

Review: Open Bethlehem (Leila Sansour, 2014)



When 'Christmas spirit' is being forced down your throat on a daily basis, it's easy to forget the conflict that still resonates in the town of Bethlehem today. Famously known as the birthplace of Christ, the town is a hotspot for tourism, but remains a scarce source of revenue. In her labour of love, Leila Sansour has spent the past five years documenting the town's segregation from the world, and her attempts to combat it.

A woman returns to her childhood home in the city of Bethlehem for the first time in years to discover little has changed since the conflict that overruled the city when she was a child. Driven by the great wall that divides the area, she campaigns to bring it down and restore Bethlehem's communal spirit.

Her story is one of expectation versus reality; a wholly personal one that depicts a woman driven by fantasy to return home, only to be overwhelmed with disappointment. By turns both personal and political, Sansour favours the reportage of the former, leading to a factually driven documentary that, whilst informative, doesn't dwell on her evidently interesting personal life. She tells stories of her childhood with her father in Russia; a man who did everything in his power to bring the rights of education to Bethlehem. It's a connection both powerful and broken, one that would give the film a little more colour. Sansour's passion is always visual, but seldom tangible. A deeper look into her own life in Bethlehem could have worked wonders here.

Unafraid, it doesn't force itself to end on a strong,

uplifting note. It understands its place as a documentary, and not a piece of work that is engaging through obtuse imagery nor dialogue. It tells a story, and it tells it very well.

It's out to inform rather than wholly entertain, but Open Bethlehem is effective in its intentions – for the ill informed, this is absolutely essential viewing.



Open Bethlehem is released in UK Cinemas on December 5th