



TECHNICAL DETAILS

Run time: 76 mins
Production Country: United Kingdom
Language: English, Arabic, French
Subtitles: English
Production year: 2015
HD, Colour
Certification: 12A

COMMS INFO

Twitter: @SyrianLoveStory #ASyrianLoveStory
Facebook: www.facebook.com/ASyrianLoveStoryFilm
Film Website: www.asyrianlovestory.com
Sean McAllister Website: www.seanmcallister.com

CONTACT INFO

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

Comrades and lovers Amer and Raghda met in a Syrian prison cell 15 years ago. When McAllister first meets their family in 2009, Raghda is back in prison leaving Amer to look after their 4 boys alone; but as the 'Arab Spring' sweeps the region, the family's fate shifts irrevocably. Filmed over 5 years, the film charts their incredible odyssey to political freedom. For Raghda and Amer, it is a journey of hope, dreams and despair: for the revolution, their homeland and each other.

Known for his unique and intimate portraits, maverick director Sean McAllister (*Liberace of Baghdad*) received the Grand Jury prize at this year's Sheffield Documentary Festival for this "Bergmanesque portrait of a relationship and love".

LONG SYNOPSIS

Amer, 45, met Raghda, 40, in a Syrian prison cell 15 years ago. He first saw her bloodied face after a beating when she was placed in a neighboring cell. Over months they communicated through a tiny hole they'd secretly made in the wall. They fell in love and when released got married and started a family together.

This film tells the poignant story of their family torn apart by the tyrannical Assad dictatorship. Filming began in Syria in 2009, prior to wave of revolutions and changes in the Arab world – at the time, Raghda was a political prisoner and Amer was caring for their young children alone. We filmed in the thriving heart of the Yarmouk Camp in Damascus – now an infamous news story as its inhabitants are being starved to death by the Assad regime. At 4 and 14, Bob and Kaka have already spent their whole lives watching either their father or mother go to prison for their political beliefs. Quiet, considerate and mature, Kaka tells me how he is prepared to follow his mother and father to prison for the price of freedom.

This intimate family portrait helps us to understand why people are literally dying for change in the Arab world. Yet, as Raghda is released from prison, filmmaker Sean McAllister himself is arrested for filming and the political pressure around all activists intensifies. The family flee to Lebanon, and then to France where they are given political asylum in the sleepy town of Albi, where they now watch the revolution from afar, waiting for Assad to fall.

However, in exile, Raghda's mental health suffers. She recently attempted suicide. We see their new life in France develop but the war is now between them. In finding the freedom they fought so hard for, their relationship is beginning to fall apart.

GRAND JURY PRIZE, SHEFFIELD DOC/FEST 2015

"The Jury were enamored by this Bergmanesque portrait of a relationship and love, taking place against an ever-changing and tumultuous backdrop. Delivering unusual gender portraits it explores vulnerabilities, looking at the concept of belonging, providing a unique and intimate portrait of disillusionment."

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Director Sean McAllister is known for his candid, frank films, depicting with extraordinary intimacy the lives of ordinary people who are struggling to survive but are survivors, caught up in political and personal conflict, struggling to make sense of the world we live in. From his early films *Working For The Enemy* (1997) and *The Minders* (1998), both nominated for a Royal Television Society Awards, to his more recent successes, Sundance Jury Prize-winning *The Liberace Of Baghdad* (2004), *Japan: A Story Of Love And Hate* (2008), *'The Reluctant Revolutionary'* and his recent Sheffield Jury Prize winning *A Syrian Love Story* (2015), Sean's work continues to inspire, to surprise and to fascinate audiences.

"One of the most brave and powerful film makers around" – Michael Moore

"McAllister left school at 16, worked in a pea factory, before giving up to go on the dole for the best part of a decade. That time gave him a real feel for the rhythm of daily life, and an understanding of how easy it is for people to spin and drift, their lives dribbling away all the while (...) I love [his] work for its sly radicalism, and am bursting with admiration for the way he has managed to make films - warm, angry, emotionally involving - that run entirely counter to the dominant voice of today's documentary mainstream." - **Sukhdev Sandhu**

"The great thing about Sean's films is that he champions the characters in his documentaries, he always takes a loser and makes them a winner." - **D A Pennebaker**

INTERVIEW WITH SEAN MCALLISTER

How do you find your characters? What do you look for in them?

