

Former Lebanese Prisoners of ‘Tadmor’ Reenact Dark Days Within Assads’s Dungeons



When people hear of Tadmor, they might think of its English name, Palmyra, which refers to the ancient ruins in the Syrian Desert. For some, however, Tadmor evokes images of one of the cruelest prisons in the world, and its gory history of torture and suffering. The prison, seized briefly by ISIS in May 2015, but then retaken almost a year later by pro-governmental forces, holds a dark place in the memories of those who were forced to live in it under Hafez al-Assad’s regime in the 1980s. Recently, Tadmor has been in the news due to a documentary about a group of former Lebanese detainees of the prison who have come forward in an act of healing and confrontation, hoping to allow their past come to terms with their present.

Lokman Slim, a Lebanese writer and publisher, and his German wife, Monika Borgmann, a director and journalist, created an intense and eye-opening documentary with their world premiere of “Tadmor” at the Visions du Reel in Nyon, Switzerland on March 20, 2016. The documentary recounts the terrifying torture that took place within the walls of Tadmor prison, which, according to poet Farag Bayrakdar, functioned as a “kingdom of death and madness.” The film delves into the experiences of 22 Lebanese survivors still haunted by memories of the horrors they faced under Assad’s regime. Slim and Borgmann present the film using theatrical staging rather than a traditional interview style, with the former prisoners playing themselves in a reenactment that not only

testifies as an indictment of the crimes committed against them, but also allows the men to stand together, confronting their past. “Ultimately, the men chose to reenact it,” says Director Borgmann in the film’s Director’s Note, “They wanted to relive it.”

Rebuilding Tadmor Prison from the remains of an abandoned school, the survivors stepped once more into this dark age of their lives, playing both victims and victimizers for each other in order to convey their story – a story which they believe others, like themselves, still struggle to cope with. With a performance that serves as therapy instead of entertainment, the 22 men unite as to bear witness to their survival in the face of inhumanity. “One couldn’t watch the film without feeling shame, shame because he is a man,” wrote Roger Outa in *Al Modon* electronic newspaper, citing the late Italian-Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levy.

Slim and Borgmann’s former work, the award-winning “Massacre,” which debuted at the Berlin Film Festival in 2005, also dealt with a similar contrast of humanity and inhumanity. Where they filmed “Tadmor” with more theatrical cinematography, the two presented “Massacre” with more formulaic interviews, featuring six perpetrators involved in the mass murders at Sabra and Shatila in 1982. The darkness of “Massacre” and the light within “Tadmor” represent elements that, while not the same, complement one another. In “Massacre,” the constant shadow cast upon the interviewees alludes not only to secrecy, but also to an intangible burden, one that looms perpetually and seeks an unattainable redemption. Light in “Tadmor,” on the other hand, acts less of a symbol of hope and more as a warning of torture to come, as the prisoners were only exposed to the outside light when the guards chose to punish them.

Both films document the suffering of man in opposing situations; one, a story of the victimizers, the other, revealing the struggles of the victims. According to Borgmann, “Massacre,” filmed in secret, never exposed the faces of the six men and took special precautions to protect their identities. The film functions “less about giving answers and more about asking questions,” while “Tadmor,” filmed out in the open, acts as a direct confrontation of crimes committed against former Lebanese prisoners in Syria. “It is as important to talk to the victimizers as to the victims if you want the real truth of what happened during a massacre,” says Borgmann. “It is really on two levels: first, reconstructing the truth and second, better understanding the phenomenon of violence.”

Though centered on different episodes of Lebanese history, both films question the causes and effects of violence committed by human beings, upon human nature. Slim and Borgmann, founders of UMAM, a research center for Lebanese history, continue to work together in uncovering the untold stories of Lebanon.