



בין גדרות

Bein gderot

Between Fences

Avi Mograbi

Producer Avi Mograbi, Camille Laemle. **Production companies** Avi Mograbi (Tel Aviv, Israel), Les Films d'Ici (Paris, France). **Written and directed by** Avi Mograbi. **Director of photography** Philippe Bellaïche. **Editor** Avi Mograbi. **Music** Noam Enbar. **Sound** Avi Mograbi.

DCP, colour. 85 min. Hebrew, Tigrinya.

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Holot is a detention centre in the Israeli desert near the Egyptian border. It houses asylum-seekers from Eritrea and Sudan who can't be sent back to their own countries, but who have no prospects in Israel either thanks to the country's policies. Although it's technically not a prison, the roll call three times daily and isolated location make it into a virtual one. Enter Chen Alon and Avi Mograbi, who decide to initiate a theatre workshop with these people in the most precarious of situations. Following the principles of the "Theatre of the Oppressed," which sees itself as an aesthetic route to political and social change, scenes from the asylum-seekers' own lives form the starting point for the process.

This approach gives the asylum-seekers the opportunity to address their own experiences of forced migration and discrimination and to confront an Israeli society that has decided to view those seeking protection as dangerous infiltrators. When a few Israelis show up, the dynamic changes. Can role-playing and the shifts in perspective it brings help foster a more profound understanding of other points of view? This is a film full of open questions.

Annette Ling

Refugees' stories, from then and now

Before we started making *Bein gderot*, I imagined a group of African asylum-seekers in Israel performing vignettes based on the Jewish refugee experience in the first half of the 20th century. Such a performance, I thought, could help Israelis to understand and identify with the African refugee experience in the first half of the 21st century – some 50,000 victims of which are seeking asylum in our country. I had in mind my grandmother, who fled Nazi Germany with her husband and daughters in 1933 and took refuge in Palestine during the British Mandate. On the one hand, the process that Chen Alon, Philippe Bellaïche and I went through working with the asylum-seekers detained at Holot moved us away from the Jewish narrative – as our initial idea to tell the asylum-seekers' story through our story proved unseemly. On the other hand, through the asylum-seekers, we came into direct contact with the contemporary versions of our own grandparents, running for their lives, here and now, in this day and age. *Bein gderot* tries to tell the story of Eritreans and Sudanese living in Israel with no legal status. It also addresses the great difficulty of stepping into someone else's shoes and trying to understand what it means to be a refugee: forced to flee and leave it all behind; which, if you will, was also my grandmother's story.

Avi Mograbi

"I am not sure that our empathy is enough"

In Bein gderot we learn that some 50,000 asylum-seekers have entered Israel since 2007. According to international convention, they cannot be sent back to their countries, but have no prospects whatsoever in Israel and are being put in a detention facility. What is their political situation; what rights and what options do they have?

Avi Mograbi: The African asylum-seekers staying in Israel are in a horrific situation because they have basically no rights. They are not recognised by the state as refugees even though Israel is a signatory to the UNHCR refugee convention, meaning that they have to check the applications of asylum-seekers. Israel hardly checks those applications, thus the African asylum-seekers are staying in Israel on three-month visas that have to be renewed. They have no right to work although they do work. Strangely enough, courts have decided not to punish people who give them work because they acknowledge that Israeli law is incompatible with humanity. So they work, but it's illegal for them to work. And what the state has done in order to try to push them out of the country – to make them leave and return to their countries where they face dangers of genocide and imprisonment – is to create an 'open' detention centre called Holot in the desert where 3,760 asylum-seekers (almost ten percent of the asylum-seekers in Israel) are now detained. It's a prison, but it's an open prison. They can walk out, but they have no right to work. Because they have no money, they can't go anywhere and they have to sleep on site and have a roll call once a day, which makes going away without permission impossible.

What are the living conditions like in Holot? How do the people detained there spend their time?

It's a prison. People share rooms with ten beds and the food, according to testimonies and photographs taken inside, is quite terrible and not sufficient. During daytime they can

walk out of this detention centre and spend their time in the desert. During winter, it's extremely cold outside. They have nothing to do – there are no educational programs, the medical service is very poor, their treatment is limited almost completely to paracetamol for anything that they have. It is a place that was constructed in order to make those who are detained there want to leave. And the only direction allowed or possible to leave in is the direction of the countries they fled from. Another option is what is called here a 'third country', namely either Uganda or Rwanda, which is where some of those who agreed to leave voluntarily have gone. In those countries, their refugee status is not recognised, not accepted, and they find themselves starting from zero in looking for a place where they can stay and survive – namely, starting a new journey from Uganda or Rwanda in the direction of Libya and Europe.

The theatre director Chen Alon and you started a theatre workshop in Holot. What were your expectations prior to starting it? What were the expectations of the people participating?

