

Acting is first-rate in 'Janem Janem'

By Jan Lisa Huttner

Published: Tuesday, February 20, 2007 8:35 PM EST

"Give three good reasons why we are here," Eldi asks his wife Efrat in one of the opening scenes of Haim Bouzaglo's wonderful film "Janem Janem."

"Because we were born here; because the climate is good here; because we have no other country," she replies.

Solid reasons all, but Eldi is not convinced; he's a high school history teacher who has lost his grip on his subject. Efrat, a psychotherapist, takes a practical approach and suggests a vacation. So Eldi heads to Ben Gurion Airport with a ticket to Paris in hand, and then he disappears.

The basic plot of "Janem Janem" is straightforward enough: Eldi joins a group of "guest workers" who have just arrived at the airport, and he lives among them as a construction worker in Tel Aviv. Most of the men in Eldi's work crew are from Romania and Turkey. They've come for the money, leaving behind their families and all of the comforts of home. Without belaboring the point, Bouzaglo makes it clear that these men have opportunities in Israel that make the trip worthwhile for them.

Eldi is quiet and watchful. He's deliberately low-key because he doesn't want to call attention to himself, but over time he begins to join in the group camaraderie. Meanwhile, a security officer named Navo questions Efrat, seeking clues that might help locate Eldi.

The pace is so even and the characters are so specific that for a while this story could be set in any "First World" country, but inevitably, just as the characters have relaxed into the everyday, we're back in Israel again.

The acting is first-rate. Danny Rytenberg, who heads the cast as Eldi, has minimal dialogue and yet he is able to communicate the most intricate emotions with his eyes and his body language.

This is a huge cast for a film that runs a mere 105 minutes, but plot elements don't convey its emotional power. Bouzaglo, serving as both screenwriter and director, has a profound sympathy for all of his characters, and he has created a fully-embodied world in which even the minor roles have weight and dimensionality.

"Janem Janem" was nominated for five Ophir Awards by the Israel Film Academy in 2005, including Best Director and Best Lead Actor. The soundtrack is also excellent, with an energetic blend of world music cuts.

"Janem Janem" will be screened as part of the Hartford Jewish Film Festival on Sunday, March 11, at 7 p.m., at the Hoffman Theater, the Carol Autorino Center, Saint Joseph College in West Hartford.

Jan Lisa Huttner is Arts & Culture Critic for Chicago's JUF News.

© Jan Lisa Huttner (2/1/07) Special for the '07 Hartford CT Jewish Film Festival

<http://www.jewishledger.com/articles/2007/02/21/news/news06.prt>