

# Film-maker still trying to find right formula for Lebanese audiences – and censors

Randa Shahal Sabbag says country has yet to deal with experience of war

Olivia Snajje  
Special to The Daily Star

As with most Lebanese film-makers, Randa Shahal Sabbag's films are entirely made with foreign funds, and her work is better known outside of Lebanon than in it. In Sabbag's case, her name precedes her work.

Her 1999 film about the war, *Civilisees*, (A Civilized People), did not survive the censors and was never released in Lebanon; nevertheless it stirred up a furor.

According to press reports at the time, her film contained "shocking scenes and repulsive profanity." She was described as a "pornographer" and a friend to the Israelis. She received death threats. But at that time *Civilisees* had been shown only once – at a press screening – before the Interior Ministry published a list of proposed cuts that served as fodder for religious leaders and the media.

"I'm known for being provocative," Sabbag says with a glint in her eye. "So I'm being used as an example or a scapegoat for the censors. They know I won't keep quiet."

Keeping quiet is not her style. Rather, Sabbag comes from a family of women warriors. Her mother, a Christian from Baghdad, married a Sunni from Tripoli. She was a long-time Communist Party member who never hesitated to scold the radical Islamists in her neighborhood, or throw a grenade out the window when necessary. Sabbag's sister, Nahla, was a militant at age 14 and an active member of the OACL (Organization for Communist Action in Lebanon).

But it was her father who introduced her to the silver screen by taking her to the cine-club in Tripoli.

"One day I saw (Antonioni's) *Blow Up* and was totally bowled over and very moved," she recalls. "I would go to the movies after school in these splendid cinemas that had 600 seats and were called *Metropolis* or *Piccadilly*."

When Sabbag wanted to study film her father agreed to

send her to Paris alone, a move that was exceptional for the times in a conservative city like Tripoli. Paris in the early 1970s was "like planet Mars" for her. But the war soon broke out and Sabbag returned to Lebanon and began filming.

While she has decided to stop making documentaries and concentrate on feature films, which come more easily to her, Sabbag began with documentaries, filming in the midst of the war. Her sister's organization, the OACL, used Sabbag as a messenger, sending her to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat or Progressive Socialist Party's Walid Jumblatt's offices with important information.

"I was very young and reckless," she says. "When I think about it, the OACL had some nerve – I wasn't at all trained or armed and had no idea what to do if a problem arose. I just wasn't taken seriously because I was a film-maker."

But the chaos during the war gave her a certain artistic freedom. This freedom has since been reined in by censorship and by what Sabbag perceives as an unwillingness on the part of the Lebanese to examine what happened during the war.

"What I find terrifying about human beings is that during all the world conflicts, you had people, for example, who could put others in gas chambers, and then go home and listen to music," she says. "When the war ended, I used to look at people in cafes in Beirut and wonder: 'Did he shoot someone? Did he put somebody in a cellar and torture them?'"

In *Civilisees*, various combatants, but also civilians, career through mad lives in a bloody comedy; only the maids from various Third World countries who have been left in charge of abandoned homes remain "civilized." Sabbag's message was primarily to show the active engagement of the Lebanese in the war.

"What's terrible is when people say the war was fought by others. In fact, the Lebanese participated in everything."



Sabbag: "I was so sure I was doing the right thing. I was caught totally unaware by the ban. With *Les Infideles* I had only myself to blame, but with *Civilisees* I got angry"

The *Civilisees* debacle was particularly painful for Sabbag since she had already suffered a form of rejection from the Lebanese public with a previous feature, *Les Infideles*. The difference was that time, Sabbag understood very clearly why.

*Les Infideles* tells the story of an irresistible attraction between two men – Farid, a Muslim fundamentalist and Charles, a French diplomat living in Cairo.

"When I projected the film at a festival in Lebanon, as the film ran, I could feel the atmosphere in the room getting icy," she says. "Seeing my film in Lebanon I thought: 'This won't

do at all. I've gone too far.' When the two men embraced I thought I would die. Here in France it was nothing, but in Lebanon it was like a porno."

Going to work on *Civilisees*, she was careful to stay in a Lebanese frame of mind, she insists, filming in Lebanon with Lebanese actors, and with famous composer Ziad Rahbani responsible for the score. She was determined not to allow her "Europeanized" outlook to take over.

"I was so sure I was doing the right thing," she says. "I was caught totally unaware by the ban. With *Les Infideles* I had only myself to blame, but with

*Guerres Imprudentes*, (Our Heedless Wars) is a look at her family's way of dealing with the war. *Soha: Surviving Hell*, a video documentary, follows Soha Bechara as she revisits the Khiam detention center after the liberation of South Lebanon in May, 2000.

More often Sabbag is concerned with the historical and cultural aspects of a region, which she sees as imposing a certain destiny on people. In the case of her first feature, *Ecrans de Sable* (Screens of Sand) in 1992, Sabbag portrays the life of a wealthy woman living in the Gulf (played by Maria Schneider) and her friendship with a Lebanese librarian who has recently escaped the war. Her newest film, *Le Cerf Volant* (The Kite), is now being edited and revolves around a region sundered by occupation.

