

DOCUMENTARY

'Exigent Times': Konrad Aderer's *Enemy Alien*

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By Rebecca Panovka 7/06 7:08pm



In April 2002, police and immigration officers arrested Palestinian activist Farouk Abdel-Muhti's at his Queens apartment, launching a two-year legal saga that—according to *Enemy Alien*, a documentary about his case—saw him placed in solitary confinement for eight months, beaten, denied crucial thyroid medications, and threatened with deportation. Ordering his release in 2004, a judge called his

treatment “Kafkaesque.”

The film, screened last night at Anthology Film Archives before the tenth anniversary of 9/11, chronicles the struggle of activists, friends, and lawyers to free Abdel-Muhti. It is part of an ongoing project by Third World Newsreel, which aims to bring attention to the mistreatment of minorities and immigrants in the wake of 9/11, and was shown following a series of related shorts.

The director, Konrad Aderer, compares Abdel-Muhti's detention to his grandparents' experience in a Japanese-American internment camp in Utah, where his mother was born. “I'd grown up with the idea that internment happened a long time ago and America had apologized,” he told *The Observer*. “But when I saw the sort of discourse and rhetoric happening again, and similar actions being taken—and not a lot of mainstream media coverage—I wanted to put a spotlight on it.”

The film spotlights governmental paranoia. Abdel-Muhti is charged with using aliases because his name is transliterated in multiple ways. In what Aderer called the “scariest part of the movie,” the INS stops him from filming outside a prison and confiscates his tapes. After reviewing them, the police are alarmed by footage of Abdel-Muhti's son waving a sword in an attempt to satirize jihadism. An INS officer tells Aderer that he cannot ask Abdel-Muhti about prison conditions when he finally interviews him. And a fellow inmate recalls a prison guard beating Abdel-Muhti and yelling, “You have no fucking rights, fucking Palestinian!”

In one particularly stunning scene, congressional hopeful and immigration lawyer Michael Wildes — Ted Kennedy once said that he had “high expectations” of seeing him in Congress — appears to defend Japanese-American internment.

“What about the argument that when we look back at what happened with Pearl Harbor and the Japanese Americans, everyone agrees that it was wrong?” asks a voice from offscreen.

“Who agrees? Who agrees?” asks Wildes. Pressed further, he says, “I think, you know... exigent times call for very strenuous reactions.”

In the course of making the film, Aderer said he was particularly struck by that exchange. “That was a galvanizing moment for me when I found myself talking to an immigration lawyer called on by the government as a terrorism expert (and a Democrat politician) who questioned that the camps were wrong,” Aderer said in an email.

In a phone conversation with *The Observer*, Wildes said his opinion was misrepresented in the film. He called Japanese internment “one of the biggest scars in American history and a tremendous embarrassment.” What’s more, he said, he believes that detention without due process is “completely inappropriate.”

(Aderer sent *The Observer* a more complete transcript of the interview, in which Wildes said, “The rules change when people take planes into buildings.”)

Despite the unflattering portrayal, Wildes said, “I think movies like this are good because they shine the light in corners that generally don’t get attention, and then we learn from them.”

Aderer hopes his film can do just that. As he said, “It’s unfortunate that a decade later people still don’t know a lot about what happened: 1200 people were rounded up right after the attacks, and none of them turned out to be connected with terrorism.”

In the film, Aderer cites statistics from the 9/11 Commission Report: 140,000 people were targeted for Special Registration, 11 of whom the Department of Homeland Security claimed—on what the Commission said were questionable grounds—were connected with terrorist organizations; the Absconder Initiative targeted 6,000 Arabs and South Asians for arrest and interrogation but did not catch a single terrorist.

“I think it’s tragic that these types of things happen in the United States when we represent ideals that are so much higher,” Aderer said. “I’m trying to encourage people to be more aware of what’s happening in front of us. We need to see that after attacks there’s a natural xenophobic reaction, and we have to understand it for what it is.”