

**verve**  
PICTURES

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Certificate **TBC**



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# SYNOPSIS

## **Logline**

Dreaming of a homeland she is denied, a Palestinian refugee stranded in Lebanon, sets a challenge to find an ancient mulberry tree that stands witness to her family's existence.

## **Short Synopsis**

While millions of birds migrate freely in the skies, a Palestinian refugee stranded in Lebanon sets a challenge to find an ancient mulberry tree that once grew next to her grandfather's house. A story of a friendship that stays connected across a divided land and a fragmented people that adopts a birds' eye perspective to reflect on freedom of movement, exile and the hope of return.

## **Long Synopsis**

While millions of birds migrate freely in the skies, Fadia, a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, yearns for the ancestral homeland she is denied. She challenges Sarah, the Director, to find an ancient mulberry tree that stands as witness to her family's existence - with only inherited memories, a blind man and a two-headed dragon as her guides. Along the way, Sarah meets with ornithologists whose observations on the homing instincts of the birds inadvertently reveal the unresolved problems of the region.

Spanning fifteen years, this story of a friendship that stays connected across a divided land and a fragmented people adopts a birds' eye perspective to reflect on freedom of movement, exile and the hope of return.



# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It seems strange to think how very different my life would have been if not for a chance encounter fifteen years ago. Sitting in a café in Beirut, a woman at the next table struck up a conversation with me and through her I was introduced to the community of a Palestinian refugee camp. I felt an instant rapport with Fadia Loubani. We shared a sense of humour and I greatly respected her proud, unwavering determination and tireless hard work to make a better, more equal world for her fellow refugees in the camp. I was deeply affected by the way she talked about 'home' - an inaccessible place across the border into what is now northern Israel, a place she has never been allowed to visit.

Since 2005, I have stayed in the camp with Fadia and her family many times. Early on I asked if I could help in some way and the family suggested I make a film. I explained how as a visual artist I had shown my previous works in film festivals, museums and art galleries, but that I was not used to making narrative films. People had been distant markers in my previous works, part of an exploration of a sense of place, not foreground characters. But rising to the challenge, and greatly moved by all the privations I had seen in the camp, I wanted to find a way that might open up fresh dialogue on the refugee situation that is as unresolved now as it was in 1948 when the refugees first went into exile. Yet I didn't want to repeat what has already been much documented, nor frame the same polarised rhetoric.

It was while living in the Old City of Jerusalem for a year, on an artist's residency, that I discovered the work of ornithologists in the region and learnt that the area is on a superhighway for billions of birds flying back and forth between 'home' and their nesting sites thousands of kilometres away. Already fascinated by aerial photographic documentation of the region by the British in the early 20th century, this birds' eye view following ancient markers in the landscape, the earth's electromagnetic field and stars in the night sky, allowed me to imagine a more connected world beyond the divisions on the ground.



I was struck by how the movement of the birds along cyclical, instinctive pathways, oblivious to surface borders and checkpoints, contrasted with Fadia's enforced stasis and her deeply entrenched longing for a home that is not the 'here' of the camp where she was born but an imagined 'there' in the family village of Sa'sa', now an Israeli kibbutz.

Fadia's challenge to find an ancient mulberry tree that marked her ancestral home was a turning point in my filming. If alive, the tree would stand as testament and witness to Fadia's historic and cultural identity. I felt a great responsibility to complete this quest and travelled to Sa'sa' a number of times, following a route up the Great Rift Valley that mirrored that of the migrating birds.

During these last years, the spread of Covid-19 across the planet has created a sense of isolation and timelessness for many, curbing movement and certain freedoms once taken for granted. These privations have been endured for decades by the people in the camps. Israel is poised to illegally annex 30% of the West Bank, a diminution of land that will affect any repatriation of the refugees; the Trump Peace Plan did not take into consideration the UN Right of Return to Israeli-controlled territory, an internationally recognised right conceived of for the Palestinian refugees in 1948 that has been re-affirmed every year since.

Now seems like a particularly apt moment for fresh examination of the refugees' situation and I hope that the perspective of the film, via the natural world, may help in some way to reopen debate about finding a resolution for the largest group of people held in limbo for the longest period of time.

**Sarah Beddington**

A person wearing a green sweater is shown in profile, looking through binoculars. The image is partially obscured by a dark green overlay on the left side, which contains the text 'FILMMAKERS'.

# FILMMAKERS

## **Sarah Beddington - Director**

Sarah Beddington is a visual artist and filmmaker based in London. Her works in film and video, sculpture, performance and public art, explore the overlaps between the historical, the mythical and the everyday, often focusing on journeys and migration. Traces in the landscape, the role of memory and non-chronological histories are also important components connecting seemingly disparate elements across time and space and opening up the potential for alternate realities.

