

## CINEMA

### CHILDREN OF RAGE

Written & Directed :  
**ARTHUR ALLAN SEIDELMAN**

Producer :  
**GEORGE R. NICE**  
L.S.V. Productions, Ltd.

Reviewed by **MARK A. BRUZONSKY**

Financially backed by a midwestern American Jew well-known for his support of Israel, written and directed by a young American Jew, yet considered by many sympathetic to the cause of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), *Children of Rage* is an excruciatingly controversial film. In Washington in late June it was screened at a showing to which the Egyptian Embassy invited a fair percentage of the audience. Invited myself by a young Pakistani friend actively supporting the PLO and writing a doctoral thesis justifying international terrorism (his invitation came from the Egyptian Embassy), I expected the usual rationalizations for fanatical Palestinian irredentism.

But *Children of Rage* is very much the unusual. It is a shocking, absorbing, and gripping portrayal of Middle East reality. Though admittedly espousing the theme of Palestinian homelessness through Israeli usurpation, this film is everything but propaganda. Those who term it such fail to appreciate the writer's artistry or motivations. For those viewers aware of

the complex history of the Arab-Israeli tragedy, *Children of Rage* is a powerful presentation of the human dimensions of what daily transpires on both sides of the nationalist/cultural barrier.

With poor advance publicity, the film played to exceptionally small audiences during June in New York City. As was to be expected, reviewers then branded *Children of Rage* with glaringly contradictory assessments. These ranged from "PLO-job . . . an explosively controversial film" (Smith and Van Der Hoast in *The Village Voice*) to "a picture so evenly balanced in its view of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that its American writer-director . . . can take a bow" (Winsten in the *New York Post*).

Arthur Allan Seidelman, who does deserve some bows, is currently promoting his creation throughout the United States and abroad — but so far with limited success. The film is a commercial venture, but in a way financial considerations almost seem secondary. It is obvious upon talking with Seidelman that he could not have written and directed this drama without internalizing a passionate need to communicate the personal dimensions of the bitter struggle. Through Seidelman, *Children of Rage* takes on, in a sense, elements of a cross-cultural crusade for mutual empathy.

While it was inevitable that American Jewry would split over the film's objectivity and worth (just as the Israeli Film Board's liaison with the Foreign Office Aluf Hareven caused a schism over approval of the script), it was just as inevitable that those opposed to Israel would find in *Children of Rage* a sophisticated device for eliciting sympathy for the PLO. Those politically oriented, on both sides, cannot help but consider the film primarily in the context of its potential effects on the American public and various international audiences.

But while political groupings do their verbal battle, it would be terribly unfortunate to overlook the human meaning

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of Seidelman's one-man crusade. Seidelman admits that "I had to tell the story from the Palestinian side. I had to unplug ears and eyes." This is a realization he came to while spending three years researching, writing and directing. While Kissinger's shuttle was taking the world into the political capitals for government posturing, Seidelman was shuttling between refugee camps in Lebanon and Israeli settlements looking for the effects on people's lives. The result is a visual and emotional journey for viewers into "the dilemma of individuals strapped to the powderkeg of national loyalties while struggling to speak to each other with words of peace." "Virtually every thought, political speech, and viewpoint expressed," says the writer, "was from a conversation I had had with an Israeli or an Arab."

Summarizing the story-line has little of the intensity of watching and feeling the plot unwind. A mine explodes and soldiers chase terrorists. With a flashback technique these border scenes are interspersed with those of kids playing kick-ball in Jerusalem — the next generation's soldiers and terrorists? Rushed to a hospital, a Fedayeen commando is recognized by Dr. David Shalmon as a friend from school days. The dying commando's brother, Omar, decides to avenge his brother's death and join the Fedayeen — much to his family's torment. "You have come here to die" he is quickly instructed. "Do not doubt that victory will come, if not in this generation then in the next." Within the PLO a debate rages over the use of terror — "honor versus terror" as one struggling opponent defines the moral terrain.

Omar is finally readied for a mission — posing as a student, he goes with a book bomb to a community center where a dance is being held. Injured in the blast, Omar is unconscious in a hospital where Dr. Shalmon suspects his involvement and seeks out Leyla, Omar's sister.

David had tried to befriend Leyla months earlier when she came to the hospital to identify her dead commando brother — this time he does.

Tormented by the antagonistic causes for which both he and Leyla's brother Omar now struggle, David tries to convince his family and friends of the desperate need to attempt understanding of the Palestinians, of their needs and aspirations and passionate conviction of having been wronged. In the process, the spectrum of attitudes held in Israel toward the Palestinians and the PLO is profoundly revealed.

"We came to this land in peace. We wanted to join them. All they want to do is destroy us..."

"This country was theirs before we came here..."

"I know the way their minds work. They want all or nothing, so they get nothing..."

With David's request to cross the border turned down, he and Leyla arrange to be smuggled out of the country to a camp in southern Lebanon. Though serving as a doctor he is always distrusted and usually openly hated. Omar, after escaping the hospital, loathes the friendship developing between his sister and David. Emotions explode in a scene where Omar screams out "You'll never have my friendship" — a statement which reverberates in the viewers mind as, "Israel will never be accepted by the Palestinians." David's response: "Well, will you at least take mine?"

The prevalent hatred of all Israelis competes with the PLO camp leader's attempt to at least tolerate the contradictions and accept David's help. But, "We've learned not to trust, not to believe," he shouts to David in desperation.