I go on a long walk looking for a film, thinking of what story I want to tell of the place I find myself in. I don't spend much time reading about the places I film, I prefer to go live and learn from hanging out with people. I spend a long time looking for a single character that encapsulates something of the place, someone who embodies the conflicts of the place I find myself in, but it is always hard to find someone who is a 'character' and has a 'story'. Often you find a good 'character' without a 'story' or sometimes you find someone who has a 'story' who isn't a character. What makes a documentary character has become the eternal question... for me, in my way of making films, it is someone who I can befriend in a true way as a part of the process in the film making, and this bonding becomes part of my film. It helps my audience warm to the people I film, and it's what comes naturally to me in the way I like to make my films - usually alone, using the people I film to become my film crew as opposed to the usual way where we crowd out the people we film when we mob them with big film crews camera gear and lights etc. I prefer to slip in and out and film in a small light hand held way in a casual way, capturing scenes and moments in life after missed by big film crews. But more crucially, I feel need to have a role 'a fly in soup' role as opposed to 'fly on the wall' - I believe we always affect what we film and I like to take it one step further and find people who step into the process of my film making and engage with me in what I like to see as a process of change through our interaction.

Why did you first go to Syria?

I feel at home in the Middle East, I joke it's the hummus that keeps taking me back (this is in part true) but I do like the laid back life style of the locals when I'm in the Middle East they remind me in a way of mates back in Hull. I can't live in Hull anymore, in part because of the closed mentality of locals (I guess everywhere, not just Hull) but I love travelling and feel inspired when I'm meeting people and exploring places, and for some reason (in part the great vegetarian cuisine and maybe the politics) I feel most at home in the Middle East.

Having made films in Iraq, Palestine and various war torn places in the Middle East, I wanted to make a film about a country that seemed to be a functioning dictatorship. I first went to Syria in 2009 curious about its secularism and booming tourist industry. Under Bashar Al Assad, the young 'reformer', tourism was generating millions of dollars a year. I visited the bars and nightclubs in the old city of Damascus and remember filming a club turning out at 5am. Men and women danced drunk together in the street as the call to prayer rang out from the minarets. Such were the 'freedoms'. Assad seemed beloved by his people, but was this adoration or fear?

One night in 2009, I met Amer, drinking a beer in a bar. Here was someone who wanted to show the world the truth of the Syrian people away from the glitz of the tourist quarters in old Damascus. My love affair with Syria had begun...

What was it like filming with the same family over such a long period of time?

Amer's family moved 15 times during filming, but at each stage I was always welcomed in - I always had a place at the dinner table and a place to stay in their home. I didn't know Raghda when I started filming - as she was in prison - but I never expected that she would end up taking centre stage of this film. At first - just as Amer had been - she was very stilted with the camera and naturally untrusting. But the longer I stayed with them the closer I got. The closeness became difficult at one stage as their relationship really broke down and Raghda would call me and ask me to come over to help make sense of their lives and their faltering relationship. It was as if they had both stepped into the film and used it in for their own means. It is this involvement in the process of filming that I find most fascinating (and try encourage emerging filmmakers to harness) I'm always surprised as a filmmaker to witness the brutal honesty of people when they are naked and open in front of your camera. It is a painstaking process - it takes years to get inside, so that people are not just acting out their lives in front of your camera but using you and a projected audience to help make sense of the world they find themselves in.

For the first few years that you were filming with Amer and his sons, Raghda was in prison. What was it like to meet and film with Ragda for the first time, after you'd created a bond with the family in her absence?

It was scary to meet Ragda... very scary after a long filming the family in her absence I'd found a place with them in the family but when she came out of prison I felt like a stranger again a bit, like I had to start again and in way I did. It takes longer than normal to win the trust of people in tense and dangerous places, and although Amer had finally started trusting me after what seemed like years of filming, it felt like I was starting again on that whole process when Ragda came out of prison. She didn't trust me and I felt awkward filming her intimately with her family. It was also a difficult time as she was adjusting and I felt very intrusive filming the family when they should have private moments but its one of the things that you know needs to be documented to make a great film - and I know that I am right in having filmed them when I look back at those measured scenes, sitting with Ragda with tears in her eyes. She can hardly remember the scenes let alone that they're documented. But that's our role as good filmmakers, I believe, to be bold and out there, to know when to push the boat out and film and get things documented even when it maybe doesn't feel comfortable. I, as the 'fly in soup', believe in pushing people to their limits in order to get the best scenes, the best material, the best moments of truth, of reflection, of honesty. And the proof for me is in the pudding, and is always in sitting down at the end of this arduous process with Amer, Ragda or whoever I film and taking pleasure at watching what we have all accomplished together come alive as a truly emotional engaging human story that transcends those 30 second news bites that people normally rely on to understand the Middle East.