Her interest in the relationship between landscape, memory and the imagination evolved while growing up in a rural, isolated village in the southwest of England where a sense of an ancient past visible within the present was clearly inscribed across the surrounding Wiltshire chalk downland.

After completing a Masters Degree in Fine Art at Central Saint Martin's in 1996, Beddington gradually shifted her focus from painting towards the moving image after relocation to New York in 2002. Working across a wide range of media, Beddington received a Bloomberg Special Commission in 2008 and has been nominated for various awards including the Paul Hamlyn and the Derek Jarman. In 2014 she was commissioned by Percent for Art in New York to design the lobby of a new school.

She has completed many multi and single-screen film and video works that have been shown internationally in film festivals, museums, non-profit spaces and galleries including: Sheffield DocFest; Liverpool Biennale; Centre Pompidou, Paris; MASS MoCA, USA; FidMarseille International Film Festival; LOOP film and video festival, Barcelona; Hayward Gallery, London; San Francisco Film Festival; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio and The Drawing Center, New York. Her work can be seen in many public collections including Arts Council England.

Fadia's Tree is Beddington's first feature length film.



## Susan Simnett - Director

With an earlier career in advertising that developed good habits in telling stories clearly, succinctly and with heightened engagement, Susan found her home in the world of film. In 2015, drawing on her business expertise and her creative interests she set up Over The Fence Films.

Working with artist director, Sarah Beddington, *Fadia's Tree* is her first feature. Currently on the festival circuit, it received the Feather Award for Best Documentary at the Karama Human Rights Festival in Jordan and the Amnesty International Award for Best Feature Film at the Donostia-San Sebastián Human Rights Film Festival.

Susan co-produced *Baba*, a BFI Network Films for Freedom short, that claimed the top two awards at the 2021 Iris Prize LGBT+ Festival. Written and directed by newcomers Sam Arbor and Adam Ali, it tells of Britannia, a queer Libyan teenager, who makes an unexpected discovery that tears at his heart and forces him to question where his dreams truly lie.

Recent work includes an Associate Producer role on the contained drama *My House* directed by Nick Norman-Butler, the Japanese/UK co-production, *Cottontail*, directed by Patrick Dickinson, produced by Gaby Tana of Magnolia Mae Films and starring Ciarán Hinds and Lily Franky (*Shoplifters*) and as Production Manager on additional photography for StudioCanal's *The Railway Children Return*, directed by Morgan Matthews and due for release summer of 2022.

Susan has an Executive Producer role on the BFI/BBC/Ffilm Cymru funded *Chuck Chuck Baby* directed by Screen International Star of Tomorrow, Janis Pugh and is currently producing the BFI supported short film, *The Call*, written by Vanessa Rose and directed by Riffy Ahmed - a spin on mother/daughter relationship and the prejudices around mental health in older age



## **Fadia Loubani - Protagonist**

Fadia Loubani was born in 1968, in Bourj el Barajneh refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon. Her grandparents fled from historic Palestine in 1948 after the two massacres in their village Sa'sa', now a kibbutz in northern Israel.

The eldest of eight children, Fadia was married in her mid-teens to a Palestinian journalist and by the time she was 18 she already had two children. At this time her parents and siblings emigrated to Denmark but very soon after their departure, Fadia's husband was killed in the Lebanese civil war. Multiple applications for Fadia and her children to join the family in Denmark were unsuccessful - the Danish authorities agreed to take her daughter and son but under Danish reunion law, Fadia was not considered dependent on her family. Unable to risk not seeing them again, Fadia made the difficult choice to raise her children in Beirut while keeping herself busy setting up the first kindergarten inside the camp. Despite bombings and wars, Fadia worked tirelessly to establish the school and has now been head teacher of Al Qassam kindergarten for over three decades.

While the footprint of the camp has remained the same since its inception more than 70 years ago, vertical expansion has been the only way to accommodate the now almost 50,000 inhabitants. The land around the kindergarten is the last remaining open space in the entire camp and Fadia has fought hard to keep developers at bay. As well as retaining room for a football pitch, playground and theatre, she has also cultivated a garden with fruit and olive trees for the children

With a long-held love of literature, Fadia has more recently turned her talents to writing. Her darkly comic plays about life in the camp have been taken to the stage by 'The Women of the Camp' theatre company she created with a band of like-minded women in the community. Last year, they toured around Denmark to much acclaim and this year some of Fadia's short stories have been published in an anthology of female writers.



# CREDITS

Directed by  
**Sarah Beddington**

Produced by  
**Susan Simnett**  
**Sarah Beddington**

Edited by  
**Ariadna Fatjó Vilas**

Music by  
**Muqata'a**

Sound design by  
**Stefan Smith**

Executive producers  
**Mia Bays**  
**Hanna Atallah**