

# 'Shatila' looks back at a period most would rather forget

**H**ARET HREIK: Sporadically fought between 1985 and 1987, the War of the Camps was an integral part of the long-running Lebanese Civil War.

Director Pepe Danquart, whose 1998 film about the War of the Camps "Shatila: Passage to Palestine" screened at the Hangar of UMAM Documentary and Research on Tuesday evening, told his large and mixed audience that his project was "an exercise in dealing with a period that most people in Lebanon would rather forget."

While admitting the documentary did not hold back the "brutal scenes and cruel words," he denied that it was about apportioning guilt. He

said he rather sought to jolt political actors out of a collective silence about a significant part of Lebanon's recent history.

The main protagonists in the conflict were Nabih Berri's Amal movement and Palestinian fac-

## || Danquart 'sought to jolt political actors out of a collective silence'

tions loyal to Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization, who'd been forced to evacuate Beirut in 1982.

"Shatila" is the fifth film in UMAM's screening series Confronting Memories, which

seeks to re-energize debate about Lebanon's Civil War. As UMAM co-director Monika Borgmann states, the series is about "initiating debate on the past" because it is only through doing so that "the civil war will stop serving as political ammunition for the present."

The first part of the film consists of a series of harrowing video clips, shot inside Shatila by resident Yussuf Ali Naffa during the three years in which the Amal Movement laid siege to the Palestinian Camp.

Crouching behind debris or zooming through bullet holes in the wall, the camera gives the viewer a glimpse of the conditions under which the thousands of residents lived their lives.

Kalashnikovs in hand, young men sprint up and down darkened allies, while, underground, hundreds of women and children sat packed into bunkers. The wails of the women as yet another body is brought down compete with the shouts of children desperate to escape the confines of their bunker.

The second half of the film is an interview conducted over 20 years later with a former Amal fighter. Hidden behind a face-mask, he describes his role in the battle, alluding to such subjects as "liquidation" but avoiding embellishments. "It was a war. Bad things happen," he said, a refrain reiterated throughout the reconstruction period by the civil war veterans populating Lebanon's political class.

The ex-fighter claims that the War of the Camps was essentially a militia affair that involved few if any civilians. As the audience has just watched footage to suggest otherwise, his remark draws indignant snorts from the crowd.

The Palestinians brought the war on themselves, he claims, by "humiliating" Shiites in their own country – apparently a reference to the PLO's occupation of swathes of southern Lebanon from the pre-civil war period until 1982.

The two halves of Danquart's documentary joined by a narrative meant to provide context to the Camps War. While the director seeks to ensure the narrative remains largely neutral, the power of the footage ultimately overrides these efforts. On the one hand, we see the suffering of women and children under siege. On the other, we meet an arrogant former fighter, remorseless 20 years after the events.

Danquart began the evening by stating he was "not interested in condemning but in remembering." By dint of the way in which the film was designed – the footage of victims and the interview with a fighter – "Shatila" leaves little room for such nuanced conclusions. By portraying a stark picture of villain and victim, the film commits an injustice to both. – *The Daily Star*