

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

Mo'

Feature Film Treatment

Written and directed by Youssef El Khoury

Script by Youssef El Khoury and Chris Churchill



CULTSCALE

THE FILM

Mo' is a feature film about a man who spends his whole life searching for his mother, finds her on live television in front of sixty million people, and then has to sit across from her in a hotel room and discover she isn't who he needed her to be.

It's 2007. Mohammed Shammass is twenty-six years old. He's sitting on a television set in Amman, and the entire Arab world is watching him. He's about to meet the woman who left him in a garbage box during the Israeli invasion of Beirut twenty-five years earlier.

What happens next became one of the most extraordinary moments in the history of Arab television. What happened after that, when the cameras turned off, is the film.

ACT ONE · THE ORPHANAGE

BEIRUT, 1990

The civil war is over. Its ruins are everywhere. Eight-year-old Mo has spent most of his life inside a Beirut orphanage with his brother Ahmad. They share a room, they share the same loss, and they share nothing else. Ahmad is built heavier, fights faster, draws trouble the way Mo draws silence. When older boys corner Mo in the stairwell, it's Ahmad who arrives first.

Mo doesn't talk about what he remembers. He remembers enough. Two children lowered into a barrel. A lid pulled over them. The light closing like a door. Then darkness, and the sound of his brother crying next to him.

THE BICYCLE REPAIRMAN

An old man comes to the orphanage every few weeks. He fixes the children's bicycles. He talks to Mo and Ahmad longer than he talks to anyone else. He whispers things to them. He tells them he's their grandfather.

His name is Ali Shammass, and he is their father.

Ali is a man ruined by guilt. He was a fighter during the war, often away, unable to protect his family when it mattered. He knows what happened to his children. He knows who put them in the barrel. He has chosen to stand outside the orphanage

and watch them grow up rather than take them into a life he can't provide. The bicycle visits are his version of fatherhood: quiet, regular, and unbearable to witness.

THE REVELATION

Mo is sixteen. A filmmaker named Ziad Doueiri arrives at the orphanage looking for a boy to cast in a film about growing up in wartime Beirut. He picks Mo. The film is **West Beirut**. It opens at Cannes Directors' Fortnight, wins the International Critics' Prize at Toronto, and makes Mo's face familiar across the Arab world.

The money is small. The recognition is real. Mo leaves the orphanage.

And then the bicycle repairman contacts him. Not as a grandfather this time. As his father. Ali tells Mo the truth: he disguised himself to stay close to his sons. He tells Mo he has a sister, Nisrine, raised by aunts. And he tells Mo his mother is alive.

That sentence changes everything.

ACT TWO · THE SEARCH

THE OBSESSION

Mo doesn't want answers. He wants a single physical act: to hold his mother. He's carried her photograph his entire life, the image of a woman he can't actually remember. The search begins in Beirut. He finds his maternal grandparents. He knocks on their door.

They deny knowing the woman in the photograph.

He comes back. And comes back. Finally, worn down by his resemblance to their daughter, they let him inside. But they give him nothing. They tell him his mother is in Africa. They refuse contact details. The cruelty runs through this family like water.

One day, during a visit, Mo hears his uncle on the phone. He grabs the receiver. He speaks into it: "Mom. I'm Mohammed, your son."

The voice on the other end is cold. She asks a few flat questions. She says she's in Africa. She hangs up.

AL-FORSA

It's Ramadan 2007. Youssef El Khoury's game show Al-Forsa is the biggest thing on Arab television: a nightly broadcast where contestants pursue a dream or a

goal, and the audience votes them through. Mo enters with one request. He wants to find his mother.

He tells his story on live television. The audience doesn't believe him. They know his face from **West Beirut**. They think he's an actor playing a part. The votes don't come.

But from Gaza, behind the Israeli blockade, a woman is watching. She recognizes the toddler she lost to the invasion. She calls the production office.

Her name is Wafa. She's remarried. She has three sons. She lives in Gaza.

THE PASSAGE

Wafa's voice reaches Mo through a phone call broadcast live. Then through a satellite link to Palestinian television. But a voice isn't enough. Mo wants her in the room.

Gaza is sealed. No mechanism exists to bring a Palestinian woman from the besieged Strip to a television studio in Amman. The diplomatic channels are clogged, reluctant, and slow.

Queen Rania of Jordan makes it happen. She changes her schedule. She secures the passage personally. And on Laylat Al-Qadr, the holiest night of Ramadan, the night when wishes are said to be granted, Wafa lands in Amman.

THE REUNION

The stage is enormous. The lights are blinding. Mo is standing in the centre of it, and he doesn't know she's already in the building. Queen Rania of Jordan walks in first. And then, behind her, Wafa.

Mo collapses. Wafa faints. They hold each other on the floor of the stage while the audience and the crew and the nation dissolve around them. It's one of those moments that television was built for, a moment so real it overwhelms the machinery broadcasting it.

The show ends. The credits roll. The Arab world carries the image home.

The broadcast ends at the embrace.

The film begins in the room that follows.

