

FORGET BAGHDAD

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The extraordinary film FORGET BAGHDAD (Jury Prize, **Locarno** 2002) offers a rare glimpse into a community which is little-known but extremely important in light of the current crises in the Middle East: the group variously known as “Sephardis,” “Mizrahim” or “Arab Jews,” that is, people of Jewish religion but Arab culture. A groundbreaking documentary, the film tells the forgotten story of the Iraqi Jews who represent a millennial tradition of Jewish presence in the region, where they formed an integral part of the society and often achieved high positions in politics, finance, and culture. Yet they were uprooted virtually overnight in the wake of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Framed by the life stories of four Iraqi-Israeli writers (Shimon Ballas, Sami Michael, Samir Naqash, Mousa Houry), former members of the communist party, *Forget Baghdad* reopens a lost chapter of Middle Eastern history. “What does it mean to be an enemy of your own past?” asks the filmmaker. As suggested by cultural studies scholar Professor Ella Shohat, who was also an advisor for the film: “FORGET BAGHDAD tells a cross-border tale of a religious minority in Iraq becoming an ethnic minority in Israel; Jews in Iraq and Iraqis in Israel.” The film also explores the painfully humorous stories of the younger generation represented by the Iraqi-Swiss filmmaker Samir himself (whose family also had to flee Iraq) and Iraqi-Israeli-American author Ella Shohat – both of whom grew up at homes, in Switzerland and Israel respectively, having to negotiate two worlds in conflict. In one particularly striking sequence, Shohat confronts the stereotyping of Mizrahi Jews on live Israeli talk-show TV. FORGET BAGHDAD deploys a rich array of archival materials-- British, Iraqi and Israeli newsreels, Hollywood features (*Son of the Sheikh*, *Exodus*, and Schwarzenegger’s *True Lies*), Israeli Bourekas comedies (*Sallah Shabati*) and Egyptian musical-comedies involving Muslims, Jews and Christians. At a moment of wars in the Middle East, and where peace seems more and more out of reach, this film offers a glimmer of sanity and hope. In this “entertaining, ironic and visually stunning film essay, Samir creates a brilliant tour de force” (Deborah Kaufman of the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival), and “achieves a density of ideas and images that extend the boundaries of the documentary form” (Vancouver International Film Festival), fashioning a narrative at once “timely and thought-provoking.” (VARIETY).

SAMIR is an award-winning filmmaker and producer, the most important filmmaker working today in Switzerland and Europe. His films are always probing and complex not only in their themes but also in their style, always sensitive, moving and stunning. His work has often addressed the subjects of immigration and multicultural issues in Europe. He cofounder of DSCHOINT VENTURE Company distinct for its highlighting the unusual work of innovative filmmakers.