

# Let there be pigs between them

Jews and Palestinians are confronted in absurd situations in *Le cochon de Gaza*



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## FILM REVIEW

Think Middle East and the words uprising, armed conflict, or at least political tension come to mind. Is it possible or is it just a utopian dream to pick up a newspaper and find that there's peace instead of conflagration, or to watch the news on TV and come across smiling faces instead of stern talking heads spilling out the day's bad news?

Common sense would say it's just an impossible dream. French director Sylvain Estibal may have thought otherwise when he first devised and then wrote a film script deeply rooted in reality — in the disputed Gaza Strip. He took at a good look at the situation there and maybe he decided it was meaty material for a comedy.

Estibal made all of this and much, much more, letting his imagination fly (literally) to script and direct an absurdly hilarious and entertaining film like *Le cochon de Gaza* (*When Pigs Have Wings*).

Across the divide between Jews and Palestinians there are, apparently, hordes of reasons (on each side) to hate and blame one another for the never-ending unrest in the region, for the deadly bombings and armed attacks are deeply and inextricably ingrained in their daily lives.

Delusional as his idea may have seemed at first, Estibal came up with this idea of concentrating his story on the one thing that unites Jews and Palestinians: their abhorrence of pigs as impure creatures. Both religions prohibit and punish not only the digestion but just mere contact with swine. Pigs, then, are one of the few (or many) things both peoples have in common. And a pig (an endearing one) is at the centre of an utterly comic dispute between Jews and Palestinians in *Le cochon de Gaza*.

It's highly unlikely but not impossible: after a storm cleans out the fishing area on the Palestine side, an impoverished fisherman, Jafaar (Sasson Gabai), nets only a couple of small fish not worth looking at. Back home, his wife, Fatima (Baya Belal), waits for a big catch — to put on the table and to help pay off their mounting debts. Jafaar is on the brink of humiliation. The following day is exactly like the day before: no fish on his net, but a heavy load not easy to identify: a pig.

The rationale in the film goes that the pig may have slipped from a Vietnamese cargo ship or fishing vessel and miraculously survived the fall, only to be caught in Jafaar's net. If a biblical twist is needed for this unthinkable event, Jafaar is not able to find it. He only knows that religion forbids contact with the animal, preventing him from touching it and throwing it back to the sea.

Determined to get rid of the unsightly beast, Jafaar tries at first to sell it (secretly) for a profit, but there are no takers on either side of the Gaza strip. Man meets pig, tries to hide it, must go through a series of misadventures to conceal the fact that he's in possession of a devilishly impure beast. This is the basic storyline of Estibal's *Le cochon de Gaza*, a most ingenuous movie that defies the limits of credibility by interspersing feasible occurrences with completely unrealistic events.

Most performers agree that comedy is much, much harder than drama. Comedians who face an unpredictable audience know this very well: the same trick or joke may work wonders with some, and the next day the same prank may prove utterly disappointing.

Estibal's *Le Cochon de Gaza* is unlikely to go the fate of staged productions. Although no such thing as infallibility exists, *Le cochon de Gaza* is so seamlessly put together and acted against such a tragic background as the Gaza strip that it becomes a most suitable territory for humour.

The same streak of imagination may have been running through the minds of Estibal and other filmmakers, such as Argentina's Alejandro Borenstein, who last year pulled one off (an extraordinary one, at that) with that small gem of a comedy titled *Un cuento chino*. As a mere reminder, the action in *Un Cuento chino* is set off by the completely unexpected and improbable event of a cow falling off a passing plane and landing on a boat where a couple of Chinese lovers are making out.

Action in *Le cochon de Gaza* too moves forward after an implausible event, but suspension of disbelief is all it takes to enjoy this delicious comedy about a man who, unknown to him, exposes the absurd stance of both sides in the conflict between the Jewish and the Palestine.

A detestable, ignominious, unruly beast like a *cochon* cannot be easily persuaded to walk off. If you do succeed, though, where's the animal going to step on? On forbidden territory as well. Kick the ball to the other side, and it'll come bouncing back, the acid humour in *Le cochon de Gaza* seems to be telling us.

Although the humour in *Le cochon...* may at first seem full of commonplaces, it's the way Estibal stitches the narrative that gives the whole a good amount of porcine effectiveness.

The struggle for power and territorial expansion are always there, but when a *cochon* steps in among horrified Jews and Palestinians you cannot but laugh your heart out. It's not that a pig is intrinsically comic, it's us humans who are comically absurd in our fundamentalist view of unquestionable dogmas. Call it faith, call it

religious devotion, but when things get out of hand there's not much you can do but laugh.

And if you happen to be an animal rights activist, fret not: *Le cochon de Gaza* does not mistreat the animal in question in any way, nor does it poke fun at or question its eating and hygiene habits. Once again, it's us humans who are ridiculed in this extremely funny (and at times thought-provoking) *Cochon de Gaza*.

## **PRODUCTION NOTES**

*Le cochon de Gaza / When Pigs Have Wings / Cuando los chanchos vuelen*. France-Germany-Belgium, 2011. Written and directed by: Sylvain Estibal. Cinematography by: Romain Winding. Editing by: Damien Keyreux. Music by: Aqualactica, Boogie Balagan. With: Sasson Gabai, Baya Belal, Myriam Tekaiia, Gassan Abas, Khalifa Natour. NC13. Distributed by: Distribution Company. Running time: 98 minutes.