What compelled you to keep going back to film?

We weren't commissioned or supported to make the film until quite late in the process so I didn't really know if the film would ever see the light of day but I kept going back to see them as friends and filming - I couldn't stop myself. In retrospect, this gave the film it's longevity and story arch and has made the experience of making this film more like a life I adopted, or a family that eventually adopted me. It's an absurd hobby I call a job; it kills me most of the time but has the small significant reward of seeing my characters championed on the screen and stepping forward defiant in their lives through their involvement with the film. I feel proud and

happy for Amer, Raghda and their beautiful wonder family, and very honoured that they gave so much to make this film – it is the most special film I have made to date in my career.

How does the film relate to what we're seeing in the news currently?

When the people that I want to communicate with watch *A Syrian Love Story* they can no longer watch the Calais crisis on TV news and just see 'swarms' or 'floods' of faceless figures (as Cameron like to call them) trying to flee Syria and enter Europe or the UK as if they are coming to steal something from us... They will know Amer, Raghda, Kaka and beautiful little Bob and see a family full of love, that laugh and cry and live and who have many friends who have died... and through this film, shot sensitively with love over 5 years, open themselves in rare way for the world to see, fighting, drinking dancing, dreaming... all the things the news doesn't have time for, all the things that documentary has and should do, to challenge all the stereotypes of what we film and show life as it is.

FULL CREDIT LIST

A 10Ft Films Production

For BFI and BBC Storyville

In association with SVT Sveriges Television AB and DR Danish Broadcast Corporation

Directed by Sean McAllister

Produced by Elhum Shakerifar and Sean McAllister

Story editor: Johnny Burke

Film Editor: Matt Scholes

Composer: Terence Dunn

Cellist: Davina Shun

Colourist: Paul Fallon

On-line Editor: Andrew Mitchell

Dubbing Mixer: Bob Jackson

Art Directors: Jack Woodhams, Kevin Rudeforth

Archive: ITN Source, YouTube, UNRWA

Production Manager: Ruth Tilley

Production Assistants: Laure Veermeesch, Uzma Hussain, Andy Cake, Phillip Rhodes

Translators: Yasmin Ghrawi, Tariq Elmeri

Legal Advisor: Sally Shell

For BFI

Director of Lottery Film Fund: Ben Roberts

Head of Production: Fiona Morham

Production Finance: Sofia Neves

Business Affairs Manager: Clare Coulter

Script Consultant: Marilyn Milgrom

Executive Producer for 10Ft Films: Hoshang Waziri

Executive Producer for BFI: Lizzie Francke

Executive Producers for the BBC: Nick Fraser and Kate Townsend

Executive Producer for SVT: Axel Arnö

Executive Producer for DR: Mette Hoffmann Meyer

With Music by Le Trio Joubran, Samih Choukaer, Youssef Taje, Zoë Keating, A Winged

Victory For The Sullen and Bo Harwood

SCREENING INFO:

IN CINEMAS AND ON BFI PLAYER FROM 18TH SEPTEMBER 2015

Full info at: www.asyrianlovestory.com/screenings

LONDON SCREENINGS

From 18th September at Curzon Bloomsbury and Picturehouse Central

Preview: Tues 15th Sept - NFT1 BFI Southbank + Q&A

Premiere: Thurs 17th Sept - DocHouse Curzon Bloomsbury + Q&A hosted by Jeremy Hardy

Opening: Fri 18th Sept - Picturehouse Central Storyville Presents + Q&A hosted by Nick Fraser

Sun 20th September – Crouch End Art House + Q&A

Weds 23rd September – Frontline Club + Q&A

Thurs 24th September – Brixton Ritzy + Q&A

NATIONWIDE SCREENINGS

Sat 19th September – York City Screen + Q&A

Mon 21st September – Bristol Watershed + Q&A (and run till 24th September)

Tues 22nd September – Manchester HOME + Q&A

Fri 25th September – FACT Liverpool + Q&A

Sat 26th September – Oxford Ultimate Picture Palace + Q&A

Sun 27th September – Brighton Dukes at Komedia + Q&A

Sun 27th September – 2nd October – Dundee Contemporary Arts

Mon 28th September – Queens Theatre Belfast

Mon 28th September – Hull Film Festival + Q&A