

Sharing memories of violence to foster reconciliation

Film interviewing perpetrators of the Sabra and Shatila atrocities wins award in Berlin

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Special to The Daily Star

BERLIN, Germany: After attending nine days in a row at the 55th International Film Festival in Berlin, which ended a fortnight ago, Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim were tired but very satisfied.

Their stay in the German capital had been successful on two fronts.

The two filmmakers' documentary film "Massacre," shown in the festival's Panorama section, had won the prestigious Fipresci-Award, which is handed out by the International Federation of Film Critics. And the film festival had proven

an effective forum for the two to promote the joint Lebanese-German-French-Swiss co-production to a wider audience, look for a distribution company and establish new contacts for future projects.

When the German-Lebanese couple started three years ago to plan "Massacre," which deals with the difficult subject matter of the Sabra and Shatila atrocity where thousands of Palestinians were murdered by Christian Lebanese forces under the supervision of Israel, from Beirut where they live, they had no idea they would be in, let alone win an award at a prestigious international festival. But win they have and have seen great inter-

est from the European and international documentary filmmaking community.

According to Borgmann, the pair chose the massacre of Sabra and Shatila in particular, because she "had done a report

|| 'Massacre' is a study about six members of the Lebanese Forces

about Sabra and Shatila for German radio. Besides, I wanted to look behind the concept of collective violence. It could have been any other massacre, but because I've known Sabra and Shatila since 1988, it

turned out to be this one."

Slim also had deeper motivations to deal with this difficult subject matter. At the time of the massacres in 1982, he was living only 1 kilometer away from the camps, though he was not aware of what was going on inside the Palestinian camp at the time. Yet his motivation, unlike other films that have dealt with the facts of the atrocities, was to find out what led people to kill other people in his neighborhood during the civil war.

"Massacre" is a psycho-political study about six members of the disbanded Lebanese Forces who took part in the killing at the camps in 1982. Although several documentaries about the victims exist, this film

has taken a very unusual and so far unpublished perspective – that of the perpetrators. It does not sympathize with the perpetrators, nor does it accuse them. Instead, the film's theme is what motivates people to execute such cruelty. It also poses the question of how the perpetrators live with their violent past.

When he was asked by the audience at the film festival about his personal intention for making this documentary, Slim made clear that he wanted "to see the events of Sabra and Shatila in the wider context of the Lebanese civil war and I didn't want to single them out." Hermann Theissen, a third co-director of the film, and colleague of Borgmann at German radio, who has worked extensively on the Yugoslavian civil war, draws connections in the film to massacres in different parts of the world.

The film itself is disturbing. To protect the identity of the six who agreed to appear, the camera does not show their faces but focuses on their body language. The filming took place in almost empty rooms in April and August 2002 somewhere in Beirut.

"We decided on purpose to do all filming inside half-empty rooms to create a claustrophobic atmosphere. Besides, we did not use archival film material because we wanted to avoid any kind of voyeurism," Borgmann told *The Daily Star*.

These men had never talked about their involvement in the massacre in public before and one of them explained in the film that it was difficult for him to talk about it. Their willingness to speak can perhaps be seen as a therapy and a need on their part to talk about their experiences once and for all. To the filmmakers' surprise, "None of them wanted to see the film after it was finished."

It was not easy to find these six men. Borgmann believes that it was the combination of Lather and Slim which helped locate the men and get them to speak about their actions. Whereas Slim, as a Lebanese native speaker had different access to them and a different relationship with them because of that, Borgmann who speaks

Arabic with a slight foreign accent, was able to ask some questions more bluntly than any Lebanese could do. Although Slim and Borgmann do not appear in the film except for their voices, the pair employ tough questioning techniques to provoke reactions from the six.

Besides asking questions directly, they also interrupt the six men several times in their accounts and confront them with evidence of the massacre in the form of a sack full of bullets or photos portraying the gruesome events.

The film is not only shocking because of the detailed accounts of what it is like to kill defenseless people first hand from these men, but also because it gives the impression that they now lead ordinary lives in Beirut and walking daily among the population. They could be anyone. Their stories provide evidence of the transformation that many young men go through during war – starting to enjoy the power they have over other people's life and death.

"We were not born as murderers," one of the interviewees says, but the logic of war held them tightly in its grip when they were seething with urge for avenging the killing of then President elect Bashir Gemayel.

|| 'We were not born as murderers' says one of the interviewees

Interestingly none of the six former Lebanese Forces repent or ask the viewers for forgiveness.