For *Le Cerf Volant*, Sabbag got both Rahbani and her favorite actor, her brother Tamim, to put on Israeli soldiers' uniforms for their roles. Sabbag initially included her brother in her films as a way of getting him out of the war, but he's since evolved into a professional actor and she has used him in all of her works. (His most notable role to date has been a sniper who plays cards with a dead man in *Civilisees*).

The story takes place on the Golan Heights in a Druze village that has been divided in two by the Israeli occupation.

"It's about a girl who is sent to the Israeli side to marry a cousin she has been promised to. But she refuses and returns to her side. She is sent back over. During all these comings and goings an Israeli soldier, a Druze, watches and falls in love with her," says Sabbag. "I've done all I can so that this time my film will be seen in Lebanon. People 'know' me without ever having seen my work."

She is anxious to begin her next project – a feature about the Crusades. Had she lived in Tripoli at the time, Raymond de St. Gilles might have encountered greater resistance when he encircled the city.

## STAR SCENE



Habib and Wadiah Abu Nasr



Geoffrey Lewis and Rita Salameh



Michel Noujaim and Moufak al-Yafi



Nuhad Khairallah



Imad and Maya Abu Nasr

## Danish maestro offers up smorgasbord of Jazz

Saxophonist covers all the classics

Ramsay Short  
Daily Star staff

Charlie Parker once said: "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn."

Of Danish saxophonist Martin Jacobsen's experience on first hearing him at the Blue Note Cafe in Hamra, where he plays for the next week, I was unsure.

Perhaps it was because the authorities at the airport had detained him for six hours Wednesday night, quibbling over his work permit, before immediately having to play to a half-full crowd with two musicians he had never met before, that the first set was missing something.

But by the second, the trio – Jack Gregg on acoustic double bass and Walid Tawil on drums – came together in that diverse, inspired way that makes Jazz so exciting.

While there is no doubt that Jacobsen's initial offerings – *Witchcraft* by Cy Coleman, and *Hank Mobley's Funk in Deep Freeze* – demonstrated an adept technical ability, his improvisational skills manifested themselves only later in Tadd Dameron's *Soul Trane* and an accomplished take on Louis Boufa's *Black Orpheus*.

Jacobsen's tenor sax rips and rolls as he pumps out the phrases, making conversation with the grammatical precision of a writer. The quotations, commas, and semi-colons of the composition were all there to be heard.

His love of the instrument is visible in an ability to make complicated compositions simple, remarkable for a musician who began playing sax at the relatively late age of 18, and who is, for the most part, self-taught.

Throughout Jacobsen's gig, Gregg and Tawil keep a vibrant pace, each carefully plucking out touching solos.

A long-time resident of Beirut, the American-born Gregg, in particular, demonstrated an earned knowledge of Jazz, eyes closed, flexing the strings of his double bass with a fine improvisation on Bronislav Harper's *Green Dolphin Street*.

Since 1995 Jacobsen has been living in Paris, where he

currently plays with his own quartet which includes Doug Raney on guitar, Jesper Lundgaard on acoustic bass and Rick Hollander on drums.

He's toured throughout Europe, including the Copenhagen Jazz Festival, the Festival Jazz d'Or in Strasbourg and the Festival Jazz en Artois in Arras.

The Danes have a strong history of Jazz, as many African-American musicians fled the United States for the Scandinavian country in the past century, where they found equality unparalleled in the US at that time.

Jacobsen is one product of those musicians' effect in Denmark, and although far from Coltrane, he plays the master's track *John Paul Jones* with an inventive subtlety.

As the trio continues to play together over the next week they'll get better and better. Jacobsen is a fine addition to come through the doors of the Blue Note. Recommended.

Martin Jacobsen is playing at The Blue Note Cafe on Makhoul Street, Hamra, from Jan. 22-25 at 10.30pm. For more information, call 01/743857



Jacobsen: love of instrument

## BKR Abunaser celebrates anniversary

Jihane Akoury  
Special to The Daily Star

A cocktail reception was held Friday at the Metropolitan Palace Hotel to mark the 35th anniversary of BKR Abunaser & Associates, the local member of BKR International, a worldwide association of auditors and business advisers.

Among the number of prominent personalities attending was Geoffrey Lewis, vice-chairman of BKR International. Wadiah Abu Nasr, one of the owners, said that "we are celebrating our success, the success of our clients, and the commitment and loyalty of our staff."

Abo Nasr added that "our affiliation with BKR International since 1996 bestowed upon us the credibility and guarantee of quality standards and ethics, and allowed us to assist our clients to reach foreign markets."

He explained that the company's goal of "vision beyond figures" means that its role is extended beyond financial statements and business valuation reports.

Photos by Mahmoud Kheir

## JUST A THOUGHT

America is a land of wonders, in which everything is in constant motion and every change is an improvement

Alexis de Tocqueville,  
French author (1805-1859)

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