

'Ghost Hunting' ('Istiyad ashbah'): Film Review | Berlin 2017

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Courtesy of Berlinale

THE BOTTOM LINE

A boldly original take on the phantom menace of post-traumatic stress. [🐦](#)

A group of Palestinian ex-prisoners re-enact their nightmarish interrogation memories in director Raed Andoni's prize-winning Berlinale documentary.

When your head is full of unresolved trauma after being brutally interrogated by the Israeli security forces, who you gonna call? *Ghost Hunting* offers a boldly original solution. Part improvised docudrama and part group therapy session, Palestinian director Raed Andoni's unconventional movie project brings together a disparate cast of ex-prisoners to first rebuild their own former jail as a film set, then to re-enact their painful memories on camera. It is a fascinating experiment, though inevitably a little disjointed and not wholly satisfying.

A co-production between Palestine, France, Switzerland and Qatar, *Ghost Hunting* premiered at the Berlinale, where it won the main documentary prize and one of three audience awards. The politically charged subject matter and unorthodox treatment should snag plenty more festival interest, particularly at events that highlight human rights and Middle East issues. In terms of wider public exposure, small-screen outlets seem more likely than theaters, though some specialist outfits may be tempted.

A former detainee himself, Andoni begins the film by placing recruitment ads for fellow Palestinian ex-prisoners. Most who turn up to audition have spent time in the so-called "Russian compound" of al-Moskobiya, West Jerusalem's notorious interrogation and detention center. Their treatment there routinely included various forms of physical and psychological torture, including sleep deprivation, solitary confinement and worse. Strong-willed inmates who refuse to crack under pressure are typically feted as folk heroes, but Andoni believes this can prove problematic, since many repress horrific memories that later return to torment them.

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The loose narrative thread of *Ghost Hunting* is the true story of former detainee Mohammed "Abu Atta" Khattab, who appears in the documentary scenes as himself, and is also portrayed in the dramatic vignettes by professional actor Ramzi Maqdisi. Andoni initially planned to make a more conventional scripted drama, but it evolved instead into a kind of deconstructed documentary that records the auditions, rehearsals, set construction and shooting process. He also includes fleeting episodes of dreamlike animation, based on his own hallucinatory flashbacks to being incarcerated at 18, which are strangely lovely but frustratingly brief.

Overall, though, *Ghost Hunting* is a fairly no-frills affair with a hand-held, fly-on-the-wall feel. Most of its emotional punch comes from the prickly power dynamics at play on Andoni's set, especially when the cramped jail cells are completed and former inmates switch roles to play Israeli guards, re-enacting their brutal treatment from the other side of the fence. There are angry eruptions, cathartic confessions and minor outbursts of violence: some staged, others real. A psychologist was present on set to monitor cast and crew.

Shot entirely inside a warehouse in Ramallah on the West Bank, *Ghost Hunting* is emphatically not an exercise in rigorous journalistic inquiry. Andoni has no interest in educating lay audiences about the wider political context, or even about the backstories of his cast. He offers scant hard facts beyond a few shock bullet points: that 750,000 Palestinian have been incarcerated by Israel since 1967, for example, or one in four of the entire male population.


Clearly a passion project for the director, *Ghost Hunting* is a little rambling and diffuse in intent. If it has any firm take-home message, it shows us how bottling up trauma can be highly damaging, and also how Palestinian prisoners use art, poetry and music to escape inside themselves during the soul-crushing grind of confinement. There are more informative films about the Israel-Palestine conflict, but not many this original.

