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# my love awaits me by the sea

*A feature documentary by Mais Darwazah*

**Produced by** The Imaginarium Films & Little Wanderer Films  
**Co-produced with** Mengamuk Films

**Feature Length Documentary**

**Release** 2013

**Duration** 80 mins

**Country** Jordan, Germany, Palestine, Qatar

**For more information**

Rula Nasser | Producer +962 79 5520056

[info@myloveawaitsmebythesea.com](mailto:info@myloveawaitsmebythesea.com)

[www.myloveawaitsmebythesea.com](http://www.myloveawaitsmebythesea.com)

## How do you return to a place that only exists in your mind?

‘My Love Awaits Me by the Sea’ is a poetic documentary narrating the story of director Mais Darwazah, who takes a first time journey back to her homeland, Palestine. She leaves a secluded reality and follows a lover whom she has never met; Hasan, a Palestinian artist, who unveils a beautiful and utopian world to her. Fairytale and reality are woven together to question the elusiveness of place and the need to believe in dreams.

## director's statement

In my world, loneliness, sadness, love, fragility and hope are emotions so often overshadowed by the bigger political picture of an unsettled Arab region. Borders continue to get tighter, freedoms more distant and elusive, as people are left with nothing more than helplessness and suffocation. Amidst this darkness, I needed to seek some light, and to make a film that would try to grant people a safe space to simply breathe and feel.

So I started with myself, as I knew if I kept waiting for “the dream” to happen, something inside me would die. I was going to leave my loneliness, fall in love and create my own ‘once upon a time’...

On a cold winter day in 2007, I stumbled across Hasan Hourani's book and knew instantly that I found the friend I was seeking. I fell in love with a man I have never met, and would never meet, as Hasan drowned in Jaffa just a few years before. On a fateful day, Hasan left his home in Ramallah, escaping the confines of “The Wall” with some friends... just to relax and breathe by the sea in Jaffa, which they're forbidden to access. He saw his nephew struggling in the water, and although he couldn't swim, Hasan went into the water to try to save him. Tragically, they would both die on that day.

In his book “Hasan Is Everywhere” the artist drew himself as a little traveller boy, refusing adulthood to avoid the bitter reality of the present day. ‘The traveller’ rose above all confinements; he freed himself of gender, age, borders, and space; he lived underwater and on top of clouds; he consoled a lonely dinosaur and fell in love with a fish...“The traveller who closed his eyes when traveling, saw all that he needed to see with his heart”.

At the end, the bitterness of daily suffering catches up with Hasan, a young man who fought so hard to seek love. Yet, sadly, just like many other Palestinians, he ends up leaving this world too soon. The irony of his death has touched many people, as it became a metaphor of the daily suffocation imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli Occupation.

The layers of this love story are not like any other, as we, Palestinians, are denied the most basic feeling on earth – normality. Hasan's beautiful ‘world’ urged me to take this first trip back to my forbidden homeland, to find my love, discover the place and create my own memories. I knew that if I could find others like Hasan I would be able to continue dreaming of the Palestine I sought, and eventually find my own logic of a more beautiful and fair world.

I decided to tell our story and discuss the most ‘normal’ things forbidden to us. This documentary refuses to accept any imposed reality and through the intimate, it touches on exhaustion and loneliness, and seeks to find the sweetness of love in a very harsh place.

## the film's story

'My Love Awaits Me by the Sea' is a poetic documentary narrating the story of director Mais Darwazah, who takes a first time journey back to her homeland, Palestine. She leaves a secluded reality and follows a lover whom she has never met; Hasan, a Palestinian artist, who unveils a beautiful and utopian world to her. Fairytale and reality are woven together to question the elusiveness of place and the need to believe in dreams.

In a land fragmented and engulfed by years of struggle, she finds her tranquil love awaiting her in a 'home' protected and held together by today's Palestinians. They defy their everyday reality - far removed from their needs - by holding onto their dreams.

This film pays tribute to Hasan Hourani, a Palestinian artist who, with his imagination, rises above the Occupation. Hourani completed 'Hasan is Everywhere', a children's book of illustration and poetry, just before his tragic death by drowning in the forbidden sea of Jaffa in 2003.

Throughout the film, both worlds of dream and reality provoke one another, to ask the questions of 'How do you return to a place that only exists in your mind?' 'How do you keep fighting for life when you're surrounded by so much death?' 'How can you continue believing in a dream when the outside world lives another reality?' And 'how can you own your version of the truth when history has taken it from you?'

