



FILM: **THE BANDS VISIT**

FDG RATING: 3.5 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Eran Kolirin: *director, writer*
Ronit Elkabetz: *actress, Dina*
Sasson Gabai: *actor, Lieutenant-colonel Tawfiq Zacharya*
Saleh Bakri: *actor, Haled*

DATE: August 18, 2018

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE BANDS VISIT**

Israel's film, *The Bands Visit* could have been a serious Oscar contender in 2007 except that it contained more than 50% dialog in English which eliminated it from the foreign language category, a restriction the film maker was not aware of. It received great reviews at the time, premiered as an off Broadway musical in December 2016, opened on Broadway in November 2017, and was the biggest winner at the June 2018, 72nd Annual Tony Awards winning ten golden globes, including Best Musical, making it one of the most Tony-winning musicals in history. A charming, offbeat story, places a band of lost Arab musicians at a road-side café in a desolate, Israeli desert town. In this unexpected encounter, we see language and culture almost harmonize rather than clash for a brief moment in time. The story was timeless and timely which is why we chose it for the July film discussion.

It's the mid 1990s when the eight men of the Egyptian Alexandria Ceremonial Police Orchestra arrive in Israel by mistake. They have been booked by an Arab cultural center in Petah Tikva, but through a miscommunication (Arabic has no "p" sound, and regularly replaces it with "b"), the band takes a bus to Beit Hatikva, a fictional town in the middle of the Negev Desert. There is no transportation out of the city that day, and there are no hotels for them to spend the night in. We see very few Israeli townspeople, those few are wary but curious seeing the 8 strange men in sky-blue uniforms with gold braid on their shoulders and musical instruments in tote. Their leader, Lieutenant-colonel Tawfiq Zacharya, with a perpetually dour expression, crosses the street and asks the woman at the cafe for directions to the Arab Cultural Center. She looks at him as if he stepped off a flying saucer. "Here there is no Arab culture," she says. "Also, no Israeli culture. Here there is no culture at all." The attractive cafe owner, Dina, offers to feed them and with reluctant graciousness, to stay the night at her apartment, at her friends' apartment, and in the restaurant.

The pace is purposely slow underscoring the hesitancy of each of the characters to socialize with an "enemy" and the strained communications in both language and culture. Old photos on the café wall stir up memories of the war which Tawfiq notices and purposely, nonchalantly hangs his hat on the picture frame corner to hide the image. Small comic moments lighten the mood of the film such as when the young, handsome Egyptian band member, Haled, looking for at least a semblance of night excitement, tags along with an Israeli teenager to a local ice skating rink. As they both sit on the bench, he finds himself coaching the shy teen how to make initial advances to the even shyer young girl sitting next to him. At the same time, Dina has persuaded the uptight Tawfiq to accompany her to a restaurant for a snack, where they each slowly reveal some of their past to each other exposing sadness and loneliness. As each scene plays out, we see more similarities than differences, and sincere gestures of kindness. In the morning, the band reassembles and leaves.

All of us enjoyed the great characters in the film, and appreciated the freshness, ambiguity, and poignancy. It was exceptionally well-written, maintaining a perfect balance transforming two "enemies," Arabs and Israelis, into ordinary people living ordinary lives with hopes, disappointments, and moments that transcend their differences. We welcomed *The Bands Visit* with a melodious score of 3.5 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)

Footnote: The film's writer-director, Eran Kolirin, told Indiewire in 2008 that he was reading a travel book in which the author related how he came to Israel by car for the first time and, becoming stressed and disoriented, ended up in the small city of Netanya instead of Tel Aviv. Because of this mistake, he has a conversation with a girl at the information desk at the hotel. That's what inspired the movie.

See you at the movies!

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