When this project started, it wanted to stage Jewish refugee stories with African asylum-seekers. Then I met Chen Alon, the theatre director whose expertise is in the method of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, and the whole project changed because the idea was to base the project on the stories and the history of the asylum-seekers themselves. And so when we started the workshop we hoped to have people wanting to participate; to do theatre, but also to do something that would be more than the nothing that Holot, the detention facility, proposes. In a way, we didn't have any expectations. But of course we did. We didn't just go there every week for almost a year and a half without any expectations. The fact that now, a year and a half later, there is a play that is touring different venues in Israel (following a supreme court ruling, all the people we met in Holot have been released because the detention period was limited to a year), is something we never imagined. We definitely didn't expect to meet such amazing people as you can see in the film. My choice to work in theatre was a way to meet people and to try to see how their stories can be staged.

What are the possibilities and limitations of theatre in that situation?

Obviously, when people are in prison, they have very few choices. So everything they choose to do is extremely limited. We met probably around fifty or sixty people in the workshop meetings. Many of them just came for a few times and then disappeared; maybe they were not interested in what we were doing, and maybe because they were deeply depressed. And of course, maybe making theatre looked a bit strange to them. I mean, how could theatre change their lives or how could theatre save them from where they are detained? But eventually, after many, many months of working and insisting and not disappearing, we succeeded in creating a small group of people who did want to do theatre or to find a way to tell their stories other than in the form of a testimonial. I'm not sure they had too many expectations but I think that all of us found a little space that was open for anything there and I hope – I think – they enjoyed it.

During the narrative of the film, a few white Israelis join the workshop. There's a discussion about whether changing roles can lead to a deeper understanding of the situation of the other side. Do you think theatre is a way of achieving this?

The question of changing roles or being able to step into another person's shoes, to understand his history or story by experiencing his story, is a very fundamental question. Can we really identify with another person? With another person's story? Or can we only understand another person's story but not really see or understand deeply or really take with us or feel what it means to be in the other person's situation? I think basically – and that is something that I've done previously in my own films – that role-play, where you try to see yourself in the role of another, is a very educational method. If you start being considerate, not as yourself but maybe as your opponent, and you start thinking of what it means to look at yourself and not at another; these are moments when maybe your understanding grows. But I'm not sure that, when people are in a very deep hole, and cannot find a way out, our empathy is enough and that we can really understand and identify. This is a question that was raised within the theatre workshops because in theatre you play roles; you play people who are not necessarily you. And when those people are next to you and they have a story that you cannot even start to imagine you would experience, well... The question is whether the exchange of roles, whether trying to play another person's role is not just another game or play of us, the privileged, thinking we can identify with the underprivileged.

Bein gderot is different from many of your other films in that for once, you as a citizen of Israel and as a political activist are not the focus. How did the decision to do things that way come about?

When the theatre workshops started, I realised that the stage has to be completely abandoned by me, by us, the people who have a secure life, and that it belongs to people who encounter these horrific circumstances that we cannot really understand. And once they have taken over leading the workshop, there's a certain moment in the film where they start staging Awet's story which becomes – because so many people participated in writing the story – a generic story of life in Eritrea and why people flee from there. It was very clear, and it was all done in Tigrinya so Chen and I could not understand what they were saying. It was all filmed with great intelligence by Philippe Bellaïche. So at a certain point they took the stage and we tried as much as possible (and I also tried in the editing of the film) to let them tell their story, rather than me telling their story. So, yeah, for once I don't stick my big red nose in the camera and talk about my agony as a filmmaker and activist, and other people who don't have red noses tell their stories and I'm giving them the service of hopefully not distorting them too much.

Interview: Annette Lingg, January 2016



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Avi Mograbi was born in 1956 in Tel Aviv. He studied art history at Hamidrasha Art School and philosophy at Tel Aviv University before starting to work in 1982 as first assistant director on various Israeli and international film projects. Since 1989 he has directed around twenty of his own films.

Films

1989: *Deportation* (11 min.). 1994: *The Reconstruction (The Danny Katz Murder Case)* (50 min.). 1997: *Eich hifsakti lefached velamadeti lehov et Arik Sharon/How I Learned to Overcome My Fear and Love Arik Sharon* (61 min., Berlinale Forum 1998). 1999: *Yom Huledet Same'Ach, Mar Mograbi/Happy Birthday, Mr. Mograbi* (77 min., Berlinale Forum 1999), *Relief* (5 min., Loop). 2000: *At the back* (32 min.), *Will You Please Stop Bothering Me and My Family* (3 min., Loop). 2002: *August* (72 min., Berlinale Forum 2002), *Wait, It's the Soldiers, I'll Hang Up Now* (13 min.). 2004: *Detail* (8 min., Berlinale Forum Expanded 2004), *Details 2&3* (9 min.), *Detail 4* (5 min.). 2005: *Nekam achat mishtey eynay/Avenge But One of My Two Eyes* (100 min.), *Details 5-10* (13 min.). 2006: *Mrs. Goldstein* (9 min.). 2008: *Z32* (82 min.). 2009: *Details 11-13* (11 min.). 2012: *Once I Entered a Garden* (100 min.). 2016: *Bein Gderot*.