Film Review


Captain Abu Raed, a film set in Amman that explores the lives of its inhabitants, particularly its working class residents, integrates social critique with empathetic depictions of individual struggles, losses, frustrated desires, dreams, and achievements. It is humanistic and tender but also ethically uncompromising and unafraid to confront disturbing truths and repressed social injustices. A highly mature work that is dignified without being self-conscious, esthetically intense without being overbearing, Captain Abu Raed packs a powerful emotional punch that is well earned and genuine. It gently urges the viewer to consider the place of the weak and the vulnerable in society, the intrinsic quality of human dignity, and the need to challenge oppressive social norms that tyrannize individuals into unbearable social conformity.

This film does justice to childhood and to children in an exceptional way. It honors and relishes their imaginations and willingness to believe as well as their playfulness and openness, while acknowledging the ways in which the injustices children are exposed to impinge upon their freedom and have a profoundly damaging impact.

The child actors mostly hail from Jordanian orphanages, and their authentic interactions and diverse personalities contribute to the film’s verisimilitude. Its unique fusion of depicting hard-edged social realities and the limitations that they present, with a vision of fantasy that is never a mere form of escapism, but rather a means to empowerment, human connection, and self-liberation, is extremely compelling.

Abu Raed is not a captain. He is something far more prosaic: a janitor at Amman’s international Airport. He is a dignified and cultured man, a man of principles and intelligence, but of limited financial means. He has lost his wife and his son, and lives alone in a simple but elegant Amman apartment. There is a rueful quality to his character but also a capacity for warmth, a strong ethical sensibility, and the desire to break out of the privacy and loneliness of his life and to reach out to others.
One day at work Abu Raed retrieves a discarded cap of an airline captain in the trash. On his way home, as he approaches his apartment wearing the cap on his head, a child from the neighborhood sees him, and excitedly asks him if he is a pilot. He explains that he is not, but the child refuses to believe him, insisting enthusiastically that he must be a pilot. Abu Raed has this interaction a few times and each time is unwilling to play along with the child's fantasy. Eventually, he allows himself to do so, setting the stage for one of the most stunning scenes of the film in which Abu Raed and the neighborhood children alike are exhilarated and freed by his tales of travels to distant lands.

Most of the neighborhood children succumb easily to Abu Raed's stories. They become absorbed in the alternate worlds that he spins for them high atop Amman at the Citadel, and while they walk through Amman's alleys and streets. He is their hero and their source of inspiration.

But one child is defiantly unmoved. Murad is an incorrigibly sullen boy, unconvinced that Abu Raed is really a pilot, and eager to prove that Abu Raed, like the children themselves, is a poor, simple man who does not merit the attention and energy of the children, and who is just as economically and existentially trapped as they are.

Murad punctures the fantasy that Abu Raed and the children have created together, bringing some of the children to the airport to test Abu Raed's claims of being a pilot who travels the world. Murad's suspicions are confirmed with an almost perverse sense of vindication on his part and the children are deeply disappointed as they discover Abu Raed cleaning the airport facilities. There is no captain's hat on his head and there is nothing glamorous about his work. He has deceived them and they have deceived themselves.

But Murad's bitterness and the cruelty with which he cuts off the shared fantasy is not the function of a malicious child with a penchant for meanness. Murad's despondency and lack of faith in life, and in the possibility of transcending the stark realities of his family and his neighborhood stem primarily from living in an oppressive reality, in which his father beats him and his mother, and he fears for their physical safety. Abu Raed lives near Murad, and hears the shouting and the beating and grows increasingly concerned. With time, Abu Raed develops a relationship with Murad which slowly softens Murad's hardness as Murad realizes that Abu Raed is a man with a great sense of care and compassion.

With the assistance of Nour, a beautiful, posed and self-confident female pilot in her 30s whom Abu Raed befriends, Abu Raed finds a way to help Murad, his mother, and Murad's brother, and ensure their safety. The development of