

Movie Review: 'The Band's Visit'

by Arthur Salm

The men in the Alexandria Police Band are way, way out of their element. Having arrived in Israel to play at the opening of an Arab cultural center, they've taken a bus in exactly the wrong direction and now find themselves stranded outside a small desert town.

'THE BAND'S VISIT' - Fresh from Egypt, the Alexandria Police Band finds itself stranded in Israel's Negev desert in the comedy 'The Band's Visit.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) There they stand, eight Egyptians with their instruments and their rolling luggage, plunked down at a Yawehforsaken bus stop. Stiff in their powder-blue band uniforms, they're ridiculous, pitiful, dazed dignified.

In the middle distance stand the town's bland apartment buildings, looking similarly stranded. Striding purposefully up to an outdoor cafe, Tewfiq (Sasson Gabai), their sad, tightly strung leader, asks Dina (Ronit Elkabetz), the cafe's owner, for directions to the Arab cultural center.

"No Arab culture here," she tells him, bemused. "No Israeli culture. No culture."

"Dead," a local hanger-out agrees.

No more buses today, either. Dina what-the-hells and takes them in, bringing Tewfiq and Khaled (Saleh Bakri), a young, Chet-Baker-crooning Lothario, to her apartment, assigning a co-worker to take the rest of the band to his. They will spend the long evening and night together, these disappointed, end-of-the-road Israelis and out-of-their-depth Egyptians.

Nothing much will happen. Dina drags a reluctant Tewfiq out to get something to eat. Khaled accompanies a girl-shy Israeli boy to a roller rink, where, in hilarious slo-mo slapstick, the Egyptian passes along some rudimentary romantic pointers. The other band members share an uncomfortable dinner with a bickering family, from whom the no. 2 conductor, the wistful Simon (Khalifa Natour), finds some musical inspiration.

"The Band's Visit" blends gentle comedy and softly aching pathos into a low-key, deeply affecting wonder, a sort of alternate-universe version of Aki Kaurismaki's raucous 1989 hoot "Leningrad Cowboys Go America." (Both films betray, or rather, brandish Jim Jarmusch roots.)

Wryly written and slyly directed by Eran Kolirin, "The Band's Visit" is grounded by impeccable performances from the Israeli/Palestinian cast, particularly those of Gabai and Elkabetz. She's sexy, cynical, weary, almost but not quite into middle age; he's there and then some, a stolid true believer in the Alexandria Police Band, keeping the faith despite heartbreaking personal tragedy. In their awkward, then increasingly unguarded conversation - charming, even cute without, somehow, veering into cutesy - Tewfiq and Dina discover a soothing congruency in their troubled souls.

The gears in the various story lines whirl with so little friction that the mechanism seems overly lubricated - by schmaltz, perhaps? Maybe; but if so, the source of the stuff is genuine.

"The Band's Visit." Running time: 1 hour, 29 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.

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