THE HOTEL

Mo and Wafa are given time together. A hotel room. Some money. The production wants them to reconnect, to complete the narrative arc the audience has been promised.

It doesn't work.

Wafa is distant. She won't remove her hijab. She makes small talk about nothing. She doesn't ask who Mo is, what his life has been, what the orphanage did to him. She doesn't reach across the table.

Mo sits very still. He's spent twenty-five years building this woman in his mind: the mother who would hold him and explain everything, who would fill the barrel-shaped hole in his chest. The woman across from him has her own twenty-five years, her own damage, her own survival. She endured what he was protected from, and it closed something inside her that she can't reopen.

THE SHOPPING

On their last day together, Wafa wants to go shopping. She buys presents for her sons in Gaza. She buys something for her husband. She walks past Mo. She doesn't buy him anything.

He watches her. This is the worst scene in the film, and the truest. Not the massacre. Not the barrel. This: a mother shopping for a family that doesn't include her firstborn son, while he stands beside her carrying the ghost of the hug he's rehearsed since he was two.

ZAHRA

The cameras have been gone for weeks. The show is finished. The miracle has been delivered and consumed. Mo is alone with something no one prepared him for: the fact that finding what you've searched for your entire life doesn't mean you get to keep it.

Zahra is already in his life. She's been there, quietly, through the search and the show and the aftermath. She's not a replacement. She's not a consolation. She's the person Mo has to learn to turn toward after spending his whole life facing backward.

Act Three belongs to her. The film doesn't end with the reunion. It ends with Mo learning that survival isn't the same thing as arrival. That the door Queen Rania of Jordan opened led to a room he still has to furnish himself.

The world witnessed the reunion.

This film follows Mo into everything that came after.

TONE AND APPROACH

This is a feature film. The events are real. The characters are real. The emotions are documented and verifiable. But the treatment is cinematic, not journalistic. We're making a film, not reconstructing a broadcast.

The camera in Act One lives at a child's height. Beirut is close, grinding, sensory: the smell of concrete dust, the weight of orphanage blankets, the bicycle wheels Ali pretends to repair. Memory isn't narrated. It's felt.

Act Two shifts register. The Al-Forsa set is oversaturated, operatic, enormous. A machine built for collective emotion. The audience is a character. The voting graphics, the sponsor bumpers, the countdown clock: they're the architecture of spectacle, and Mo is standing inside it holding something private.

Act Three strips everything away. The hotel room. The silence. Two people who share blood and nothing else, trying to find a language for what happened to them. The camera stays close and doesn't cut away.

The film earns its ending by refusing the one the audience expects. The reunion is the midpoint. The real story is what it costs to survive it.

THE CHARACTERS

Mohammed "Mo" Shammās Protagonist

Twenty-six. Found at two in a garbage box during the 1982 invasion. Raised in a Beirut orphanage. Carried his mother's name through everything. Appeared in Ziad Doueiri's **West Beirut** at sixteen. The Arab world knew his face before it knew his story.

Wafa Mother

Survived the invasion. Left Beirut. Remarried in Gaza. Built another family, another life, and sealed the door behind her. She isn't cruel. She's a woman who endured something so enormous that she couldn't carry all of her children through it. When she arrives in Amman, she brings twenty-five years of that weight with her.

Ali Father

A fighter who wasn't home when it mattered. Disguised himself as a bicycle repairman to watch his sons grow up in an orphanage he couldn't take them from. Guilt made invisible by tenderness.

Ahmad Brother

Same barrel, same orphanage, different exit. Ahmad carried the rupture outward. Mo carried it inward. They love each other the way survivors do: completely and at a distance.

Zahra Companion

The person Mo turns toward when the search is over. She doesn't fill the gap. She teaches him that the gap is something he can live with. Zahra is where the film finds its tenderness.

Youssef El Khoury The Producer

Created Al-Forsa. Was in the building the night Mo walked on stage and the night Wafa landed in Amman. Held the story for seventeen years. Holds the access, the archive, and the trust of every person in it.

Queen Rania of Jordan The Act

The woman who made the reunion possible. Gaza was sealed. No diplomatic mechanism existed. She created one. That decision is the hinge on which this story turns.

COMPARABLE FILMS

Slumdog Millionaire (2008) used a game show as the spine of a survival story. Flashback as the delivery mechanism for trauma. \$141M worldwide.

Lion (2016) traced a child separated by disaster into an adult rebuilding memory into a search. The reunion as the most dangerous moment in the film. \$140M worldwide.

The Kite Runner (2007) buried a truth that demanded to be faced, a wound that was never allowed to close. \$73M worldwide.

Mo' carries the emotional architecture of all three and goes further: it asks what happens to the person who finds what they've been looking for and discovers it's become something else entirely.

FORMAT AND STATUS

Feature film. Approximately 95 minutes. Budget: \$1.2M. Production territories: Lebanon and Jordan.

Script by Youssef El Khoury and Chris Churchill. Feature-length screenplay complete. Mohammed Shammam in consultation, exploring self-portrayal. Life rights secured. Source footage from the original Al-Forsa broadcast identified and available.

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