness: Tamim al-Chahal plays an Israeli officer in *The Kite*, directed by his sister

of a sudden *demode* (obsolete). Cinema didn't interest me at all. I didn't understand much and was just having fun."

But he learned to respect the marks on a set and went on to act in his sister's next feature, *Les Infidèles*, in 1997, playing the part of an executioner.

Sabbag had already interviewed him in a documentary about her own family during the war, *Nos Guerres Imprudentes* (*Our Careless Wars*), in 1995.

The role that established Chahal as a powerful actor was that of a deranged sniper in

Sabbag's 1999 film, *Civilises* (*A Civilized People*). "This was my most important role," says Chahal. "It was the one that was closest to me, it was very natural."

In *Civilises*, Chahal plays a Christian sniper camped out atop a building with a dead man as a companion. Chahal talks to the man and plays macabre games with him. They "play" cards, the sniper carefully arranging them between the corpse's stiffened fingers.

Chahal's first-hand experience of the war certainly helped

him for this role. The wildness and rage in his sniper comes from his past. "This rage exists in all of us who have lived through what we did," he says simply.

Chahal's acting is completely instinctive. It draws on what he knows best: "I'm interested in roles that I feel, that I can understand."

Sabbag has written of her brother that "he is everything but an actor ... asking questions, grabs the screenplay, rails against me, says exactly the opposite of what he's supposed to,

refuses to start again. My job is to irritate him so that he forgets why he's with us. I usually succeed fairly quickly and then he takes the plunge, with all his mass and vigor. He is the best of actors because he is himself." Chahal's most recent role as a bullying Israeli officer in *The Kite* (showing in cinemas this week) placed him once again in a military situation he was familiar with: "All officers are the same," he says laughing.

Sabbag writes her brother's roles for him as she does for other actors she knows intimately.

But what is it like always being directed by his sister?

"It was very hard at first and it continues to be difficult," Chahal says. "She still treats me like her little brother and I have to put up with her stress. While she helps me to do most everything I want to, she's not very patient with me."

The obvious question is whether Chahal will act with other directors besides his sister. Sabbag says she would like to see him work with others and Chahal agrees, although he admits he has never looked for an agent or pursued his career seriously.

"He sees it as just giving me a hand with my movies," Sabbag explains simply.

Clearly Chahal still has many roles within: "I haven't yet had a chance to get out everything I feel inside."

And he obviously enjoys being on the set, saying: "When you are involved in a film it's like taking a trip to Hawaii. It's a big vacation. Then you have to go home and face your real life!"

Chahal's real life is in Tripoli, where he recently got married and is an entrepreneur. He frets about post-war Tripoli losing its soul and eventually disappearing.

He is little known to the public because his sister's films haven't been shown in Lebanon. "If *Civilises* came out in cinemas here, it would touch a lot of people," Chahal says.

"His life wouldn't be the same," adds Sabbag, who continues to work on getting *Civilises* released in Lebanon.

"It will change his vision of himself."

The public would also discover Chahal's significant natural talent. For the moment, however, they'll have to content themselves with seeing him in a minor but forceful appearance as an Israeli officer in *The Kite*. —O.S.

JUST A THOUGHT

Morals is not preaching,
it is beauty of a rare kind

Ernest Dimnet,
French priest, lecturer and author (1866-1954)