

TENK.TV, LES CONTES MODERNES, CINENIC FILM
AND JOUR2FÊTE PRESENT

ANNECY₂₀₁₈ 

THE TOWER

A FILM BY
MATS GRORUD



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80 MIN / DCP

INTERNATIONAL AND FRENCH PRESS

Ciné-sud Promotion

Claire Viroulaud & Anne-Lise Kontz

claire@cinesudpromotion.com / +33 6 87 55 86 97

anne-lise@cinesudpromotion.com / +33 7 69 08 25 80

INTERNATIONAL SALES

Jour2fête

9 rue Ambroise Thomas - 75009, Paris, France

Sarah Chazelle & Etienne Ollagnier

+33 1 75 43 26 82

sales@jour2fete.com

S Y N O P S I S

Beirut, Lebanon, Today.

Wardi, an eleven-year-old Palestinian girl, lives with her whole family in the refugee camp where she was born. Her beloved great-grandfather Sidi was one of the first people to settle in the camp after being chased from his home back in 1948. The day Sidi gives her the key to his old house back in Galilee, she fears he may have lost hope of someday going home. As she searches for Sidi's lost hope around the camp, she will collect her family's testimonies, from one generation to the next.



THE DIRECTOR



© Merete Haseth

Mats Grorud is a film director and animator from Norway. He previously directed two short films and has worked as an animator on several feature films, documentaries and music videos. During his childhood, his mother worked as a nurse in refugee camps in Lebanon. In the 1990s, Mats studied at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon while working as an English and Animation teacher in the Burj el Barjaneh refugee camp. Based on the testimonies of the refugees and his experience, he wrote the script for his first-feature film, *The Tower*.

FILMOGRAPHY

DIRECTOR AND ANIMATOR:

2009 **SANTA KLAUS**, short film, co-directed with Robin Jensen.

2008 **MY GRANDMOTHER BEJING**, short film

ANIMATOR:

2005 **ASYLUMSEEKERS**, short film directed by Kaja Polmar.

GRANDPA IS A RAISIN, feature film directed by Pjotr Sapegin.

INTERVIEW WITH MATS GRORUD

Where did the idea for the film come from? And how is your personal story related to Burj el Barjaneh?

My mother worked as a nurse in Lebanon during the war in the 1980s. When she came back to Norway, she told us about how the kids in the camps were growing up, and that one day there would be Peace and we would go there together. Then in 1989 we moved to Cairo. I was 12 at the time and went to an Egyptian school with my younger sister. I vividly remember going to Jerusalem and Gaza at Christmas in 1989. It was snowing and on every street-corner Palestinian kids were making V-signs with their fingers. Kids my age. That was during the first Intifada.

I went to Lebanon and visited the camps for the first time at the end of the 90s. It was a study trip arranged by the Palestine Committee, a solidarity organization for Palestinians set up in Norway.

The same organization had a program where you could stay in the camps and work for NGOs. So when my animation studies ended in 2001, I went to Lebanon to stay for a year, working in an NGO-sponsored kindergarden in the Burj el Barjaneh camp in Beirut.

I was also doing workshops for children in different camps with other Palestinian NGOs.

I then started interviewing my friends in the camps, asking them about their lives and their backgrounds: where they came from, their stories, their lives today and thoughts about the future.

From those interviews, I worked on a documentary about the camp called *Lost in time, lost in place*, but kept looking for a way to tell all these stories. In 2010, I met my producer, Frode Søbstad, and an idea started to take shape.

What was it?

It was all about three main characters: Wardi, her great-grandfather Sidi and the mysterious Pigeon Boy. I wanted to connect the newest generation with the oldest. Fewer and fewer of the generation expelled from Palestine in 1948 are still alive. Initially, we wanted to make a short

film, but as the script developed, I wanted it to include more scenes and dialogues and to show more about the situation for the Palestinians living in the camps. I wanted to make a short film, but the producer thought the vastness of the material would fit a full feature. He convinced me.

