

FILM

The Band's Visit

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The first feature by the Israeli writer and director Eran Kolirin, "**The Band's Visit**" (Israel-France, 2007, colour, 87 mins), presents eight Egyptian members of the Alexandra Ceremonial Police Orchestra, stranded before an airport terminal in Israel. They have just landed, all dressed in blue suits and blue caps. While parked tourist buses and cars drive off, there is nobody to receive them. An old man takes photos of the band members. The band's leader, Zacariah Tewfiq (Sasson Gabai) speaks to somebody in the local municipality, but the lady at the municipal office disconnects. A band member, Khaled fails to obtain any information from the information desk. A passerby girl drops a coin in the hat of a band member. Khaled sings a Valentine song to the beautiful eyes of a girl, at the airport counter. The band boards a bus for Bet. Senior musicians discuss new pieces, which require orchestration. At Bet, the band chief enquires of the Arab Cultural Centre. The Nearest cultural department office was at Petah Tikra.

The band walks despondently along foot paths, with luggage strollers and musical instruments. Locals address the band chief, Tewfiq as 'General'. Conversations with Israeli locals are in awkward and halting English, who offer bits of hospitality. The Band members are besides a sea coast. They dine at Dina's (Ronit Elkabetz) restaurant. While Simon plays the clarinet for 'ouverture concerto', Khaled plays draught with a local Israeli man. Dina informs that there were no more buses in the small town. A local, Itzy and Dina offer the stranded Egyptians shelter for the night. Tewfiq reminds the fellow musicians that they are representing Egypt, and should conduct themselves with dignity, in all delicate situations. Dina's neighbour, Maimon, also extends friendship. Makeshift beds are arranged by Dina, who also offer coffee and water melons. The Egyptians are constrained by limited money. Tewfiq and Dina go for a drive in Dina's car. There is a man at a telephone booth, waiting for a call from his girl friend, for several months. Khaled stays at home. Three members from the Band join a dinner at Itzy's place. It is Itzy's wife's birthday. Simon plays the clarinet. Itzy's father was a musician, and his mother was a calypso dancer. Itzy and his father sing a lullaby. Kamal rings up the Egyptian embassy from a public call office. An Israeli man whistles. Tewfiq explains to Itzy's family that the Band plays classical Arab music, which sprang from a man's soul.

On the streets Khaled meets Papi, in front of a cafe, and encounter two girls. They go for a drive in Papi's car. Dina is a divorcee. At Itzy's party, Dina's boyfriend, Sathi, walks in with wife and two kids. When Dina puts on a soulful disc, Khaled plays the clarinet. At a skating rink, Khaled approaches a girl, while finding it difficult to keep balance. Dina and Tewfiq sit on a street Kerb bench. Dina imagines a park with children, besides the sea. Tewfiq mimes conducting an orchestra. His wife died three years ago; and he has one son, who committed suicide after a scolding. As the music concerto ends, Itzy's son falls asleep in a small room. There are tons of loneliness all around. Kamal is informed at the telephone booth, to await instructions. Dina confides her love

for films with Omar Sharif and Fattel Hamana. Returning from town, Khaled sings Chuck Berry's "My funny Valentine".

At Dina's place, Dina arranges for wine, when Tewfiq wakes up at night, he finds Dina and Khaled making love. Outside on the streets, one band member sings, another plays cello, while another plays harpichord. Next morning, Tewfiq thanks Dina, and the band leaves. Shortly at a performance, the Israeli flag and the Egyptian flag flutter, and Tewfiq conducts.

Kolirin plays the band members in the centre of vast landscapes, which emphasizes their isolated existence. The masculine Egyptian faces contrast with the jolly, blue costumes. The narrative abounds in visual humour. While the Egyptians and the Israelis study each other closely, there are no hints of hostility. Nor does love gush out spontaneously. The uncomfortable silences are broken by bits of music and humorous situations. The professional reserve of the band accentuates the pervading melancholia. As Shai Goldman's camera cuts from one face to another, in drawn close-ups, the serious and the comedy merge. Music and original songs by Habib Hanna conjures peace in the desert town, along the sea. The films were screened at New Delhi's Osian Cine Fan's Asian and Arab Film Festival. (July 08) □□□