# a conversation

Film curator Verena von Stackelberg speaks to director Mais Darwazah

**VS:** Your films are very personal and you often use your own family stories to illustrate a bigger picture. Could you therefore start by talking about your personal background?

**MD:** I'm all over the place, literally. My family is originally Palestinian, but also part Syrian, and a quarter Kurdish. I was born and live in Jordan, and the rest of me is scattered amongst family in all corners of the globe. But this is the norm for anyone living in exile. What remains from all this, for me, is the constant feeling that there is a place around the corner you need to be in. In a just world and in my case, that would be Palestine. And, because that place around the corner is forbidden, all other places feel incomplete. So you master the feeling of yearning, and you keep missing this elusive 'place'; a loved one, a home, a land, a tree, the sea, a friend, a fair chance at life, someone you've lost... You're left with one question: When you face the 'real' loss of a loved one, wouldn't it be much less exhausting, if you hadn't already been living with this feeling of a 'forbidden place' all your life? What if I was able to have coffee with my mother in the afternoon by the sea in Palestine? Would my life – our life – be any different? I have no answer. What I do know is that because of the Occupation, you find that the most personal thing about you, what makes you the person you are, changes because of an oppressive collective reality that is still very much present. When the details of everyday living are so complicated, and often even unattainable, you realize that it is dangerous to exist without constantly remembering the bigger picture. If you ignore the surrounding social or political context, life would appear very complicated, and you end up feeling there is something wrong with you, personally. So you begin to crumble and disappear. This means it's very difficult to talk about my background without discussing the larger context. For example, the saddest thing about the first visit to Palestine was the reaffirmation of this elusiveness. A three-minute drive, and there you are, in the place you have always dreamt of being. So your dream has always been there, around the corner, three minutes away. This country, this pain, the stories, the yearning, the sea are just three minutes away, but in the real world those three minutes actually consist of years and years of war, rooted in century-old religious fallacies and the meddling of world powers. My aunt always tells me that this yearning is good for the creative mind. I agree, but it's exhausting, because you spend so much energy just trying to sort out what is in your heart and your mind.

**VS:** When and why did you decide to make this film and what has changed politically while working on it?

**MD:** I wanted to have a better understanding of the complicated love story I have with my country and my region. Over the years, I travelled and lived in several Arab countries, but something was always missing. I knew that the picture was never going to be complete without visiting Palestine. Being my age and a Jordanian of Palestinian origin makes it very difficult, if not impossible to go for a visit. But, with perseverance and luck, there are ways to see 'the homeland'. Although I always had tangible excuses to delay this visit, even if, deep inside, I knew the real reason for this delay was just fear. Seeing my homeland [the dream] scared me. I did not want to fall in love with the place I've been searching for all my life,

which is forbidden to me. I also did not want to witness the Occupation and the atrocities suffered by the Palestinians, and leave feeling useless and helpless. So, for my own selfish reasons, I kept ignoring my dream, but as time passed, I became very numb. When I saw Hasan Hourani's work [his book, "Hasan is Everywhere"] everything changed. Hasan's ability to create this utopian world, although he lived under occupation, amazed me. In retrospect to more piercing collective issues, he still found the space to speak from the heart about the most simple and fragile emotions of things I needed to hear. He gave me the strength to visit Palestine as I created another dream. As a result, Palestine would no longer be an elusive space from my own nostalgia. It became real, the place where Hasan came from, where I come from. He would be my unknown lover, someone I got familiar with, metaphorically speaking, and someone who reassured me with his words that there will always be a more beautiful and serene place. I wanted to make a film about all this. So, I went and I saw. I saw things I will never forget.... normal things, friends meeting for a coffee, lovers strolling, holding hands, the smell of apple tree blossoms in a spring night, the sunset in Acre, and the Hebron accent (my favourite) amongst all the different Palestinian accents. But the most important thing I would witness was the Palestinians' ability to retain their humanity, irrespective of all the hardships. But aside to all this beauty, I also saw the Israeli Occupation without its fake façade, abstracted of all its lies, with a hard and very ugly shell. This grounded me politically, so to speak, as I witnessed all the evidence first hand. For years, Israel has used the ambiguousness of 'religious' discourse to cover up the simplest fact; it is an occupier that has robbed the Palestinians of their land, and it is an occupation that represents a modern-day colonization of a country present within a region, also held hostage by this colonization. Since its inception, the occupation of Palestine and its sustainability has depended on its neighbour's weaknesses; neighbours preoccupied with internal issues of corruption, injustice and economic hardship, driven towards inane sectarianism, which diverts attention away from the real culprit responsible for the region's unrest. So, what is taking place today in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon is very much connected with sustaining this sectarian, military state. This is an eternal story, but what has changed today, is that a courageous Tunisian man named Bouazizi made the first step and said "I have had enough". And from that day, the ball has started to roll.