What was most important for you to communicate?

We wanted to make a film about the passage of time: the past, the present and the future. To show how children are born into this camp without rights, as refugees. In Lebanon, they aren't allowed citizenship, which means they cannot own anything, and they are excluded from the labor market.

These people have suffered tremendously. They have lost family members, or seen them relocated to distant parts of the world. They are stuck in the camp, waiting for a political solution. They feel forgotten. They have been refugees since 1948. Most still have their house keys and their land deeds. A UN decision states they have the right to return to their homes. However, it is impossible for them to leave Lebanon unless they marry someone from the outside, or migrate illegally to Europe.

But I try to show the other side of the tragedy. People with humor, warmth and hospitality. I wanted to show their bright perspectives on life, in contrast to all they have endured. How they manage as human beings, and not just economically. That was the prerequisite. They aren't laughing all the time, but keep the faith, and I wanted to show the means in which they survive.

How authentic or biographical are the stories and the characters in the movie?

The characters are based on my friends and their families. I have woven in things I heard in the camp, and information from interviews we did. Some characters are more directly inspired than others.

There are also stories told as flashbacks - stories inspired by actual events described in biographies, in interviews I read, and in archive material based on the oral history of the people from the camps.

For example, Wardi and her Great-grandfather are greatly inspired by a friend of mine, Hanan Bairakji and her relationship to her grandfather. He has been deceased for a long time, but he became the outline for Sidi. I used people and their stories for inspiration; thus, the film is not a 1:1 accurate depiction of real people and events. Some of the lines in the film are direct quotes – others inspired by stories and details people told me.

My goal was to create something that sounded as true as possible for the Palestinians in Lebanon. It is a mixture of different people, different stories and different situations in the camp.

How do you create the characters' surroundings?

The setting for the story is the camp. We see it as it develops from tents after el Naqba in 1948 and how it continues to grow upwards still today. A lot of efforts went into finding pictures of the camps throughout the last 70 years. This research started with the pictures I got from my mother who worked as a nurse in the camps from the 80s and onwards.

What were the hardest technical challenges?

We used a great deal of time in the development of the film to find ways to make the puppets speak and express their emotions. Much thanks to my French producer Les Contes Modernes, we ended up doing all the animation in Bourg-Lès-Valence after tests in Poland,



France at a great studio there, Foliascope. They did both the 2D and puppet animation for the film. Working together with a highly skilled team of animators led by Pierre-Luc Granjon and He-fang Wei, we used replacement mouths and moveable brows, but kept the same faces all the time. This worked very well.

There was also a challenge to bridge the style of the 2D and the puppet world. This took us some time to figure out, and together with the Art Director Rui Tenreiro and the team in France, we found solutions that I hope work. The questions were largely where to make the two worlds more similar and where to break and contrast in style.

What is the situation of the children in the camp today?

The number of children living in Burj el Barjaneh represents around 43% of the camp's total population, which is approximately 21,000, without taking into account the 20,000 refugees who recently arrived from Syria all living on one square kilometer.

Their situation is thus very problematic; they feel completely excluded from Lebanese society and are "ghettoized" in the camp. Nevertheless, there is no significant number of kids out of school, but there are growing numbers of semi-illiterate children who drop out before high school. Many go into vocational training. Kids have trouble studying since they know they will not find work in Lebanon. They almost all dream of emigrating or going back home one day.



THE PALESTINIAN DIASPORA

*Interview with doctoral research fellow **Erling Lorentzen Sogge**,
M.A. in Middle Eastern and North Africa studies at the University of Oslo, 2014.*



What was the reason for the displacement of the Palestinians in 1948?

The war happened. The Palestinians from Galilee, the northern part of present-day Israel, were expelled. In certain towns, the men were gathered into groups and shot on the spot. Due to the violence, and the fear of additional massacres, more than 100,000 Palestinians fled to Lebanon. Lebanon was not necessarily a foreign country for them. Many had traded with the Lebanese for years, and had established comprehensive networks. Throughout the aggressions leading up to the 1948 expulsion, they made a habit of going back and forth between Galilee and Lebanon in times of trouble. However, they didn't expect that on May 14, 1948 – the day the state of Israel was born – the borders would close permanently. They were now stranded.

