



A film by Tawfik Abu Wael

An ATASH Partnership production

Israel / Palestine 2004  
109' / colour / 35mm  
Anamorphic 2:35:1 / Dolby SR

In Arabic with English subtitles

Certificate 15

(certified 15 due to bonus features contained in the DVD - feature certificate 12A)

DVD bonus features:

- "Diary of a Male Whore", award-winning short film by director Tawfik Abu Wael
  - Interview with the director
    - Theatrical trailer
    - Stills gallery

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**UK Theatrical Release**

**25<sup>th</sup> November 2005**

**The ICA Cinema, London and at selected cinemas across the country**

**UK DVD Release**

**24<sup>th</sup> July 2006**

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## Synopsis

Winner of the International Critics Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, this beautiful and powerful debut feature from the brilliant young Arab filmmaker, Tawfik Abu Wael, is also an important groundbreaking collaboration between a Palestinian writer/director and an Israeli producer, financiers and crew - the first of its kind.

Abu Shukri and his family have settled alone in a valley far from their home town. Tyrannical father, Shukri rules the home with an iron fist, forcing his wife and three children to burn fires all day to make charcoal. When he decides to build a pipeline to bring fresh water to their home, it awakens their instinct for freedom, but carries with it tragic consequences for the entire family.

Featuring haunting music, stunning cinematography, and incredibly moving performances from the non-professional cast, 'Atash' is a complex, assured and vivid first feature from an exciting filmmaker, and one to watch for the future.



## Cast

**Abu Shukri** Hussein Yassin MAHAJNE

**Um Shukri** Amal BWEERAT

**Gamila** Roba BLAL

**Halima** Jamila Abu HUSSEIN

**Shukri** Ahamad Abed EL GANI

## Crew

**Written and directed by** Tawfik ABU WAEL

**Cinematographer** Assaf SUDRY

**First assistant director** Shabtai YITZHAK

**Art director** Boaz KATZENELSON

**Editor** Galit SHAKED - SHAUL

**Sound recordist** Maxim SEGAL

**Costumes** Efrat MEIRAV

**Original Score** Wissam M. GIBRAN

**Sound track designers** Ronen NAGEL, Oded RUSKIN

**Producer** Avi KLEINBERGER

**Associated producer** Baher AGBARIYA

**With participation of** Yhoshua Rabinovitch Fund for Arts Tel-Aviv Film Project,

Hot Vision Ltd., Hubert Bals Fund

## Tawfik Abu Wael - Director

Tawfik Abu Wael was born in the Palestinian town of Um El-Fahem in Israel in 1976. He graduated from Tel Aviv university where he studied film directing. From 1996 to 1998 he worked in the film archive of Tel Aviv university. From 1997 till 1999 Tawfik taught drama at Hassan Arafe school in Jaffa.

## Filmography

1997	BREAD, HASHISH AND THE MOON - 11mn
1998	I LEAVE, YOU STAY - 8mn
1999	INTELLECTUAL IN GARBAGE - 2mn
1998	CHARACTERS - 4mn
1999	DIARY OF A MALE WHORE / Yawmiat Ahir - 16mn
2000	TAWFIK ABU WAEL - 14 min
2001	WAITING FOR SALLAH EL-DIN - documentary - 53mn Festivals 6e Biennale des Cinemas Arabes, Paris 2002 Arab Screen Independent Film Festival Doha / Qatar 2002 DocAviv, Tel-Aviv 2001 International Documentary Film Festival Munich 2002 Mostra Internazionale Del Cortometraggio Montecatini / Italy 2002

## Festivals for ATASH

*Best Film, Jerusalem International Film Festival 2004*  
*Best Film, International Film Festival Corsica 2004*  
*Special Jury Prize (Biennale des Films Arabes), Paris Film Festival 2004*  
*Best Cinematography, Israeli Film Academy 2004*  
*Best Cinematography, Mostra de Valencia 2004*  
*London Film Festival 2004*  
*Galway Film Fleadh 2005*  
*Cambridge Film Festival 2005*

# Interview with Tawfik Abu Wael

## **Where did the idea of the film come from?**

I was up in the hills near my village, Um El-Fahem, in a car with a friend of mine. It was dark and raining. The only light came from the car's headlights. We were talking to kill time. He told me about a conflict between two families in the village. It was a conflict regarding a water pipe. I was struck by the subject and I already felt the first sensations for a film about a man who'd spend his time to protect his pipe from a mysterious danger. ATASH was born.

## **Is ATASH a political film?**

There is no film without politics. But in ATASH I'm dealing with the relationships between human beings. I didn't want to use the conflict to make a movie, I made a film about human beings. Relationships between people are politics. That's where I settle my personal political goal.

## **Where is the conflict ? Where are the Israelis ?**

The conflict is between the characters, in their soul, in the complexity of their relationship, in their conscience. My film is settled in a valley by the village where I live, Um El-Fahem, a village where the Israeli is a foreigner. For us, the Israeli is the State, the boss for whom we work, the university where we study... In my film, I did show the world where I come from.

