

Bikur Ha-Tizmoret (The Band's Visit) (12A)

28th September 2009

Director: **Eran Kolirin**
Israel/France/US 2007

Running time : 87 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Sasson Gabai** (Lieutenant-colonel Tawfiq Zacharya), **Ronit Elkabetz** (Dina), **Saleh Bakri** (Haled), **Khalifa Natour** (Simon), **Rubi Moscovich** (Itzik).

SCRIPT: **Eran Kolirin**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Shai Goldman**. EDITING: **Arik Leibovitch**. MUSIC: **Habib Shadah**.

Films from Israel do not often grace our screens. Asked to name a Jewish filmmaker one might be forgiven for falling back on Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, the duo behind Cannon Films, a unit synonymous for many with the nadir of Eighties commercial cinema. It is heartening, then, to have a year in which we can boast not just one but two Israeli films on our programme. And *The Band's Visit* is 'indubitably the most acclaimed Israeli movie for many years'.

Set in the 1990s it concerns the arrival of the members of the Alexandria Ceremonial Police Band in Bietha Tikva, a remote Israeli community. The key ingredient of the unexpected in this clash of cultures lies in the fact that they were scheduled to perform in the similarly named and far more cosmopolitan Petach Tikva. Temporarily deprived of their transportation and without a shekel, they have little alternative but to accept the kind offer of café owner Dina to put them up for the night. The band's rather stiff conductor, Tawfiq, and easy charmer Haled get to stay at Dina's, while the rest lodge with the family of her associate, Itzik. With the difference in cultures inevitably providing droll or embarrassing moments, the stage is set for the characters to learn a little about each other and so about themselves.

Tawfiq gradually warms to the unabashed Dina as she attempts to lighten him up, and it is this meeting of minds that contains more meat for drama, rather than the easy alternative of having Dina jump straight into bed with Haled, who instead takes her callow employee Papi for a night on the town. Tawfiq, it turns out, has good cause to regret his conservative ways. Meanwhile Itzik's discordant household provides an echo for the storm in the soul of Simon, the band's second-in-command, whose long-gestating concerto still lies unfinished.

Throughout the movie the political factors that have divided the two nations from biblical times

up to the end of the 1970s, when President Sadat resolved to bury the hatchet, remain unspoken by the characters and barely referenced by the director, though of course they underlie everything. The peace, moreover, is only an official one and naturally it takes more than that to change people's mindsets: *The Band's Visit* is a healthy reminder, without lapsing into whimsy or sentimentality, of how people can get along whatever their governments do.

All the more disappointing it must have been, then, that despite garnering awards at numerous festivals, such as Tokyo and Cannes, the film was excluded from the very first Middle East International Film Festival at Abu-Dhabi, and the Cairo International Festival. To add insult to injury it was denied a nomination for the Best Foreign Language Oscar because it was calculated that over fifty per-cent of its dialogue was in English, a lingua franca for the Hebrew and Arabic otherwise spoken by its participants. The fact that it did really well domestically at the Israeli Film Academy Awards and Jerusalem International Film Festival, can have been scant consolation for Kolirin, whose message was surely intended for a more ecumenical audience.

With its closing scenes of a rousing performance before the Arab cultural centre for which the band was intended to play, the film may remind members of *Brassed Off*. I must confess at this point that I haven't seen the present film, but I suspect it scores its points without recourse to the over-earnestness that somewhat marred that film. We shall see if I am right.

David Clare