[VS: You enter the film with a story from Hasan Hourani, about the fish and the bird. Who is Hasan?](#)

**MD:** I was visiting London after finishing my MA at Edinburgh, and my friends were telling me about their "very funny and interesting" friend called Mahmoud, who was coming over for dinner that evening. That day, I had a meeting scheduled with Hasan's publisher, to discuss some work I had done for them. Upon leaving, she gave me his book as a gift and asked if I had heard his story. When I told her I hadn't, she said "It's a very sad one. He drowned in the sea just after finishing this book". So I left quickly, eager for a quiet place to take a look at this 'Hasan'. I went to the park, sat and dangled my feet over the edge of a pond, and opened his book. On the inside cover, I saw his photo with his curls and half-closed dreamy eyes, which reminded me of my mother's. Then, I read a poem about a 'traveller' who closed his eyes because he was able to see the world with his heart. I sat and read; and his words started to flow like he was whispering to me, like it was just him and me in the universe. A while later, my tears came, too. I was exhausted. Until that moment, I did not

realize just how much. I had been walking on crutches for over a year due to a serious car accident I had a few years back, and both my body and my mind felt tired, constrained and complicated. When I saw Hasan's work, heard his words and saw the image of him in the book... I felt so happy that the person I had dreamt of falling in love with actually existed, and wasn't just a fragment of my imagination. I also felt very, very sad. I could not imagine why such beautiful people had to leave so quickly, especially in my part of the world. He just wanted to stand before the sea and breathe its air, but because he is Palestinian, forbidden to access the sea, he never learned how to swim. It felt like there was no space for the dreamers in this world. That story had a personal resonance, because my mother was also a dreamer, too free for our world. So instantly, I knew I wanted to create something dedicated to such beautiful people; those who saw things too clearly. Later on, I got to my friend's house and immediately said "I know what my next film is going to be about: it will be about Hasan Hourani". They all looked at each other and said "Mahmoud is Hasan's brother". And then everything fell into place, as I believe coincidences are like presents in the course of making any story or film. It felt like Hasan was calling me from the sea; a voice which I did not want to ignore – someone to whom I already owed my moment of silence. It took a while to understand my relationship to him. With time, I realized he was trying to tell me that I am free of all borders; I can go anywhere; and I don't have to be scared to use my heart. His book felt like a man's last will and testament; a reminder of all the small things we have been forced to live without for a very long time. All this came after only reading a few lines of his words. Hasan, 'the traveller everywhere', created a beautiful world, which he did not have in reality. Seeing that gave me the strength to create my own; a world filled with all the things I dreamt of and am still waiting for, I was going to fall in love with a boy, named Hasan, by the sea of Palestine.

**VS:** Where did your film take you in terms of locations, how did you decide where to go next? It is all very connected: Can you describe the map of your journey?

**MD:** It was more coincidental at first, then after a lot of writing, it evolved into the map, which is really that of a Palestinian. In Syria and Jordan, you have 'the refugee', and in the West Bank and the pre-1967 area (1948 Palestine), you have 'the occupied'. So it does not matter how scattered we are, or how divided our land is, what passport we carry, or what borders or walls we need to cross, the Palestinian issue is one; the differences are only in the details. Many try to fragment this map to dilute Palestine, to provide justification for the excuse and existence of Israel. So it is no longer Palestine but the "Gaza Strip", or the "Palestinian Territories", or the "Palestinian refugees" living outside these delineations who, according to politics, almost don't exist. I was very conscious to try not to fall prey to these geographic divisions, on a political level. But, considering the film is inspired by Hasan's book, "Hasan is Everywhere", I also wanted to respect the artist's narrative: 'Everywhere' meant free and without borders. So the narrative was built to respect a collective desire, which does not exist in reality... an open physical space that allows people to move/connect and build their lives, freely and without any constraints... a space where the individual's story is valuable and becomes the main element of construction for a 'desired' real life, or a film.