## **This place is deserted. What is this valley?**

I have known this place forever. It's part of the landscape where I live. For ATASH I specifically wanted to place the film there because it's a very cinematic location with amazing aesthetic possibilities. It's look like a no-where. By chance, it's a place where Tsahal (Israeli army) used to train for urban fighting, a fake Palestinian village. In Hebrew it's called a UFA - Urban Fighting Area. The land where this camp was built belonged to the inhabitants of Um El-Fahem until 1948, when it was definitively confiscated by the State of Israel. In 1998, there were violent altercations between the townspeople and the Israeli army which had extended its exercises to a larger area. After these fights, an agreement was signed with the army to stop training there. This place is deserted.

## **In the Arabic culture and language, Water is synonymous with Life. In your film, Water is the origin of the conflict, the modern element which will mark the beginning of the tragedy.**

I don't like symbolism. Progress and modernity are occidental notions. Personally, I don't refer to progress nor modernity, I talk about liberation of consciousness. Abu Shukri and Shukri, the father and the son symbolize these people, they cannot free themselves because they can't change themselves.

## **At one point, Shukri, the son, can choose to change. Although he chooses tradition, continuity. Is it a pessimistic vision?**

It's not a pessimistic vision, it's the way I see the world. For my character, there is no other choice than knocking himself on walls because he doesn't have any arm to fight back. My position isn't pessimistic, it's a call for liberation but the man can't do it.

## **That leads us to talk about the status of women in your film.**

On the surface, the women in the film appear to be repressed and helpless but, in fact, a woman's action initiate the entire plot and conflict. She's at the center. Without Gamila, there is

no film. In *ATASH*, a young woman ruins a family. According to the male culture depicted in the film, the family's honor is dependant on the daughter's behavior: she must obey the code of that culture. Abu Shukri - torn between his moral cultural duty, to kill his daughter, and his love for her- invents a third possibility: he removes his whole family to nowhere. Abu Shukri can't resign himself to kill his daughter or even let her die. He's a moral human being, a hero. Gamila is the one who gave him the opportunity to become a hero.

**The film makes us think about classical tragedy.**

I like tragedy very much because it makes the heroes face absurd choices. In a tragedy, whatever will be the choice, whatever he will decide, the hero will suffer. Generally, he chooses the solution that fits with his ethics. But this very choice leads him to the tragic situation. In fact, looking at the film in this perspective is the audience's choice, not mine.

**Why "Thirst"?**

"Thirst" is not only a title but also the atmosphere that surrounds the film. I talk about thirst for water, for food, for freedom, for sex, for eroticism, for love, for desire... Thirst for life.

## Press Quotes

**"Undoubtedly a beautiful film. Abu Wael is arguably the most exciting Arab film-maker to have emerged in more than a decade."**

*SIGHT & SOUND*

**"impressive... a bold, brave film."**

*Geoff Andrew - TIME OUT*

**"...often sublime...provocative, yet affecting..." (4 STARS)**

*David Parkinson – EMPIRE*

**"A confident, beautifully composed film"**

*Philip French - THE OBSERVER*

**"No more beautiful film presents itself...a superb central figure, alone worth the price of a ticket."**

*Derek Malcolm - EVENING STANDARD*

**"a meditative film...lyrical cinematography...affecting performances."**

*Ian Johns - THE TIMES*

**Critics' Choice**

*INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY*

**"Visually impressive"**

*Tim Robey – THE DAILY TELEGRAPH*

**"a complex, brooding film powered by an almost classical sense of tragedy"**

*METRO*

**"wonderfully poetic visual ideas...a thoroughly compelling fable."**

*CHANNEL 4*

'No Way Out' (published in Israeli daily, "Haaretz")

By Yitzhak Laor

"Atash" ("Thirst") is, in my opinion, one of the most beautiful films ever made in Israel, and certainly the most complex of them. Exploring the figure of the father and the act of patricide keeps it from being an "autobiographical movie." Stories about the father always reach more deeply into the filmmaker's culture and carry greater relevance for the viewers in their different cultural contexts. But this is not a "universal" movie, thank God, in the spirit of the distinction that Hebrew literary criticism used to make, laughably, between works of the "majority" and those of the minority. In other words: This is a minority film, in the most distinct sense of the term. Not only does it speak the language of a minority within a minority, but its cinematic language is itself a

genuine minority language - a language that Israeli directors, especially those who emerge like neatly wrapped bonbons from the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School in Jerusalem, are taught not to speak.

Small wonder that this brilliant new filmmaker once again hails from Tel Aviv University's penniless and dilapidated film department. They may not have pots of gold there, but they have creative freedom. Tawfik Abu Wael came from there, as did other young filmmakers before him, such as the late Rafi Bukai, Dalia Hager, Dover Kosashvili and others.

It is easy enough to commend Asaf Sudri's genius cinematography or Wisam M. Gibran's wonderful music. Before anything else, however, the excellence of the story should be noted, a fine story that grows out of the smoky, sooty landscape in which it is set. The heroes' sooty faces, black hands and smoky clothes are the raw material of which the faces are carved. Abu Wael manages to leap over a narrative hurdle that most local storytellers, especially filmmakers, find insurmountable: how to tell a story about more than one person, more than two, more than three, and to understand them in a whirlwind, each through the other's eyes.

