



A THIN LINE BETWEEN Love and Hate

Elle Flanders' first full-length feature film, Zero Degrees of Separation, explores the turbulent lives of two gay couples straddling the chasm between Israel and Palestine.

BY JOHN HOBBS

"I feel like this film chose me," muses lesbian filmmaker Elle Flanders, explaining the almost supernatural and certainly serendipitous beginnings of her first feature length film, *Zero Degrees of Separation*.

After receiving an e-mail from a friend about a gay couple—one Israeli, one Palestinian—effectively bridging the gap between their conflicting politics and forging a romantic relationship, Flanders was inspired to call the Israeli, Ezra, to ask if there was anything she could do to help them. A few minutes into their conversation, Ezra began to inquire about Flanders' family. "He said, 'Are you related to the Morrisons?'" and I said, 'Yeah,' then he was just like, 'I remember when you lived in Israel with your family in the '70s and you were a young girl living at your grandparents' house—I was the gardener,'" recalls Flanders, still seemingly astonished. It was this eerie coincidence, coupled with a discovery of archival video footage showing her idealistic grandparents first arriving in their new homeland, that inspired the filmmaker to pursue a feature-length film project.

The fruit of her filmmaking endeavors—*Zero Degrees of Separation*—is a highly-stylized documentary that follows the story of not one, but two gay couples whose romantic lives are faced daily with a barrage of Herculean obstacles: from Selim's constant arrests for crossing into in a restricted area to visit his partner to Edit explaining that her mother worries that Samira will slice Edit's throat in the middle of the night. Flanders juxtaposes these gritty real-life travails with archival footage of her idealistic grandparents, whose expectations of a peaceful and harmonic existence on the banks of the Mediterranean have never been realized, to create a riveting statement about the land that has been in near-constant turmoil since its inception.

"I wanted to bring a very nuanced and complex story to the screen so that we could walk away thinking that perhaps the Middle East is a little bit more complicated than our

[George W.] Bush-ite terms," says Flanders, who explains that her goal with the film was to get people thinking. "There are many films out there that are meant to get you thinking this way or motivated that way. I think that, for me, any kind of art proposal is just to get you thinking—not necessarily to get you to become an activist."

Despite the fact that the film follows two gay couples, Flanders did not aim to make a traditional gay documentary. "I wanted to start pushing queer cinema into a whole new realm. I don't know about you, but I don't go home to my lover every night and say, 'Oy, did I have a bad gay day!' I think being gay, like the Israel and Palestine thing, is a lot more complex than that."

The film, which has already snagged awards at several film festivals across Europe, has not been an easy sell in these conservative times. "Israel has swung so far to the right that anybody who has any kind of opposing ideas is just seen as way out there," explains Flanders, who posits a radical rethinking of the notion of the state of Israel. "I think we all need to be conscious of how we do things—not just now, but in the future—so that we don't end up in this place again. I think that Edit says it very clearly in the film when she says, 'We could've done it differently, but we didn't.'"

Flanders says that those who have seen the film have had nothing but positive feedback to give her. "They feel like they've had an experience and a journey and I think that as an artist and a filmmaker, I couldn't ask for anything more."

Catch Elle Flanders' award-winning documentary Zero Degrees of Separation at the National Geographic All Roads Film Festival taking place Sept. 28-Oct. 1 at the Egyptian Theatre, 6712 Hollywood Blvd., L.A., and the Aero Theatre, 1328 Montana Ave., Santa Monica. For the full festival schedule, go to www.nationalgeographic.com/allroads.