VS: The people in your film are very warm, filled with dreams and very open when talking about them. The boys you met in Jerusalem for example (here called “The Kings of Jerusalem”) are so articulate, and even while talking about an extremely upsetting situation, their eyes keep calm and friendly: “The dream we speak of doesn’t vanish when we wake up. It exists when you are sleeping, awake or dead. Its lifetime is longer than yours”. Or the man you spoke to who lived on the street previously known as the Bride of the Sea (now called Street 60): “A right isn’t lost if claimed”. Can you talk more about the people you met?

**MD:** I had a special chemistry with the characters as soon as I met them. But to be frank, there is nothing extraordinary about them, or about myself, or about my story. The only thing that gives the characters their uniqueness is a genuine representation, one that is not slave to the stereotypes found in mainstream media. For years, the Palestinian has been represented as a weak person, a victim, someone who deserves our pity, almost incapable of having strong charisma, because there is a more powerful, more progressive and even sexy Israeli occupier. But the reality on the ground, shows that the Palestinian is far from those stereotypes, with a lot more to offer. So, the presence of such characters and personalities is not particular to this film. What may be particular is the instinct that magically pulled me in their direction. In the early stages, there was no clear logic, but rather an emotional drive, where I did not really feel that this was a film and that these were characters. I allowed myself to fall in love a million times... with what they said, or their eyes, or their resemblance to Hasan, or their silence. Each of them has a story in Hasan’s book, which I dedicate to them. Mohammad, the refugee who’s always dreamt of travelling the world, was the “Exiled Sea Palm” living alone away from his family in a distant sea. The Kings of Jerusalem were the gatekeepers of the “City of the Domes”, the place where Hasan came to rest at the end of his journeys. Nael, a father of a baby girl with a lot of love to give, was the lonely dinosaur who had no country because he got tired of fighting. And Hazim, who dreamt of seeing his forbidden sea, was a fish that lived in a sea castle, “half immersed in water and half in the sky”, a home with “no walls” and where “the strong never ate the weak”. My mother, who is a main character in the film, and whose voice is always present in my head, comes in at the beginning and at the end, as a metaphor for my relationship with Palestine/Hasan... She is my motive, someone I can’t go back to, someone I miss speaking to, and someone I will wait to see in another dream or another world. My dream with her is different, no longer constrained and free. Even though we were very closely connected, I think it was the mutual need to speak about something this close to our hearts, which I believe, at the end, is behind this warm feeling you mention.

VS: Among the many things that fascinate me about your work is the way you think about and engage with space and time. You pose questions such as “How do you return to a place that only exists in your mind?” and say that you “turn moments into memories” when you make a film. What does filmmaking mean to you?

**MD:** It’s an empty white screen of ‘x’ pixels by ‘y’ pixels; a space to share all our desires, our fears, weaknesses, aspirations, dreams, stories, secrets... hopes. It’s a place where I can create a world that makes sense, a safe world where I feel totally free. This screen is also a mirror, a reflection, which looks at you straight in the face and expects total honesty. This is challenging and tough because, at times, we run from ourselves. Here, I can’t run, because without this total honesty, the image/story/film just doesn’t come together very well.

When I started making “My Love Awaits Me by the Sea” I was on a quest to answer a few personal questions I had in my head, which were giving me a hard time. I felt my whole life was built on a construct that didn’t belong to me – you can almost call it an illusion. A borrowed, concrete reality owned by history and by a previous generation, which I lived in through illusions. I owed it to myself – to my generation – to put forward a new set of questions belonging to us, because if we want Palestine to stay alive, we have to understand its issues in the present. I don’t have any precise answers but, today, I am able to miss a real place, friends, a corner in a street – this new fuel I have will enable me to continue this dream till eternity.

**VS:** The film includes scenes of hand drawings of the sea and landscapes. To me, it further illustrates the abstraction of a desire, a longing for a place that is (partly) only in your head. You also show still photographs of people and places, from old and from recent times. How did you approach the visual style of the film?

**MD:** Regarding my drawings, it was very challenging to find the right visual language because I also had Hasan’s drawings. I was very careful not to mix between the two. While making a film of this kind, one can execute the drawings in a sophisticated way and, for example, use animation, or get a professional to illustrate. But, the very idea of the film is to construct a dream/reality using one’s own mind. I wanted to create something that had a homemade feel to it, something very simple, to encourage the viewer to feel they can do the same. The room “Mais’ world” also illustrates this idea, and brings all the supporting visual elements together. It is a bland, characterless white wall that can take on any image, where you can construct any story you desire.

