

# The Wanted 18: a tale of talking cows and Palestinian rebellion

Director and cartoonist Amer Shomali on his humorous - and risky - movie about a real-life uprising



Amer Shomali photographed outside his studio in Ramallah by Tanya Habjouqa for the Observer New Review.

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**I**t was quite terrifying,” says Amer Shomali of his decision to make a funny film (featuring talking cows) about a very serious situation (the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation in the late 80s and early 90s). “But I’m a cartoonist and humour is part of the way I see things. I believe that a nation that can’t make fun of its own

wounds will never be able to heal them. So first recognise the shithole you are in,” - the 33-year-old laughs - “then make fun of yourself.”

*The Wanted 18* tells the true story of a Palestinian committee in the town of Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem, that purchased a herd of cows from a friendly kibbutz owner and used them in a bid to undermine Israeli control. It was a step towards self-sufficiency beset by problems: Palestinians are not a cow-rearing people, which accounts for some agricultural hiccups along the way, and the Israeli authorities did not look kindly even on the smallest gestures of independence - the cows were declared “dangerous for the security of the state of Israel” and became fugitives from the law.

Recovering from flu at his home in Ramallah, Shomali, who has a great head of black curls and a sharp wit, tells me he first heard the story as a kid growing up in Syria. “I was born in Kuwait,” he explains, “but my family was kicked out in 1982 and forced to live in a Syrian refugee camp.” Though only six hours away by bus, Palestine was “like another dimension” for the young exile. “It didn’t seem like a real place that you could physically drive to.” Perhaps that’s why the cow story appealed to him: it was no less outlandish than the Palestine in his mind. It also struck a chord because his father’s family came from Beit Sahour and some of those involved were close relatives.

When he finally made it there aged 17, Shomali was disappointed to find that Beit Sahour was not quite the collectivist utopia he’d envisaged - as the uprising dwindled, so did the community spirit. “I thought it was this perfect place where everybody helps everybody else, but instead many of the people were obsessed with cars and brands and cared only about themselves.” Making the film over five years became a “window into the past” for Shomali. “It was a healing process for me to recreate this reality I’d missed.”

He achieves this using live action as well as animation - and, despite the misgivings of Canadian co-director Paul Cowan, humour plays a central part. “For him it was a bit dangerous to have a mother telling a story about her kid dying in a demonstration next to some animation of farting cows, but we needed this mix of sadness and comedy,” insists Shomali. “It was a risk, there was no guarantee it was going to work, but from what I hear,” - responses to the film at home and abroad have been extremely positive - “it seems like we pulled it off.”

*The Wanted 18* screens at the Human Rights Watch film festival in London on 23, 24 and 26 March

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