



## Sam Wollaston Blown up, blinded and taught to hate - no wonder the children of Gaza play at war

The Palestinian kids in **True Stories: War Child** (More4) lost a lot in Israeli missile attacks on Gaza. Brother and sister Mahmoud (10) and Amal (nine) lost their father, a younger brother, and their house. Amal was buried under rubble for four days and still has shrapnel in her brain. Another Mahmoud (12) saw his friend Hossam blown in half in front of him. Little Loay (10) lost his sight. Ibraheem (10) saw the family fishing boat, their livelihood, destroyed. All lost their childhoods.

Now, when they play in the bombed-out streets, it's always war they play at - with guns and rockets, Israelis v Palestinians, interrogation, torture, execution. A little pretend war within the real one.

They speak with great bitterness and anger, but also with enormous openness and maturity for their years. "They did not leave anything," says 10-year-old Mahmoud. "All that's left is sand. If they could have destroyed the sand, they would have destroyed that too."

"By God I want to die," cries Loay. "Call this living?" Loay is the most tragic of all, deeply emotionally traumatised as well as blinded. The sight of him learning to use his stick, a little boy tap-tapping along the pavement with a stick that's almost as tall as he is, is unbearable. "I feel the anger comes from my eyes. I want to look at lands, farms, strawberry plants, trees, flowers," he says. In his dreams he sees again. And when the rage gets too much he curls up inside the cupboard underneath the television he can no longer watch.

Then Loay is taken away from his school, where his friends are, and sent

to a special place for blind kids. "I'm annoyed I've been transferred to this school." Me too mate.

There's quite a lot of annoying behaviour from the grown-ups. Young Mahmoud's uncle shows his nephew suicide bomber videos. "See how he is martyred in this scene. See how he doesn't feel a thing. These are his insides, his intestines." Then he shows the boy how to mount the magazine on a Kalashnikov, and to take aim at his own mother.

And it's not an awful lot better at school. "Could there be forgiveness between us and the Jews, could we be friends?" Mahmoud's teacher asks the class. "No!" says the class. Correct answer. "How about with the children, could we be friends with them? Mahmoud, what do you think?"

"No," says Mahmoud.

"That's right," says the teacher.

"They are sinners. Therefore, there can't be either forgiveness or friendship between us." Well done everybody.

Some of the scenes in this film are familiar - they were included in a Dispatches documentary from last year. It doesn't matter, it's good enough for a second viewing. It's brilliantly done, stark and beautifully shot. There's no narration - the children, and the pictures, speak for themselves. There's a lot of humanness, some humour even. Of course there is: in spite of everything, they are still children. I like their understanding of how the Jewish faith works. "They worship idols, sand and stones. And they worship plastic. They create idols from dates and pray to them. And if they're hungry, they eat it." Plastic-worshipping, date-eating infidels.

Mostly though it's just very depress-

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ing. And when the hatred is so deeply ingrained, at such an early age, it's hard to see much hope.

**Nuns Aloud** (BBC1) was quite amusing. A record company sets out to find the next big thing in the female Gregorian chant genre. All the problems you might imagine could arise do arise. The sisters are a little publicity shy, they won't do raunchy videos, make guest appearances at the Britawards. Many of them won't talk, or be filmed, or even come out from the cages they live in.

More worryingly, a lot of them can't sing. But pleasant A&R men Olly and Tom eventually find some near Avignon who can. And they get round the other issues - by letting them film themselves, interviewing them through the grille etc. Actually I would have liked to have heard more from the nuns - like the one who says the one thing she misses about the outside world is swimming in the sea. But that's the problem, they won't give much.

Anyway the record is a screaming success, goes to number one in the classical charts on both sides of the Atlantic. Tom and Olly probably make a ton of money. And in a Benedictine monastery in southern France I imagine