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Production companies: Les Films de Zayna, Akka Films, Dar Films
Cast: Ramzi Maqdisi, Mohammed "Abu Atta" Khattab, Raed Andoni, Atef Al-Akhras, Wadee Hanani, Adnan Al-Hatab, Abdallah Moubarak
Director-screenwriter: Raed Andoni
Producers: Nicolas Wadimoff, Philippe Coeytaux, Raed Andoni
Executive producer: Palmyre Badinier
Director of photography: Camille Cottagnoud
Production designer: Dominique Treibert
Editor: Gladys Joujou
Venue: Berlin International Film Festival (Panorama)
Sales company: UDI, France

94 minutes

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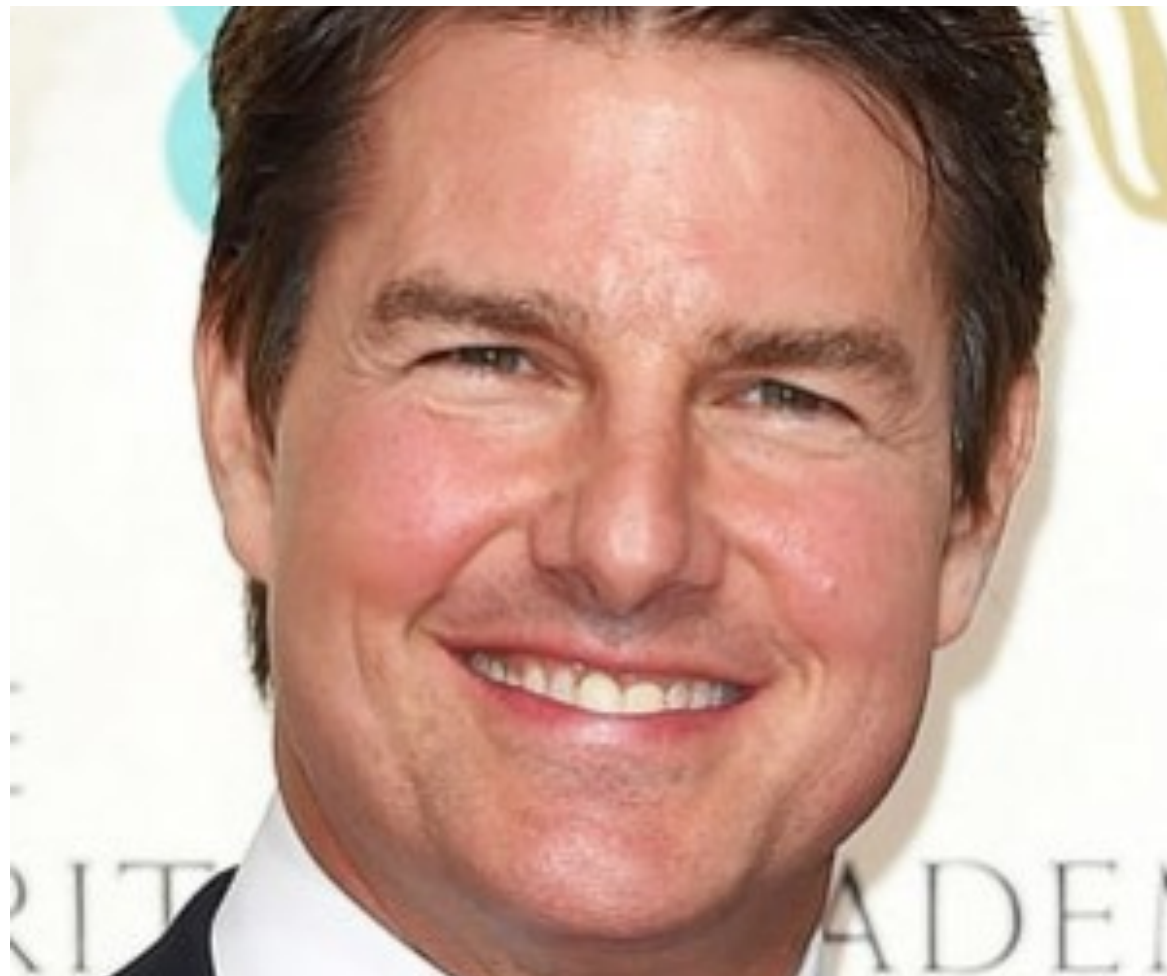


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