What happened to them?

Not all of them became refugees. Some, especially those with good networks – many of them wealthy Christian Palestinians – obtained Lebanese citizenship. Most were not so lucky and had to find other ways to survive. They settled in different cities. However, nobody thought that they would stay in Lebanon for generations; they thought it was a matter of weeks or months. Temporary arrangements were organized.

Community leaders among the refugees made agreements with the Red Cross and Lebanese landowners, in order to set up smaller refugee camps. Between 1949 and 1950, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) took over the responsibility for these camps. In the beginning, conditions were bad. The Lebanese state wouldn't allow building materials into the camps. Materials like zinc and nails were banned. They lived in urban slums.

In the late 1960s, circumstances improved. The PLO and the armed Palestinian resistance groups were formed in Lebanon, and the refugees were finally given a political voice. In general, the Lebanese left side of politics supported the PLO and its Palestinian revolution. This was a period of Arabic solidarity and nationalism. Buckling under the pressure of changing political winds, the government eventually gave the Palestinian militia groups the right to set up their operations in the camp and assume responsibility for the refugees. This arrangement was formalized in the 1969 Cairo Accords.

From 1969 to 1982, the camps in Lebanon experienced a period of relative prosperity. Supported by petro-dollars coming in from the Gulf, the PLO equipped the camps with state structures, such as schools, hospitals, police forces and revolutionary councils.



However, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 destroyed the PLO-state within the camps, and the organization was forced to evacuate. The camps have remained autonomous from their host state, but have since become impoverished slum-like societies with no functioning internal political authority.

What is the situation in the camps today?

It is bad. First of all, the Palestinians lack legal protection. Despite having lived in Lebanon for three generations now, they enjoy fewer civil rights than any visiting foreigner does. Roughly half of the 300,000 Palestinians in Lebanon lives in a refugee camp, or in unofficial gatherings. They are neglected by the Lebanese state but also by their own political leadership. Following a coup within the Fatah movement in 1983, the camps became scenes of internal Palestinian struggles between the militia groups that were loyal to Syria, and those that still supported the PLO. Today, you find roughly 19 Palestinian factions competing for influence within the camps. Although the various groups have at times found ways to cooperate, any conflict erupting within the Palestinian system

in the homeland tends to have a disruptive impact on camp governance across the diaspora.

The camps themselves are overpopulated. As most Palestinians are banned from working in Lebanon, there is a continuous struggle for resources. The Syrian war has sent waves of new refugees into the camps in Lebanon, where the budgets of local support agencies have become severely strained. Although the camp populations are growing, the camps do not expand in size. The solution, for those that have the resources, is to build vertically. As a result, sunlight is blocked off and fresh air doesn't make its way into the camp. Burj el Barjaneh is famous for its bewildering jungle of electric cables snaking down from its rooftops. Every winter, people die from electroshocks when the cables are submerged in the rain that fills up the streets.







TECHNICAL CREW

Director: **Mats Grorud**

Scriptwriter: **Mats Grorud, Trygve Allister Diesen, Ståle Stein Berg**

Art Director: **Rui Tenreiro**

Music Composer: **Nathanaël Bergèse**

Animation Supervisor Stop motion: **Pierre-Luc Granjon**

Animation studio: **Foliascope**

Animation Supervisor 2D: **Hefang Wei**

DoP: **Sara Sponga/ Nadine Buss**

Editors: **Silje Nordseth / Carsten Meinich / Anders Bergland / Margrete Vinnem**

Sound designers: **Cloudberry ab, by Christian Holm, Erik Bjerknes**

Produced by **Frode Søbstad - Tenk.tv, Patrice Nezan and Laurent Versini - Les Contes Modernes - Annika Hellström, Cinenic Film**