Abu Wael, in the end, both solves the problem and does not. The father, the patriarch (Hussein Yassin Mahajne), stubborn and cowardly, proud and foolish, is expelled from the scene; he may even have been murdered by the son, Ahmed (Ahmed Abed Elrani). In one plot, the simple one that is the story of five people, a solution is found: The father is gone, and the son inherits his place. In the other story, nothing is resolved. The son becomes a father, and the future may promise a better kind of fatherhood; yet the dependence on him remains unchanged. If there is a tragic dimension to this work, it lies in the desire to cast out the father and in the hint that the desire to do without him has failed. There is no escaping the father, the film says; without him, there will be no world. But the world of the father is a cruel one. Three women expect the son to save them from the father. The son wants something else, but he takes the job.

A farmhouse, far from the village but also very close to it, near a forest that is really a pine grove, near a spring that is really a foul-smelling bog - that is where they flee, the family: the father, the mother (Amal Bweerat), the young son and two daughters. When did they flee? A decade ago. Life in that abandoned building, without water, without human contact, seems as though it has only just begun in this place of exile. And the opposite. The five earn a living by making coal: They burn trees that the father and son illegally chop down. The mother begs the father to return to the village, for the sake of the children, whom he loves. That love makes him ashamed of what happened to the older daughter, Jamila (Jamila Abu Hussein). That is why he forbids her to go out to the world, that is why he has exiled himself and his family. Her disgrace is his disgrace. And his disgrace is also the son's.

Deeper story

Here is the greatness of film narrative: In a handful of cinematic moments, the movie

constructs the father as a man who chose to flee heroically rather than harm his daughter for the sake of his honor. At other moments, especially when the daughter speaks, we understand that he is a coward, unable to face the village gossips and ill-wishers. At still other moments, Abu Wael hints at another, deeper story, an erotic story between father and daughter: When the father forces the daughter to put on the new dress he bought for her, the camera moves over his face, over her body, and from there outside, to the flames that suddenly catch the dress of the other daughter (Roba Blal). The spreading fire, the daughter crying for her mother's help, the father overseeing the efforts to put the fire out with sand, so that no coal will go to waste - all these create an eruption unrivaled in its power anywhere else in the movie. From here begins the road to the untangling: The older daughter runs away, the father brings her back in his loving paternal arms and locks her in the basement like a hate-filled man. The fight between the father and the adolescent son, in front of the women, makes way for the ending mentioned above.

Abu Wael never for a minute abandons the role of tragedian: The father must be killed, but at the same time, the preservation of what there is - honor, daughters, family life, the few belongings, souvenirs from the past, lovely clothes from an even more distant past - depends on the father. Without him, as the movie makes very clear, there is no chance. Over and over the father is implored to rent an apartment and live among people. Over and over the equation is posited (an equation of peasants, we might already say ahead of time): Your life is your piece of land. The desire to leave the remote, inhospitable place gnaws constantly at family and at us. Eventually, when the son replaces the father, he begins to supervise the coal-making work in that godforsaken landscape. The clinging - so the ending clearly proclaims - the fear of being deprived, creates a dependency on authoritarianism.

Abu Wael is very careful not to get dragged into a "political film." But can a native of Umm al-Fahm - an Arab town in the state of Israel, five minutes' drive from the Palestinian West Bank city of Jenin, an hour's drive from Tel Aviv - make a film and not be political? Here lies the power of the movie, which is tragic: It grasps the impossibility of extricating oneself from the clutches of evil, and yet fights like hell to break away. The movie is strewn with signs that also, on another level, construct a political story. The director chose "nonprofessional" actors. Not only do their anonymous faces come to us "blank," empty of prior meaning, but the director wisely uses a dialect of Arabic spoken only in central Palestine. True, only some of the viewers will recognize this, just as only some of them will understand the link between the name of the director's hometown, Umm al-Fahm (literally, "mother of coal"), the past of the village in the movie, and the exiled family's occupation: coal-making. The same holds for the abandoned "farmhouse" - in reality, an abandoned army facility, where the Israel Defense Forces once conducted exercises in what is euphemistically known as a "military operation in urban terrain," that is, a battle fought between village houses. The place is thus constructed as a kind of metaphor for the IDF's creation of the layout of a Palestinian village, on expropriated land. One of the daughters collects shell casings, another a sign whose significance some of the audience will not register. The father chats briefly with a passerby, who warns him about the authorities. The land,

after all, is not his. The father replies: The land is mine, and I will not leave it. The guest says: Pardon my language, but you are fucking with an ancient dick.

In this moment of insistence lies the key to the contradiction that the son, who watches the father, is forced to inhabit. Here the movie touches on a theme of Palestinian literature and cinema: the disgrace of the fathers. Abu Wael manages to insert this theme into a frame of his own: The father's disgrace is the son's punishment, or rather, the son's duty to continue clinging is a punishment from which there is no escape.