

At Berlin fest, Palestinian film tackles prison trauma

H haunted by his own time behind bars, Palestinian director Raed Andoni recreates a notorious Israeli interrogation center—and has ex-prisoners re-enact experiences in a bid to set their demons free. In the running for best documentary at the Berlin film festival, Andoni's "Istiyah Ashbah" (Ghost Hunting) examines the rarely documented collective trauma suffered by former Palestinian prisoners. "In Palestinian society, to survive detention and interrogation is like a rite of passage, you either come out a hero or you come out totally broken," the celebrated Ramallah-based filmmaker told AFP this week after the film's Berlinale premiere.

"And then people compare notes: how many days without sleep? How long in solitary?" the 45-year-old said. Having been imprisoned himself in his youth, he said he remained "haunted by flashbacks" such as the sound of doors slamming shut and the feeling of a fabric bag being pulled over his head. Shot over seven weeks in a hangar in the West Bank town of Ramallah, the film brings together around a dozen former detainees of all ages and backgrounds, who are asked to recreate the notorious Russian Compound jail in west Jerusalem from memory.

Role play

The participants rebuild the detention center in painstaking detail, from the size of their cells to the color of the tiles and even the pulley they say was used to lift inmates off the ground during what they described as torture sessions. Slowly they bring the place of their nightmares back to life—and as the walls go up, the memories come bubbling back to the surface, forcing the men to confront their memories and breaking taboos in the process. "I use everything I can in the film to help them dig into their subconscious," Andoni said, explaining that he wanted to peel away layer after layer of repression to find "the ghost inside".

For some of the ex-detainees it was too much and they walked away from the project. "I told everyone from the first day of shooting that you have the right to quit," he said, adding that there were psychologists on set to provide emotional support. His quest to push the men to their limits makes for uncomfortable viewing at times, particularly in the drawn-out torture scenes when the former inmates play the roles of Israeli interrogators or prison wardens.

Having already explored the topic of trauma in his first feature-length film "Fix Me", which delves into his own psychoanalysis sessions, Andoni said this time he wanted to face the painful memories of his detention through the eyes of others. The experience has been cathartic, he said. "When I think about it now I (think) back more to the movie, and that was the idea," he said. His young assistant director Wadee Hanani, who was held at the Russian Compound detention center for 45 days in 2009, said the film had helped him find some closure as well.

"I haven't yet digested everything that happened, I am on the way, I am more connected. But I need time." Israeli NGOs have accused Israel's Shin Bet domestic security agency of abusing Palestinians under interrogation in a manner so systematic it points to official endorsement. The country has also come under fire at the United Nations over allegations of prisoner abuse—charges it rejects. "Ghost Hunting" is being screened in the Panorama sidebar section of the Berlinale film festival. The award for best documentary will be handed out on February 18. — AFP



File photo shows young baseball fans watch as Texas Rangers center fielder Delino DeShields throws the ball away during the team's spring training baseball game against the Kansas City Royals in Surprise, Ariz. —AP photos

Spring break ideas

From beaches to Europe to new museums

Spring break is right around the corner. For some travelers, that means seeking out beaches and sunshine. Others may be tempted by Europe, which has become more affordable for Americans, or by spring skiing.

Airfare, destinations and bookings

Airfares vary considerably this time of year. Travelers not tied to a holiday week may find flights are cheaper at other times. Most colleges schedule a week off in March, but family vacations often revolve around school breaks for Easter (April 16 this year) or Passover (beginning April 10). Booking.com's data shows that travel March 18-April 30 will be 2 percent more expensive overall than last year, but a few domestic destinations are cheaper, including New Orleans, 8 percent cheaper than last spring; Miami Beach, 4 percent cheaper; and Tampa, Florida, 9 percent cheaper. And take a look at Europe: A strong US dollar has made vacations there much more affordable for Americans. Expedia's top 10 destinations for March and April are Cancun, Mexico, followed by Orlando, Florida; Las Vegas; New York; Miami; Los Angeles; London; Punta Cana, Dominican Republic; Phoenix and Paris.

American Express Travel's top five international destinations are London, Cancun, Rome, Paris and Tel Aviv. But American Express reports a few other spots spiking compared with last year, with spring bookings to Iceland up 150 percent, to Auckland, New Zealand, up 129 percent, to Madrid up 114 percent, to Casablanca, Morocco, 103 percent, and Zurich, 101 percent. AAA's bookings have three Florida destinations - Orlando, Fort Lauderdale and Miami - in the top five domestic destinations, along with Anaheim, California (home to Disneyland), and Las Vegas. Internationally, AAA's top five are Punta Cana, Rome, Jamaica, London and the Bahamas.

At StudentUniverse, which caters to travelers 18-26, top spring break destinations are London; Los Angeles; New York; Miami; Paris; Madrid; Orlando; Barcelona, Spain; Cancun; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Tokyo and Dublin. Debbie Sebastian, a Travel Leaders agent in Danville, Kentucky, says she's seeing lots of "groups traveling with Punta Cana being the most popular choice this year. The flight times and charter options make it a great option." March is typically the Miami airport's busiest month for domestic arrivals, with 1.08 million passengers in March 2016. Karen Malone, with Travel Leaders in Woodbury, Minnesota, says in addition to the Dominican Republic, Jamaica is also proving popular, with both destinations offering new resort choices. "We here in the frozen North are attracted to those turquoise blue waters and white sand beaches," she said. Cancun's always big for spring break, but it's not just a destination for the pina colada-and-party crowd. "Cancun also serves as the gateway for more quiet environs like Isla Mujeres, which is growing in popularity, as well as the entire Riviera Maya and all points directly south of Cancun, including Playa del Carmen," said Travel Leaders spokesman Steven Loucks. The region has all-inclusive resorts for every kind of traveler -

couples, families, multigenerational groups.

Some ski resorts schedule fun events to mark the end of winter, from concerts to costume contests and parties with a beach-and-barbecue theme. Vail, Colorado's Spring Back to Vail festival is April 14-16 and includes the World Pond Skimming Championships, where skiers land in the water. Breckenridge, Colorado, has a Spring Fever festival, April 1-23. Baseball fans often schedule trips to catch their favorite MLB teams getting ready for opening day. Late February through April 1, the Cactus League plays in the Phoenix area, the Grapefruit League plays in Florida.

Culture cultures

Not everybody hits the beach for spring break and not every family heads to theme parks. Wendy Perrin, founder of the travel planning site WendyPerrin.com, says her best spring vacations with two boys have been to Colonial Williamsburg in Williamsburg, Virginia; Paris; and a Panama Canal cruise. This year, she's taking the family to Morocco, "to introduce the kids to a completely different culture." If you like visiting museums, note two important openings this spring: the American Writers Museum in Chicago on May 16 and the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia on April 19.

Other noteworthy events include the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial 2017 in New York, a contemporary art survey opening March 17; in Kansas City, Missouri, special exhibitions at the National World War I Museum and an April 6 commemoration of the centennial of America's 1917 entry into the war; and at the Dallas Museum of Art, opening March 12, a survey of 200 works of Mexican modern art by Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and others. A new attraction opens at Graceland in early March, "Elvis Presley's Memphis," with museum exhibits, a stage and more. — AP



In this file photo, a visitor takes pictures of cherry blossom trees in full bloom on the tidal basin in Washington, DC.