Over the years, I had also been collecting images without consciously thinking about their meaning or relevance – I just allowed myself to be driven by a simple “I like this”. When we came to the point of writing for the edit, I literally mapped things out and grouped images together haphazardly. At one point, I took a step back, and started the logical analysis. What was phenomenal was that I realized the subconscious is also creating its own story. Certain images were chosen from research before going to Palestine, or collected from videos I took from my first research trip to Palestine, where I allowed myself to be part of the experiment and be driven by emotion – meaning, I did not think, I just shot things that moved me. When we put everything together we found them connected, where a photograph, collected many years before the inception of this project, was also present in some form or another in the footage or narrative. One specific picture is the black and white one of the sea, which I begin and end my film with. I bought this picture in Damascus almost ten years ago. On its back was written “Jaffa 1947”. I later gave it as a present to a friend and wrote “This picture made it from Palestine to Damascus in 1947. I hope that one day it will make its way back”.

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## the director's biography

Having worked across the Middle East in architecture, graphic design and television documentaries, Mais Darwazah's independent film career started by making short experimental films; *It Wasn't a Question of Olives* (1', 2001), *The Human Puppet* (10', 2005), *Still Waiting* (3', 2007) and *Aisha's Journey* (8', 2009). After finishing her undergraduate degree in Interior Architecture from Kingston University (UK, 1997), she received the Chevening scholarship from the British Council, completing an MA in Documentary Directing at Edinburgh College of Art (UK, 2007). Her graduation film *Take Me Home* (54', 2008), was screened in more than 20 international film festivals. As part of an Arab feature documentary collective entitled *Family Albums* she completed *The Dinner* (25', 2012), which was co-produced with ARTE France and received the Special Mention audience award at Cinemed, 2012.

In 2010, Darwazah started developing *My Love Awaits Me By the Sea*, her first feature-length documentary, which has participated in several development workshops like the Berlinale's Talent Campus DocStation, and received numerous regional and international funds such as the Sundance Documentary Development Fund. Her film was selected to officially screen and premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, 2013. She works and resides in Jordan.

# the team; crew, cast & supporters

## **Producer**

Rula Nasser established her Jordanian production company The Imaginarium Films in 2010, with a vision to develop and produce globally appealing Arabic content. Nasser's involvement in the film industry started in 1999, working on several productions for the BBC and Discovery channels, as well as the well-known Australian television series Survival. She later joined the Royal Film Commission of Jordan and worked with them for five years on their Filmmaker's Support Program. Having built this vast experience in various areas of production enabled Nasser to produce more than four feature films in the last two years, which have participated in several prestigious festivals around the world. The Last Friday was the first Jordanian film to screen at the Berlinale 2011, and Waiting for P.O.Box was in the official competition of the Cannes Short International Film Festival, 2012. She was chosen by Variety magazine in 2012, as one of the top Ten Arab Producers to Watch.

## **Co-producer**

Michel Balagué together with Marcin Malaszczyk and Georg Tiller founded the production company Mengamuk Films, where he works as a producer and managing director. Mengamuk Films produces feature films, documentaries and artistic projects which tread new paths in form and content. These works challenge conventional methods of film production just as much as they cross the defining lines between various filmic and artistic forms of aesthetic expression. In 2013, Balagué produced Sieniawka, which premiered in the 63rd Berlinale and won the first film prize in FID Marseille. Recently, he has produced two short films, Domicile and Triangulum, both of which were premiered in major international film festivals (Berlinale & Rotterdam) and won several awards. In addition, he has founded the super 8 & 16mm collective LaborBerlin e.V. He has collaborated with several art institutions around the world and worked as a DOP on numerous films.

**Director & Author** Mais Darwazah

**Production** The Imaginarium Films, Little Wanderer Films

**Co-production** Mengamuk Films

**Producer** Rula Nasser

**Co-producer** Michel Balagué

**Creative Consultant** Hala Alabdalla

**Line Producer** Najwa Mubarki

**Cinematography** Arlette Girardot, Joude Gorani

**2nd Camera** Mais Darwazah

**Sound Engineer** Issa Qumsieh

**Editing** Wardan

**Sound Design & Mix** Jochen Jezussek

**Colour Grading** Jorge Piquer Rodriguez

**Live Drawings** Mais Darwazah

**Music** Cynthia Zaven

**Guests/Cast**

Ghayda Ajalyaqeen Darwazah, Hasan Hourani, Mohammad Reda Al-Haj Ahmad, Samer Hussam, Ammar Hanini, Muhannad Halawani, Nael, Leila & Maryam Kanj, Hazim Al Sharef, Mariam Yassine, Sheikh Amin A-Nabulsi, Hamdeh Mousa.

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