

## A Poet in Palestine

Elia Suleiman this weekend previews *The Time That Remains*, an Arab-Israeli chronicle. Impressions from alongside a committed artist.

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### **Ramallah, Nazareth**

*Special Correspondent*

### **Patrice Trapier**

Wearing a Panama hat, a black jacket, and white shoes... An eccentric dandy was seen strolling the streets of Ramallah and Nazareth this weekend. Elia Suleiman returned home to give previews of his latest film, *The Time That Remains*, before its release in France, on the 12<sup>th</sup> August. At each showing, the audience thought it was a triumph, laughing at the perilous gags (a photograph showing his behind, immortalising the surrender of Nazareth to Zionist troupes in 1948; a neighbour steadily dousing himself in petrol before insulting his mother), and applauding the cult scene (the hero pole-vaulting the Separation Wall).

Like any dandy, Elia Suleiman is neither here nor there. At 16, he left school and Nazareth to earn a living from various small jobs in America and to devour works of cinema in an effort to self-educate. Israeli, Palestinian, holder of an American Green Card, a Dutch passport and an apartment in Paris... By qualifying his latest film as a “chronicle of the present-absent”, he sums up this paradox. All over the world he is celebrated as one of the most inventive film makers. In Israel, in the Territories, his films can sometimes frustrate or irritate. *Divine Intervention* contained grating scenes (the red ball with Arafat’s face on it, floating over Jerusalem; the heroine transforming into a ninja and killing Tzahal soldiers...) but Palestinians might have liked it better if it were less poetic and more militant.

### **He is reinventing a silent-talking cinema, slow but vibrant**

This time the film is calmer, more mature, more intimate. Dedicated to his parents, it was filmed for the most part in Nazareth, in the family home, on the terrace of the author’s favourite café. Formed of four parts (The Death of Palestine; The Death of Nasser; The Death of Father and the First Intifada; The Death of Mother and the Building of the Wall), *The Time That Remains* mercilessly tackles the situation of these Arabs who had become a minority in Israel. Suleiman talks about Palestine because it is his homeland but his eyes take in a view that extends well beyond the edges of the frame. For example, he often moves his characters out of shot; they are held by unseen hands, composing his images like a painter or a choreographer.

His take on reality has unheard-of depth; sad yet happy, tormented but light. With his economy of words, he is reinventing a silent-talking cinema, slow but vibrant, in contrast to a period of noise and fury.

Since childhood Suleiman made a personality for himself, a sad clown that could make loved ones laugh without saying a single word. Like Keaton, Tati and Pierre Etaix, he has the body of a mime which plays on movements both little and large. He creates shots of astounding beauty: the father, like Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus*, perched on a car about to explode; the mother with eyes already swallowed up by death, one foot tapping out the rhythm of song from her youth. He films ideas worthy

of Eisenstein or Chaplin: a young mother interrupts the Stone War with an irritated remark; a Palestinian so absorbed by his mobile phone conversation that he makes a tank gun useless, in the end it gives up following him.

*The Time That Remains* opens and closes on a human and political moral. This desperate war for a land limited and saturated by history looms over all parties, both dominant and dominated: an Israeli taxi driver breaks down and asks where his all his childhood dreams have gone; a young soldier cannot make young Palestinians respect the curfew while they dance and ends up, behind the mesh of his armoured screen, moving to the same rhythm as these young 'enemies'.

*The Time That Remains* is an important film. It may see the same success as *Devine Intervention* and go worldwide. The ecumenical team which works for Suleiman (Jewish Israelis, Jewish Palestinians, Non-religious Arabs, Muslims), young Palestinians that benefit from these film previews by the attention brought to crimes committed by the wall, are holding it in high acclaim. But they all know they can never lay claim to the film maker. His work both belongs to them and eludes them at the same time.

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