

## FILM REVIEW

# Where figures from the past stand tall

In animated documentary 'Waltz With Bashir,' Ari Folman attempts to come to grips with the terrible events he witnessed during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon

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STAFF REPORTER

Comics are for kids, right? Wrong. Over and over again, great animated films, going all the way back to *Bambi* (1942) have taken on big questions of life and death, showing the enormous potential of a medium unconfined by the superficial realism of actors and sets. Now there comes along *Waltz With Bashir* (Vals Im Bashir) by Israeli filmmaker and former soldier Ari Folman, which despite its use of animation techniques that look positively prehistoric to people brought up on the products of Pixar, may well be one of the best films about war made in recent years.

At its most superficial level, *Waltz With Bashir* deals with the 1982 Lebanon War and ends with the horrific events of the massacre by Christian Phalangist Militia of Palestinian men, women and children at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps outside Beirut as the Israeli army stood idly by (or as in some accounts, fired flares into the sky to help light the grisly work). But to say no more than that is like describing *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as a film about the war in Vietnam.

*Waltz With Bashir*, like most great war films, is not just about bombs, bullets and bayonets. It takes war and the life of soldiers as its background, but its central themes are those of memory and guilt, and how, in a world full of horror, we are able to forget many uncomfortable facts. Because the film is largely about what happens in the mind rather than action on the ground, the animation medium works remarkably well, at some points imitating the format of a talking heads documentary, at others creating highly dramatic images of war, and then drifting seamlessly into a phantasmagoria of dreams and waking nightmares. Folman's use of a

combination of cutouts and flash animation may seem clumsy at first, but is capable of powerful effects, in the manner of woodcut prints or posterization.

This is particularly effective in some dream and combat sequences, where the conscious artistry of the representation puts the emphasis on perception, and creates a distance with actuality — after all, dreams and moments of extreme stress are generally about what we see rather than what is actually there. *Waltz With Bashir* opens with a dream of wild dogs on the rampage, the product of the uneasy conscience of one of Folman's former army buddies. The recounting of the dream sets him wondering how he has been able to so completely forget his own presence among the forces that stood outside the camps as hundreds, or even thousands (the figures are widely disputed), were killed.

Through a series of interviews, the voices of the actual speakers superimposed over animated figures, and tied together by Folman's own narration, a picture of the Israeli forces in Lebanon is drawn. Due to the nature of the film, *Waltz With Bashir* is able to go beyond the depiction of scared young men let loose in a lawless land with heavy weapons, to incorporate recollection, hindsight, dreams and fantasy, as the story unfolds in a loose, rather episodic manner, moving gradually toward a terrible event that these soldiers cannot, or will not, take any action to stop.

As Folman goes about his interviews, various seemingly tangential tales of the war emerge. There is the terrible guilt of the sole survivor of a tank crew caught by snipers and the madness of another recruit who charges out into the crossfire in a dance of death,

firing his heavy machine gun as he reels about against a background plastered with huge posters of Bashir Gemayel, the Phalangist president whose assassination would trigger bloody revenge from his militia. (This episode is the source of the film's title).

The terrible deed presented in the film is not so much the massacre itself, but the fact that Israel stood by and let it happen. Folman makes quite clear that the actual act of killing was performed by the Phalangists, but while this might absolve Israel from the actual butchery, guilt at a personal level is not lessened. It is this guilt, and the surprise at how it can be so effectively repressed in himself and others, that makes *Waltz With Bashir* so tantalizing. The specter of the Holocaust is acknowledged, and the question of how a people who suffered in the death camps of Auschwitz could brook the actions of the Phalangists is put on the table. But there are no easy answers, and no particular redemption.

Many other questions are raised in *Waltz With Bashir*, some related to the complexities of conflict in the Middle East, but most are about how very easy it is to live in denial of the terrible events that surround us. As rumors of the massacre emerge, a series of interviewees at different levels of the military hierarchy say they heard about it from someone else; nobody had actually seen it, so perhaps it wasn't really happening. Folman seems to suggest that you can do a terrible thing by doing nothing at all.

The film ends with a transition to real documentary footage of the aftermath of the massacre, as the surviving residents mourn the dead. The sound of their despair rings in your ears long after you leave the cinema.



## Film Notes

### WALTZ WITH BASHIR (VALS IM BASHIR)

DIRECTED BY: ARI FOLMAN

WITH THE VOICES OF: RON BEN-YISHAI, RONNY DAYAG, ARI FOLMAN, DROR HARAZI

RUNNING TIME: 90 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN HEBREW WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

• *Waltz With Bashir* was favored to win the Oscar for Best Foreign-Language Film. But in one of the few surprises at this week's Academy Awards, Hollywood gave the prize to Japanese film *Departures*.

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