

An EPIX Original Documentary  
Produced by Gidalya Pictures in association with Blumhouse

# THIS IS HOME



A Film by Alexandra Shiva



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## **SYNOPSIS**

THIS IS HOME is an intimate portrait of four Syrian refugee families arriving in America and struggling to find their footing. Displaced from their homes and separated from loved ones, they are given eight months of assistance from the International Rescue Committee to become self-sufficient. As they learn to adapt to challenges, including the newly imposed travel ban, their strength and resilience are tested. It is a universal story, highlighted by humor and heartbreak, about what it's like to start over, no matter the obstacles.

After surviving the traumas of war, the families arrive in Baltimore, Maryland and are met with a new set of trials. They attend cultural orientation classes and job training sessions where they must "learn America" – everything from how to take public transportation to negotiating new gender roles – all in an ever-changing and increasingly hostile political environment. Their goals are completely relatable: find a job, pay the bills, and make a better life for the next generation.

We witness the families' struggles and triumphs up close through the drama of everyday life. Through intimate access, this cinema vérité film takes a fresh look at the classic American immigration story and challenges us to see past differences to find common ground. THIS IS HOME goes beyond the statistics, headlines, and political rhetoric to tell deeply personal stories, putting a human face on the global refugee crisis.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

THIS IS HOME began when someone involved in refugee resettlement asked me to make a film about refugees in a similar style and tone as my previous film, HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO. I understood immediately why my style of filmmaking would be effective for this subject matter. The approach I took with my previous documentary was to foster connections between film and audience by creating an opportunity for the viewer to be with the subjects, to walk alongside them, rather than looking at them from a distance. Part of the strategy was to stay personal and away from the political.

My approach with THIS IS HOME is similar. No expert talking heads or political advocates explaining why you should care or believe one thing or another, but rather direct human connection through vérité and interviews with our subjects. What does it feel like to be uprooted from everything they know and start over, after intense trauma? How does it feel to come from a rich culture and adult life and in some ways, feel like a powerless child, having to learn the details of basic living all over again? What is it like to be a child, trying to develop a sense of rootedness and sense of self, while watching your parents – your role models – struggle with their own sense of identity and belonging?

By bypassing the highly charged political aspects of this enormous crisis (while still allowing for the context) and landing the viewer in the intimate worlds and the drama of everyday life, struggles and triumphs, I hope to pierce the veil of indifference. To find a way in, so that we see all our common humanity and similarities instead of an intense focus on difference.

I believe that people want to connect and care about the current refugee crisis, but that fear, indifference and alienation, borne out of a complete lack of exposure or understanding, stands in the way. Refugees have been reduced to statistics or nameless faceless millions. I think that by focusing in on a few individuals and making the story as personal as possible we can create a bridge to the universal and shed light on a larger issue.

As the daughter of an Israeli immigrant father, I have a very up close and personal interest and understanding of issues around displacement, alienation, identity and belonging – all the more reason why I wanted to tell this story.

- Alexandra Shiva, Director/Producer

## **ABOUT THE KEY SUBJECTS**

**Khaldoun & Yasmen** (age 36 & 30)

*CHILDREN:* Sedra (age 10), Omar (age 8), Mohamad (age 7), Linda (age 5)

Before the Syrian Civil War started, Khaldoun, Yasmen and their four children lived in Homs. While Yasmen looked after the kids at home, Khaldoun provided for the family by working odd jobs in mechanics and trucking and living off his ample charm and street smarts. However, everything changed for the family when Khaldoun was detained and tortured. The family used the last of their savings to flee Syria, paying a smuggler to help them cross the Jordanian border. They lived in the Azraq refugee camp while applying and waiting for refugee status from the UNHCR. In the summer of 2016, the family was accepted by the US and sent to Baltimore, Maryland.

**Madiha & Mahmoud** (age 32 & 44)

*CHILDREN:* **Mohammed** (age 15), **Mohannad** (age 11), **Ahmad** (age 8), **Ayman** (age 3).

Madiha and Mahmoud grew up in the city of Daraa, where the war began in 2011. The couple lived with Mahmoud's parents for three years while saving to build Madiha's dream home. While eating lunch one day, their home was bombed. That evening, Madiha and her family fled to Jordan. She was eight months pregnant when they made the 6-hour journey. After waiting over two years the family was resettled in Baltimore.

**Iman** (age 51)

*CHILDREN:* **Batoul** (age 25), **Maria** (age 20), **Aya** (age 17)

Before the war, Iman and her three daughters lived a prosperous life in Damascus. Iman practiced medicine and worked at the Ministry of Health, while her daughters studied. Batoul was in the midst of a master program in computer engineering, Maria was attending college for business, and Aya had just started high school. After fighting moved into their neighborhood, the family fled to Jordan where Iman worked for the World Health Organization in the Zaatari refugee camp. When she was invited to give a lecture at Georgetown University about the camp, Iman decided to use the opportunity to apply for asylum status, hoping her girls would come to the US soon after. However, it took over two years before they were reunited. Batoul, Maria, and Aya applied for refugee status and arrived the summer of 2016.

