

FROM: THE PRESS OFFICE

TALKING TO THE ENEMY  
Voices of Sorrow and Rage

Tuesday 15 December, 9.00 - 10.00pm

Award-winning British director Mira Hamermesh adopts a challenging approach to documentary film-making in her new hour-long film about the Arab-Israeli conflict Talking to the Enemy: Voices of Sorrow and Rage. This is part two of an envisaged film tryptich which began with her film about apartheid Maids and Madams (first shown in June 1985), which won the channel its first Prix Italia. In turning her attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict Mira Hamermesh once again goes to the heart of the confrontation, humanising the participants in the process. The result is a remarkable and deeply moving film.

TALKING TO THE ENEMY: Voices of Sorrow and Rage, is a story about an encounter between enemies. A chance meeting - on neutral ground in Washington DC - takes place between MUNA HAMZEH, a young Palestinian journalist, and CHAIM SHUR, an older Israeli and editor of the journal New Outlook. The meeting leads to an exchange of letters and a challenging outcome, when Chaim suggests that Muna should visit Israel as well as his family's home at their kibbutz in Negev. As Muna says, "...It's just not something that you do, that you just walk over to the enemy and talk to him or her, and visit them, and be in their homes..." With Muna's arrival the action of the film follows the increasingly painful course of the encounter. Instead of bringing the parties closer to a reconciliation the visit accelerates the contradictory passions unleashed by the confrontation. Set in a landscape bristling with the realities of the killing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the film explores the feelings and the psychology of people living in enmity with no easy resolution to the bloody conflict. TALKING TO THE ENEMY: Voices of Sorrow and Rage examines the language and emotions of enmity - with its special rhetoric, symbols and logic - in a battlefield where words, like bullets, are exchanged in the volleys of mutual recriminations Jewish and Arab cemeteries are telling evidence of butchered opportunities.

"Stereotyping the enemy is, of course, as old as history itself. Projecting exaggerated power or powerlessness onto one's enemy creates legions of grotesque monsters mocking reality yet passionately believed in," says Mira Hamermesh. Towards the end of the film, the enemies - the Israeli and Palestinian participants - in the act of humanizing each other are overwhelmed by compassion. In the process, TALKING TO THE ENEMY: Voices of Sorrow and Rage unexpectedly creates a climate in which it is possible for enemies to weep on each other's shoulders.

MIRA HAMERMESH is a Polish-born, British film-maker and artist of distinction. She was one of the first English students to gain a scholarship to train at the internationally recognised Polish Film School. In addition to the highly acclaimed Maids and Madams, her credits include short features: Lesson II and Homecoming (Film Polski) and Passport (BFI), as well as drama for BBC TV and Israel TV, and many documentaries for Israel TV, Dutch TV and Thames TV (Two Women). Her film-making, both here and abroad, focuses on aspects of oppression and injustice, subjects painfully close to her own early experiences of war and refugeehood. Her parents perished in the Holocaust.

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# TV Mail

## Brief encounter across the gulf

BY a tragic coincidence, Mira Hamermesh's brilliant film *Talking To The Enemy* (C 4) was mocked by events shown earlier in the evening on the news.

Hers was a story of reconciliation between Jew and Arab, a demonstration that human values can overcome political differences, however bitter.

The news, however, told a much more familiar story, with Palestinians rioting in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, and the Israelis responding with live bullets.

How, then, were we to believe in the encounter between two very human beings across the political divide - the divide that produced the violence and bloodshed we had just been witnessing?

Muna Hamzeh is a young Palestinian journalist, apparently working in the United States. She is a passionate believer in the



PETER PATERSON'S TELEVISION REVIEW

cause of her dispossessed countrymen: her mother was born in Jerusalem, and her father in Haifa.

Chaim Shur is an elderly Israeli journalist, a magazine editor, and a believer both in human contact with the 'enemy' and the idea that a Palestinian state might be formed from Gaza and the West Bank of the Jordan.

### Cause

There are hints that such a compromise might be acceptable to Miss Hamzeh, though in her heart she believes that the whole country belongs not to the Israelis, but to the Palestinians.

