



on location
Berlin

The amazing *Paradise Now*, with Kais Nashif (left) and Ali Suliman as two Palestinian friends who become suicide bombers, reinforces Berlin's rep as a pointedly political festival.

Holier than Hollywood

The Berlin film festival's always edgy, but this year it's so politically hot, it seems to be openly mocking shallow Tinseltown By CAMERON BAILEY

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BERLIN—THERE'S ALWAYS A WAR ON at the Berlinale. You feel it. Whether it's Iraq, Bosnia, Rwanda or the eternal flame of the second world war, the raw facts of bombs and body counts always make their way into the theatre here. This year Berlin's main Competition section includes both *Hotel Rwanda* and *Sometimes In April*, the Rwandan genocide drama from Haitian director Raoul Peck (Lumumba). Japanese Emperor Hirohito is the subject of *The Sun*, from spooky-genius Russian director Aleksandr Sokurov (Russian Ark).

But the movie most likely to set off conflicts among the Potsdamer Platz chattering classes is *Paradise Now*. Directed by a Hany Abu-Assad, a Palestinian with an Israeli passport, it's the story of two West Bank friends re-

cruted to be suicide bombers. One day they're squabbling with their boss at the auto shop, the next they're being ritually shaved and cleansed for their mission.

Abu-Assad (Rana's Wedding) eases the story forward in a low-key, matter-of-fact way. There's none of the melodrama this material usually attracts. In fact, it feels more like a procedural. This is what it's like to record a martyr video. This is the chain of command. This is what happens when things go wrong and you're running around Nablus with a bomb locked to your torso.

Paradise Now starts with the daily humiliations of checkpoints and military occupation, only later in the film providing deeper glimpses into why two otherwise ordinary guys would turn their own bodies into bombs.

It's a remarkable film, even more so when you realize it was shot in the West Bank, with carnage unfolding almost daily. Six technicians—Germans,

by the way—left the shoot in Nablus after an Israeli missile attack hit too close to the set.

In Berlin, *Paradise Now* is both a point of principle and a red carpet occasion. It screens alongside American froth like *Hitch* and *In Good Company*. You'd almost suspect that that was part of the festival's politics: to ridicule Hollywood by setting it next to actual, engaged cinema.

But the reasons are more prosaic. This year Berlin screens 343 films from 52 countries. It'll sell over 400,000 tickets to the public. It's a big tent. It's a place where Korean director Park Chan-Wook (*Oldboy*) will sell American rights to his third revenge thriller in the Market, while over in the Forum they're playing Peter Hutton's stunning Icelandic landscape film, *Skagafjörður*, and a new Janet Cardiff/George Bures-Miller videowalk called *Ghost Machine*.

It's a place where, as radical as Pa-

radise Now can appear, it's the big, glossy Palestine movie next to something like *Zero Degrees Of Separation*, by Toronto's Ellen Flanders. Her documentary portrait of two couples is fuelled by the fact that both couples are same-sex but of different ethnicities. If it's not enough for an Israeli Jew to date a Palestinian, imagine if they're also gay. And vice versa.

Berlin is also a place where Keanu Reeves will show up to promote a small indie film called *Thumbsucker* and say nothing worth noting, while Catherine Deneuve will show up and hold forth like the sphinx to 15 selected journalists.

On whether love can strike at any age: "Yes, I think it's possible, because I don't think it's impossible."

On seeing old pictures of her young self: "I don't look at the photos and say, 'Ah, I was young, I was blonder and so on and so.' It's not that I can stand aging more than other people, but I'm a fa-

talist."

On Lars von Trier: "He told me he was preparing a musical with Björk and he had written a part for a black American woman that he thought he could give to me. I said, 'Why not?'"

On trusting the young directors she works with: "Trust, what is trust?"

No doubt that last line is tattooed on the eyeballs of a lot of the festival veterans surging across the cobblestones here. It's a constant crush of skeptical people. You have to fight your way through flocks of black coats and opinions to get anywhere. Thousands of us, accreditation badges swinging like dog tags from our necks, moving on thousands of private trajectories.

We're looking for pictures. It's not over yet.

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