



ARTS

Edited by Stephen Bevis



Sex on a schtick in the desert

FESTIVAL FILM

The Band's Visit
Saleh Bakri, Ronit Elkabetz
Directed by Eran Kolirin
Review: Mark Naglazas

Irony abounds in *The Band's Visit*, a wry, bittersweet cross-cultural comedy about an Egyptian police band stranded in the Israeli boondocks.

But the biggest irony is the treatment *The Band's Visit* received from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which ruled it ineligible for the best foreign language Oscar because its dialogue is predominantly English.

The reason the Jewish and Arabic characters speak mostly in English in this Israeli production is that it's the only means the members of the band and the group of locals who come to their aid have of communicating.

In other words, Eran Kolirin's deservedly acclaimed debut feature is being punished for setting out to narrow the eternal gap between Jew and Arab, for seeking to find common ground through the use of amusingly broken English and thick, barely comprehensible accents that require subtitles to be understood (don't worry: they're supplied).

Kolirin shows his deft, downbeat Aki Kaurismaki-like approach in the funny opening scene in which the band, while arriving at Tel Aviv airport, remain locked in formation in their Disney-ish baby blue uniforms. Is their weirdly frozen bearing a sign of discipline or are they just bewildered at finding themselves in a country that's supposed to be their sworn enemy?

One of the group, the youngest and cockiest, hits the ground

running and cracks on to an attractive young woman in an information booth. But his pick-up schtick — "Do you like Chet Baker?" followed by a heartfelt rendition of *My Funny Valentine* — seems to come from another time and place.

The Egyptians have arrived to perform at an Arab cultural centre. The signs outside the airport, however, are no longer translated in Arabic (even though it is the language of a big portion of the population) so the band find themselves not in their appointed destination but an out-of-the-way desert settlement.

When their unsmiling leader Tewfig (a wonderfully doleful Sasson Gabai) wanders into a cafe in the windswept town and asks for the location of the Arab culture centre the bemused manager Dina (Ronit Elkabetz) takes great delight in telling them their town is no biblical oasis: "No Arab culture, no Israeli culture, no culture at all."

But the stunning Elkabetz delivers the line with such sass and undisguised sexuality, followed by an invitation for the band to stay the night until the bus arrives the next day, that the town's apparent lack of culture seems utterly beside the point.

Rather than the crass comedy of two cultures colliding with which we've become so familiar (see *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*) what Kolirin delivers is a sly, beautifully buttoned-down search for commonality between the stranded Egyptians and the initially wary Jews.

The delicacy of first-timer Kolirin's touch is most vividly on show in the touching sequence in which the Chet Baker-loving ladies'

man (Saleh Bakri) instructs an awkward local on how to romance a girl at a roller disco by sitting next to him and demonstrating his killer moves, Jacques Tati-style (he rubs the boy's leg, the boy rubs the girl's leg and so forth).

But the heart of the story is the tentative relationship between the hangdog band leader Tewfig and the Hebrew bombshell Dina (what such a woman could have done in steamy biblical epics of old boggles my mind).

Again, Kolirin does not opt for easy, crowd-pleasing romantic high jinks.

Rather, a heavy air of melancholy and disappointment and longing overhangs their every encounter, culminating in Dina's revelation that once upon a time she and her family loved watching Egyptian movies, especially those starring Omar Sharif.

This ripe, sexy, sarcastic woman with so much goodness and so much heart is stuck in a dry, barren land with no culture and no connection to the world around her.

She's yearning for love but the man who wanders into her life has his own problems, a heartbreakingly sad history that has blocked his mind and his heart.

Politics and religion are not mentioned once in *The Band's Visit* but this wise, beautifully crafted little comedy speaks volumes about the things that divide and, more importantly, the things that unite.

The Band's Visit is on at the Somerville Auditorium each night at 8.30 until Sunday. It is then at the Joondalup Pines for one week.

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Lovelorn: Ronit Elkabetz and Sasson Gabai play out doomed romantic dreams in *The Band's Visit*, a beautifully crafted comedy about the things that divide and unite