When Mr Shur persuades Miss Hamzeh to visit him in Israel the

stage is set for a most moving personal drama. But the Palestinian is wracked by bitter sobs as she sees her family home in Haifa.

There is a further estrangement when host and guest are brought together in debate, with the differences between them widening into a gulf. It confirms the view of a sympathetic Israeli expert: whenever such debates become adversarial, that is the end of the dialogue.

Perhaps it was female curiosity, perhaps generous-heartedness, but Miss Hamzeh changes her mind and pays a visit to Mr Shur's kibbutz to meet his family.

After some polite, even stilted, exchanges, *Talking To The Enemy* at this point became almost unbearably moving. The Israeli wife and mother, with none of the debating ability of her husband or their guest, recalls something that is clearly never far from her mind: the death in action of her 22-year old paratrooper son.

Bursting into tears, she tells the Palestinian girl, 'War means that when the

door opens, in a split second the world shatters. Someone is there with the fateful news. That is all war means to me.' Both women are now weeping as the mother repeats to herself, and to the enemy holding tightly to her hand: 'I never had any hate. I never had any hate...'

I had the irrational wish that this scene could have been shown last night, immediately after the news on every TV station in the Middle East.

The Margaret Mead Film Festival, at the American Museum of Natural History, included some of the smartest, funniest and most moving films I've seen this year. Readers who are looking for a really good time at the movies might keep in mind the following sample of the festival's fifty-three films. With luck, they will turn up in other festivals, in schools, on television — wherever people understand that “documentary” and “en-

tertainment” are not antithetical concepts.

*Talking to the Enemy*, by Mira Hamermesh, records a visit to Israel by a young Palestinian activist. Now a resident of Washington, D.C., where she works under a photograph of herself shaking hands with Yasir Arafat, she is the granddaughter of Hassan Shukri, for many years the mayor of Haifa. In 1987, she agreed to visit Israel at the invitation of an elderly kibbutznic who is active in the peace movement — a man who, as it happens, grew up in Haifa on Hassan Shukri Street. It would be useless, and no doubt redundant, to recount here the political differences that separate the two. The film does not disguise their conflict; indeed, toward the end, the Palestinian flatly declares the situation to be insoluble. Yet the human connection between these people has grown so strong that, moments later, the Israeli's wife and the Palestinian are weeping in each other's arms. At this point, it does not matter that the film, in formal terms, is a bit muddled. By helping to bring these people together, and by providing a link between them and an audience, Mira Hamermesh has brought out the most humane possibilities of both her subjects and her medium. There wasn't a dry eye in the screening room.

# TELEVISION & RADIO

## BRIEFING

### A Palestinian in Israel

**TALKING TO THE ENEMY: VOICES OF SORROW AND RAGE** (9.00 C4) is a documentary recording the occasion of one journalist's visit to see another. The visitor is a young Palestinian, Muna Hamzeh (right), the host an older Israeli, Chaim Shur (left) and the occasion a provocative invitation following a first meeting in the US.

The film is simply gripping. The only emotion the family and their guest can truly share is

grief. She has no sense of conciliation — '2,000 years of the Jewish dream, that means absolutely nothing to me'. And they, who lost a son in battle, dream of peace somehow.

*Maids And Madams*, about apartheid, won for film-maker Mira Hamermesh the 1986 Prix Italia for documentary. This is the second of what she now plans as a trilogy. Her next stop should be Ireland.

W Stephen Gilbert



## TELEVISION / Fiona Maddocks on a youthful grilling of Michael Grade

MICHAEL GRADE sat solid and impassive, like the wall of a squash court, impertinent little questions hurtling at him from all directions: did you jump from the BBC or were you pushed, Mr Grade? Did you leave because you lost control of news? What are your qualities? (Recognizing talent, if you wondered.) And has Mary Whitehouse influenced your decision-making?

The young, mainly Scottish, audience in BBC Scotland's lively and wide-ranging *Open to Question* (BBC 2) were quite puffed out by their verbal footwork by the end of the game, while Mr Grade, ever courteous and self-possessed, had scarcely to twitch a red-socked toe. He sat, chin in hand, listening carefully to each question as if tackling it for the first time, although, inevitably, we had heard many of the answers before.

