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CHRONICLE OF A DISAPPEARANCE

(SEGELL IKHTIFA)

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Produced by Elia Suleiman for Dhat Prods. in association with the Fund for the Promotion of Israeli Quality Film, European Union Media Project, Centre National de la Cinematographie.

Directed, written by Elia Suleiman. Camera (color), Marc Andre Batinge; editor, Anna Ruiz; art direction, Samir Srouji, Hans Ter Elst; sound (Dolby SR stereo), Jean-Paul Mugel. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (Window on Images), Aug. 28, 1996. Running time: 88 MIN.**

With: Ula Tabari, Elia Suleiman, Fuad Suleiman, Nazira Suleiman.

Returning to live in Israel after many years in New York, Palestinian director Elia Suleiman uses his privileged position of insider/outsider to take a witty and ironic, yet heartfelt, look at how Israel's Arab population has lost its national identity. Clearly made and carefully structured, with numerous comic elements, the likable "Chronicle of a Disappearance" is an easy film to watch, especially suitable for fest and TV auds. Pic won the Luigi De Laurentiis award at Venice for first film.

What makes "Chronicle" revealing for Western auds is Suleiman's penetrating observation of the urban Arab "middle class" — pensioners, souvenir-shop merchants, a girl trying to rent an apartment. Gradually pic piles up contradictions while offering no simplistic answers for Palestinians living uneasily under the Israeli flag.

Film is structured in two parts. The first poses as a docu showing the inertia of daily life in Nazareth and the humorous paradoxes of modern life. A retired man plays computer games while puffing on a traditional hubble-bubble. Two bored men fill up "holy water" bottles from the tap to sell in their souvenir shop. On the Sea of Galilee, vacationers ride noisy jet skis.

In the second part, "Jerusalem, a Political Diary," the fixed-camera sobriety of Nazareth gives way to a moving camera and a more openly fictional view of city life. Suleiman appears more or less as himself, a filmmaker who has returned from exile, looking for inspiration. Grotesque, surreal images recur of Israeli police cars roaming the streets, hunting down terrorists. A young woman searching for an apartment is caught between two worlds: In the Arab part of the city, it isn't proper for women to live on their own, but on the Jewish side no one will rent to her because she's an Arab. She seems to join a terrorist group concocting bombs, but that may be part of Suleiman's imagination.

Blurring the line between documentary and fiction, the theater of repressed violence and the gentle comedy of everyday life, "Chronicle of a Disappearance" is much more complex than it at first appears. In contrast to the know-it-all journalists sitting around the American Colony hotel discussing "why all these people hate each other," Suleiman collects images without answers, like memories.

Marc Andre Batinge's cinematography reflects the shifting tone of Suleiman's vision, from homey realism to garish staginess. Soundtrack, chosen from a number of countries, is dominated by catchy Arab tunes including pieces by Alla, Abed Azrie, Natacha Atlas, Samira Saffo, Naiat, Pemahan, Yma Shama — and songs by Leonard Cohen. —*Deborah Young*