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LEBANON

Tales of the twice-displaced

By Jim Quilty

BEIRUT: Fatmeh Abu Khurj says leaving Damascus' Yarmouk camp reminded her of a scene from the television series "Al-Taghriba" (The Exodus). The 43-year-old library manager describes having fled her home with only the clothes on her back. She emerged from her house, assuming the streets would be empty, but found them full of people – other camp residents fleeing their homes with the few belongings they'd been able to collect.

For all the grieving and tragedy on people's faces, she was amazed to find the street utterly silent.

Khurj's family is from Safouriyya, in northern Palestine. Her flight from Yarmouk marks her third displacement – from Safouriyya to Ain al-Hilweh; from Ain al-Hilweh to Yarmouk; from Yarmouk to Sidon.

"I wondered, is it possible that we're experiencing the Nakba a second time?" she recalls. "But now it's worse. We have nothing left."

Another Yarmouk refugee, 27-year-old artist and musician Abu Ghaby, recalls camp residents were willing to tolerate all manner of privation – shelling from FSA positions, PFLP-GC positions and Syrian army positions; family members detained by anti-regime militants and pro-regime forces alike.

What broke the refugees' conviction to remain in Yarmouk, he continues, was the indiscriminate destruction caused by the strafing runs of the state's MiG fighter jets.

"History to the people of Yarmouk," he continues, came to be marked by "'Before the MiG' and 'After the MiG.'"

Abu Ghaby's family hails from Haifa. Nowadays he resides in Beirut.

The family of 10-year-old Hanin al-Shahabi comes from Safouriyya. She describes how, when her family fled Yarmouk, her parents intended to keep everyone together in a unit. Then her father suddenly dropped dead for no apparent reason, scattering his family to the four winds.

She bursts into tears shortly after commencing her tale, and remains in that state for the rest of her testimony – as do two other young women who appear to be her older sisters.

These are some of the figures who populate "We Cannot Go There Now, My Dear," the latest documentary film of Carol Mansour. The film will have its premiere at a one-off screening Thursday evening at Metropolis Cinema-Sofil.

The new film is concerned with the practical and existential challenges facing Syria's multiply

displaced Palestinian community.

In several respects it is a sequel to Mansour's 2013 doc "Not Who We Are," which took up the stories of several Syrians, from several walks of life, who found themselves in Lebanon after the Syria's 2011 revolution moved to insurrection, then civil war.

Produced by the Middle East Office of the Heinrich Boell Foundation – the social and cultural organization associated with the German Green Party – Mansour's film was researched by Muna Khalidi, who collaborated with the director to make "Not Who We Are."

The two films resemble one another not only in their subject matter and formal approaches but in the audiences they seem to be targeting. Mansour is an old hand at ensuring that her work is diffused in English and French as well as Arabic – this film takes its title from a line in "Refugee Blues," by the 20th-century British poet W.H. Auden.

Mansour's oeuvre is not primarily interested in entertainment. Insofar as her films take up stories of injustice, there is implicit in each the assumption that that an engaged, cosmopolitan audience is interested in the experiences she's collected and is able to use the information to do something.

How viewers respond to "We Cannot Go" depends on what they look for in documentary film, and Mansour's doc falls between stools of classification.

Like many of her past works, it isn't far removed from classical documentary in that its central core is a cluster of testimonials from Palestinians whose families had been displaced to Syria and who now find themselves someplace else – Lebanon and points west.

In classical documentary practice, however, the refugees' at times gut-wrenching testimonials have a counterpoint in the dispassionate historical-sociological account of an expert-sounding narrative voiceover (often accompanied by archival footage).

The history of how Palestinian refugees came to Syria and integrated into the pre-revolutionary Syrian polity and society – and how that contrasted with the experience of Palestinians in Lebanon – is a complex and fascinating one.

The Palestinians' experience of the two countries is highly informative of each host country and goes far to decode the social and cultural diffusion that has marked Palestine's several expatriate communities.

Details of how the Palestinian experience in pre-revolutionary Syria differed from that of Civil War and post-Civil War Lebanon is alluded to in Mansour's film, but only through the impressionistic recollections of her subjects.

Interested audience members who are new to this story will likely emerge from "We Cannot Go" feeling frustrated that the community's story hasn't been told in more depth.

Many doc-makers are skeptical of classical documentary's premises, especially the seemingly omniscient "voice of god" narrative – which feigns disinterest while assuming the narrative voices it reproduces are most authentic.

Mansour's informants provide diverse filters of age, gender and education through which their

refugee memories are refracted, yet their tales of multiple displacement are more marked by common experience than by diversity.

The younger generations who have never set foot in Palestine – the three young women from the Shahabi family, for instance – express a tearful nostalgia for life in the camps, frequently Yarmouk, which are the closest thing to Palestine they know.

The counterpoint to these emotional testimonials isn't the "voice of god" but neither is it the nicely framed stationary shots of landscape, or silent portrait shots of its characters – techniques that "creative documentary" has borrowed from feature film.

Instead, Mansour uses a lyrical narrative voiceover – penned by Egyptian-born Lebanese journalist and poet Sahar Mandour and adapted into English by Tarif Khalidi – that speaks for the refugee community as a whole.

Ultimately, though, the film is carried by its individuals. Take 67-year-old poet Yussef al-Terany. When his family fled Samakh in northwest Palestine for Deraa on Syria's southern border, he recalls, the only thing he brought with him was his mattress.

"The wool inside is from my grandfather's sheep in Samakh," he says. "I brought it out here with me. It's my wedding mattress."

"We Cannot Go there Now, My Dear" screens at Metropolis Cinema Sofil Thursday at 8:15 p.m. The projection will be followed by a panel discussion.

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