Grade aired his views on television violence, DBS (satellite broadcasting) and censorship with channel-flicking speed, denying as "mischievous speculation" the rumours of his jealousy towards John Birt, the BBC's recently appointed Deputy Director General, and remaining impervious to

### An audience takes the Michael

barbs about his well-developed habit of swapping jobs and viewpoints.

A man with bristle-brush hair suggested that Grade, a self-confessed populist, was ill-equipped to sustain Channel 4's impressive arts and culture record; Grade reminded his audience of *The South Bank Show* and other pioneering arts programmes from his London Weekend Television days. And moments later, to prove he could take on any Channel 4 commissioning editor in the culture stakes, he name-dropped Michelangelo and Rodin as if they were old friends.

Hadn't *Wogan* trivialized the BBC's output, one girl demanded waspishly. Here was Michael Grade's chance to confirm his unparalleled talent as an

honest-to-God opportunist: "I'm sorry you don't like *Wogan* — watch Channel 4!" So persuasive was his smile, so boundless his charm, he could well dent BBC ratings at a blow.

*Talking to the Enemy: Voices of Sorrow and Rage* was the second film in an envisaged triptych by the British director Mira Hamermesh, whose film about apartheid, *Maids and Madams*, won a well-deserved Prix Italia two years ago.

A young Washington-based Palestinian journalist, Muna Hamzeh, by chance meets Chaim Shur, a senior Israeli journalist, and after great deliberation accepts his invitation to visit his family's home and kibbutz in Israel. The film recorded this visit, their painful friendship and the irreconcilable differences which ultimately drove a deeper wedge between them. Her tears, as she stared at the Jerusalem house which was once her home, had a bitter sorrow which knows no easy solution.

It was a fine and deeply troubling hour's television, which, by observing private anguish, said more about the Arab-Israeli conflict than any reportage or news analysis ever could.

one or other of the lightning wars. Perhaps a small bridge was built, but the main memory I have is of the Arab girl's eyes, clouded by her own tears and also by an immutable glare of hate, as she visited her childhood home — now, for her, unreachably deep into Israel. Suddenly, the bridge seemed to creak.

Elsewhere in the week there were a few immensely moving documentaries. On Tuesday, in **Talking to the Enemy** on Channel 4, a militant Palestinian agreed to go to a kibbutz, to meet Israelis campaigning for an equable end to the killing. She clearly liked the people she met, placing her hand on the knee of a Jewish mother who wept at the memory of her son, killed during

Equally moving, but also remarkably joyous, was Pattie Coldwell's film **Remember Terry** (BBC2, Thursday), in which she documented the last weeks in the life of Terry Madeley, a gay Aids victim she befriended during the sturdy Aids week TV campaign earlier this year. Coldwell's easy, no-nonsense manner was a delight. "Can you catch asthma from this?" she grinned, after trying out Terry's oxygen mask.

THE OBSERVER

**Talking to the Enemy** (Channel 4) was a remarkable exploration of the personal dimensions of the Arab-Jewish conflict. It was an account of the relationship between a young Palestinian journalist, Muna Hamzeh, and an Israeli magazine editor, Chaim Shur. They originally met on neutral ground, in Washington, and the film traced the painful course of Muna's visit to Israel and the kibbutz where Shur lives with his family.

General de Gaulle used to delight in reminding journalists that 'nations have no friends, only interests'. This is fine for diplomats and statesmen, but cold comfort for ordinary citizens, who are torn between, on the one hand, the requirements of nationalist ideologies and, on the other, their simple desire to make friends — or at any rate to get along — with their neighbours. 'Talking to the Enemy' was memorable because it highlighted two individuals riven by these contradictions. It was both moving and depressing; moving because one felt that the emotions displayed by the characters were not simply aimed at the camera; and depressing because one can envisage no political solution to the tragedy of the West Bank and the Gaza

Strip, a tragedy in which people who were once the victims of tyranny now find themselves behaving like tyrants. Much the same kind of film could be made about Northern Ireland, and it would have much the same effect on viewers.