In the midst of these interpersonal sub-dramas a retaliatory Israeli commando raid unfolds. David is shot dead by one of the extremists. Omar falls to Israeli

helicopter fire. The camp goes up in flames. Leyla is alone, shattered by what outsiders often casually refer to as the "Arab-Israeli conflict." She becomes the lasting image of the human grief resulting to the actual participants.

Some will term it all melodrama — except for the fatalistic ending. Others will, of course, charge political manipulation, if not by a gullible Seidelman, then by Arab-supporting promoters. But Seidelman, clearly exploitable as another "turn-coat," sees his creation as an attempt to get to the roots of the human conflicts, to try to uncover the motivations and passions that turn people into fanatics and ultra-nationalists. "All I wanted," the writer insists, "was to make a film about people, not political issues. If I were interested in politics, I'd have done a documentary."

Seidelman, though, has often been treated as if he were making a documentary as well as politically motivated. Aluf Hareven ("*Aluf*" is a first name, not a military designation) — who caused an otherwise favorable 12-man Israeli Film Board to refuse approval to the script which would have made possible the help needed to produce the film in Israel — accused Seidelman of everything from being a bad Jew to being a bad Christian. "Even after my return to New York," Seidelman recalls, "I received letters from him damning me." "Hareven," says Seidelman, "hated the script with a vehemence that was rather phenomenal. In two interviews the man never smiled." Among the changes Hareven insisted upon were a scene where Omar would accept money for something he was to do and one where an Israel-built hospital for Palestinians would be destroyed by terrorists. He was most upset at the very notion of David crossing the border illegally and with the appearance of David's apartment which he compared to one on the upper west side of New York City. "We

are not like American Jews," Seidelman was instructed. "You are insulting us."

During the summer, after one of the American screenings, a man approached Seidelman shouting, "I'm going to knock the shit out of you." Reflecting his true sentiments, Seidelman responded, "But first tell me what side you are on." The writer insists that "the film is not apologetic of the terrorist problem. I am a pacifist. I abhor terrorism. But you don't stop terror by not trying to find out its root causes."

Seidelman though, like the rest of us, has his own political orientations, though he may not recognize them as such. His "truth" is passionately expressed, but even the most admiring can easily see omissions and gaps in Seidelman's presentation of the Israeli-Palestinian nightmare. Some accuse him not only of telling the story from the Palestinian point-of-view but of giving depth and feeling to his Palestinian characters while portraying the Israelis on the whole as less feeling and more coldly insensitive. Whatever one's view, Seidelman's belief that "this film presents a microcosm of the truth" is not really challengable. But his related views are. "Only when Israel as a national-political entity is willing to see this truth can she achieve a lasting peace in the Middle East," Seidelman preaches. "The Palestinian problem is the core and the base of the Middle East problem. Unless that problem is solved they can sign treaties till kingdom come and there won't be peace, and I don't think there are 10 members of the Israeli parliament or the American diplomatic corps who know that. I don't think that Mr. Kissinger has ever visited a refugees camp."

"Truth" and biases aside, *Children of Rage* is definitely not melodrama. It is a well-acted and emotion-capturing fictional documentary that deserves to be seen and discussed. How unfortunate it is that the Israeli Film Board is not likely

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to give Israelis the opportunity to judge for themselves.

During the final months of 1975 the film was scheduled to open in Houston and a number of cities in Florida for the first commercial showings since June in New York. It has become something of a hot potato with unconfirmed rumors that pro-Israeli groups have been applying considerable pressure behind the scenes. Whether this is true or not the \$1,000,000 film hasn't really gotten off the ground yet. According to Seidelman the Rugoff chain in New York thought they might be bombed if they agreed to distribute the film. The K-B theatres in Washington apparently considered the film too anti-Israel. On the other hand, Seidelman is completing negotiations for the film to be shown on German television and has sold the film for cable showing in the U.S. which he notes will include showings at U.S. Army bases.

Creating this mostly true-to-life portrayal of what is in fact happening began about three years ago at the suggestion of a young woman of Syrian ancestry. As Seidelman began exploring the actual situation in the Middle East, the script began to come out of Seidelman's own perceptions of the motivations, beliefs and attitudes of those he met. Whether Seidelman is "right" in believing that the plight

of the Palestinian refugees is the key to solving the conflict is not nearly as crucial as how meaningfully he has presented the Palestinian case while not slandering the Jewish one.

It is far too easy to dismiss *Children of Race* as a PLO tear-jerker. More than any other film I know, Seidelman's captures dimensions of pain and suffering that are so well understood by Middle Easterners on all sides of the cease-fire lines, but all too little felt by many of Israel's most supportive followers or the PLO's intellectual cheer-leaders. As Seidelman puts it, "Everything I say in the film is no different from what Amos Elon has written in his excellent book, *The Israelis*."

But seeing all of this on the screen at a time when the PLO taunts the world with concessionary "dreams" of Israel's collapse is wrenching to those who see in Israel the legitimate embodiment of Jewish aspirations, if not survival. Even so, the pain is necessary to bear — actually a small price in comparison to the fates of so many Israelis and Palestinians. And if in Seidelman's story there is some impetus for attempting to understand the other side, to learning why young Palestinians eagerly accept suicide missions as well as why Israeli *sabras* race into battle, then it is a film everyone should witness.