



# Strike out the Band

ROBERT W. WELKOS

Put yourself in writer-director Eran Kolirin's shoes. Your first feature-length, theatrical movie is receiving raves at film festivals around the world; critics applaud how it speaks with understated eloquence to the political realities of Israeli-Arab relations while noting how it also is infused with enough wise humour to make audiences nod and smile. And yet, the biggest controversy dogging your film is how much English dialogue it contains.

Late last year Kolirin's small-budget indie film, *The Band's Visit*, garnered headlines around the world for reasons that the 34-year-old Israeli filmmaker never envisioned when he set out to make a fictional story about a ceremonial Egyptian police band that winds up stranded for 24 hours in a dusty Israeli town.

*The Band's Visit* was ruled ineligible to compete in the foreign-language film category by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which governs the Oscars, because more than half the film's dialogue is in English. Academy rules, for instance, hold that for films to qualify in that category, their dialogue must be "predominantly in a non-English language".

Kolirin "stopped caring" about the controversy. "You know, you make a film, you make it with your heart and then it's like someone with some kind of geometrical scale is coming and making some measurements . . . and it has nothing even remotely to do with the thing I did."

Kolirin compares the dispute to a

songwriter's lyrics and somebody complaining: "Look, we read your song and it consists of three verbs and one adjective."

"You would say to them, 'Yes, you're right but you're not understanding the song'," Kolirin said. "Is this the correct way of evaluating a song? I don't know. It's strange."

Although the film is about an Egyptian police band, Kolirin used Israeli Arabs as the band members because, the director said, political realities would have made it impossible to hire an Egyptian cast.

Although he didn't see the movie as a political film, Kolirin did admit it conveyed a political message that addressed the cultural divide between Arabs and Jews in Israel. He noted that when he was growing up in Israel, he and his grandmother would often watch Egyptian soap operas on Israeli TV.

"That's something that has been kind of lost in the modernised, privatised, big media market," he said. "For me, Arab culture was inside our houses . . . Now, my wife's cousins, they all know Spanish because Spanish soap operas are very big in Israel right now. Why have we stopped buying our soap operas from Egypt and started buying our soap operas from Spain? It's a political question."

Kolirin said the story struck a chord with many Israelis because Israel remained a country questioning whether it was Western or Middle Eastern.

"It is a very young society," he said. "It does not have a real culture. There is a Jewish culture but not an Israeli culture. My question is: Who

am I? How much of me is European? How much of me is Arab? I belong to the Middle East and I'm losing this connection . . . The way I see it, Israel is living this crazy urge to be immersed in the West, to belong to the West, while it's obvious that it's in the Middle East. And I think it has a deep connection to the Middle East.

"On the other hand, everyone surrounding us — in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon — everyone wants to be in the West."

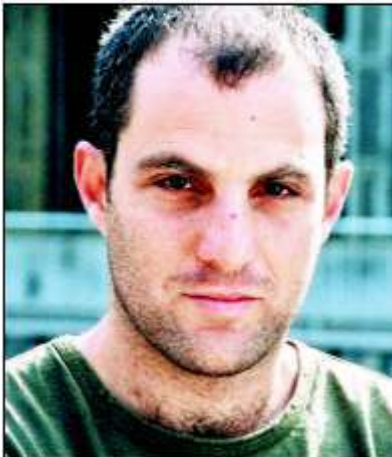
Despite the acclaim his movie has received in Israel, it also has come in for its share of criticism, particularly for a scene depicting a romantic tryst between a Jewish cafe owner (Ronit Elkabetz) and a handsome young Egyptian band member (Saleh Bakri).

"Some of them say, 'Yeah, again the Israeli woman is taking inside her bed an Arab man. Why does this always happen in Israeli movies?'" Kolirin said. "What I find interesting is that when people don't like something, they say, 'This is what always happens', even though I don't remember another movie with this happening."

The director lives in Tel Aviv and away from the camera, he likes to play guitar or Irish banjo but admits he isn't very good. "I play really bad. I am a frustrated musician," he said. "Doesn't this show in the movie?"

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



Director Eran Kolirin



Tryst: Ronit Elkabetz is at the centre of a controversial scene in The Band's Visit.