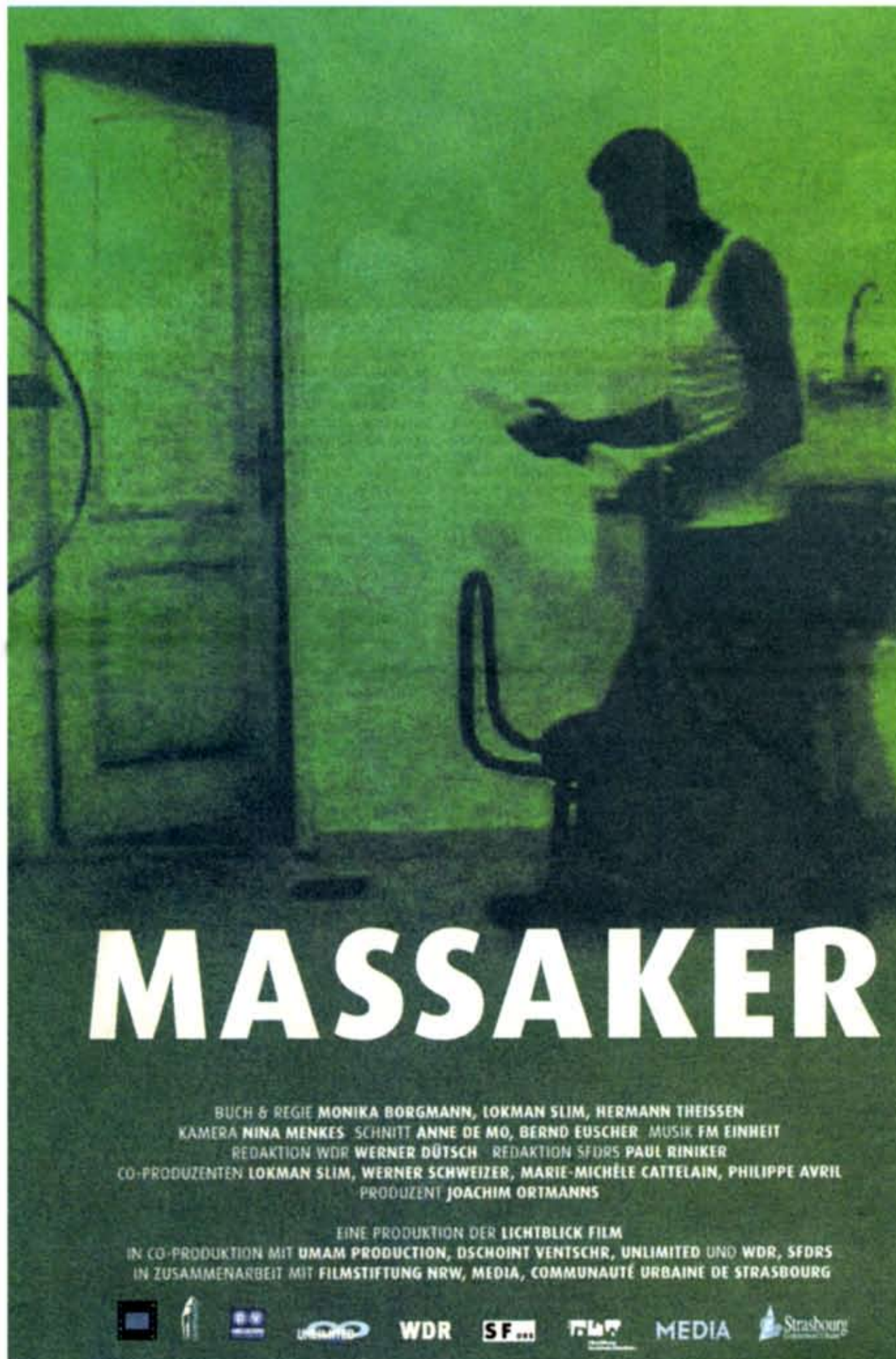
The festival audience received the film positively despite the serious content. After the film's initial success in Berlin, Slim and Borgmann hope to find a distribution company for further screenings in cinemas across the world. Later the film may be shown on television because it was co-produced by German WDR channel and Swiss Television. It is not known if it will be shown in Lebanon yet.

"Massacre" is part of a wider project by Borgmann and Slim,

who are committed to "overcoming Lebanon's collective amnesia regarding the memory of civil violence throughout its history." Together with two friends, they set up the non-profit civil organization "Umam Documentation and Research" in the summer of 2004. The organization not only maintains a large database containing printed documents regarding Lebanon's civil war, but its members also record and collect narratives of the war and produce an audiovisual database. These databases are available to researchers, journalists and the general public at the center's offices in the southern Beirut suburb of Ghobeiri and soon the archive will be available online at www.umam-dr.org. Starting from April, the "Umam Research and Documentation" team will organize discussions, film screenings and exhibitions regularly and it will publish a collection of books about "Zikarayat al-Harb" ("Memories of the War") in co-operation with Dar al-Jadeed publishers.

With the support of the Goethe Institute, an exhibition entitled "Baghdad Stories" will be opened in April at Umam. The center will also hold a workshop for Lebanese and Palestinian youths in April 2005 in co-operation with the German journalist Philipp Abresch and the German organization MEDICO, commemorating the outbreak of the civil war 30 years ago. For this project, young people will be provided with single-use cameras and be asked to search for personal accounts from their families and neighbors about the events in April 1975 that led to the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war and to capture the stories creatively with their cameras.

In Berlin, Borgmann and Slim also talked about more projects to come, all of which will stay true to the couple's main objective – to lay the foundation for true reconciliation in Lebanon on the basis of sharing memories peacefully. To take the first step in that direction, they both admit that "we would be very happy when the film "Massacre" would be shown all over Lebanon."



"Massacre" looks behind the concept of collective violence.



Slim and Borgmann hope to one day to be able to show their film in Lebanon.