**Mohammad** (age 35)

*CHILDREN:* **Hani** (age 13), **Hadi** (age 11), **Reem** (age 7), **Abdullah** (age 5)

Before the war, Mohammad and his family lived in Homs where he worked in construction as a tile and ceramic setter. A true craftsman - he built his own home from scratch and helped neighbors on his block build theirs. In 2012, Mohammad and family fled Homs for Hama, another Syrian city. They stayed there for two more years before they were forced to flee again. Like so many Syrians, the family illegally crossed the border to Jordan by a grueling 12-hour truck ride at night. After applying for refugee status, the family arrived in Baltimore in May of 2016.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

### **Alexandra Shiva - Director/Producer**

Alexandra Shiva is Peabody Award winning documentary filmmaker. Her most recent film, THIS IS HOME, is an intimate portrait of four Syrian refugee families arriving in Baltimore, Maryland and struggling to find their footing. It will premiere in the World Cinema Documentary Competition at The Sundance Film Festival in 2018 before broadcasting on EPIX.

Her previous film, HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO, follows a group of teenagers and young adults on the autism spectrum preparing for an iconic American rite of passage — a Spring Formal. This Peabody Award winning film premiered at The Sundance Film Festival in 2015 and aired on HBO to great critical acclaim.

Alexandra's second documentary STAGEDOOR follows five kids through a musical theater summer camp program in the Catskills. STAGEDOOR premiered at SXSW in 2005, had its theatrical debut at Film Forum in New York in 2006 and aired on Sundance Channel.

After spending extensive time in India, Alexandra launched her documentary career producing and directing BOMBAY EUNUCH, a feature-length documentary that follows a makeshift family of eunuchs as they struggle to survive in modern Bombay. In 2001, the film was awarded Best Documentary at New York's New Festival and the Special Jury Award at the Florida Film Festival and was released theatrically.

Alexandra graduated from Vassar College with a BA in Art History.

### **Lindsey Megrue – Producer**

Lindsey Megrue is a creative producer and director with over a dozen years of experience creating documentary films for theatrical release and television broadcast. She has worked on many critically acclaimed programs for PBS, including eight episodes of the award-winning series AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. She was a Field Producer for the three-part, six-hour, Emmy-nominated CANCER: THE EMPEROR OF ALL MALADIES. She co-produced KOCH, a feature-length documentary about former New York City Mayor Ed Koch, which premiered at the Hamptons International Film Festival, opened theatrically in 2013 and broadcast on PBS's POV. In addition to her work in film and television, Lindsey also creates web content for prominent news organizations. She has produced work for The New York Times, Retro Report and The Marshall Project.

Lindsey has also directed for the highly rated PBS series FINDING YOUR ROOTS WITH HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. She is a member of the Directors Guild of America, 2017 Impact Partners Producing Fellow and a graduate of Smith College.

### **Jason Blum – Executive Producer**

Jason Blum, founder of Blumhouse Productions, is an Academy Award-nominated and two-time Emmy and Peabody Award-winning producer. Specializing in low-budget films, Blumhouse has produced the highly-profitable THE PURGE, SINISTER, PARANOMAL ACTIVITY and INSIDIOUS franchises, which have grossed more than \$1.7 billion at the global box office. In 2017, all three Blumhouse films opened to number one at the domestic box office, including the blockbusters SPLIT and GET OUT and October's HAPPY DEATH DAY. Additional credits include WHIPLASH, THE NORMAL HEART and THE JINX. Blum serves on the Board of Trustees for Vassar College, the Board of the Public Theater and is a member of the Sundance Institute's Director's Advisory Group.

### **Princess Firyal of Jordan – Executive Producer**

Princess Firyal of Jordan is a humanitarian and philanthropist, who became active in relief work in refugee camps after the wars in the region. The Princess was appointed to UNESCO as a Goodwill Ambassador in 1992 and later was appointed as Special Advisor to the Director General of UNESCO. Princess Firyal launched with UNESCO the International Hope Foundation for Street Children in 1994, working with mobile units of the Children's Health Funds caring for the immediate needs of those children

in shelters.

The Princess was elected to the Board of Directors of the United Nations Association in 2003. She is also a member of the Board of Trustees of the International Rescue Committee for Refugees, serves on the Dean's Councils of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and is a member of the International Council at Columbia University, which she attended. Princess Firyal was appointed a Minister Plenipotentiary by the government of Jordan in May 2007 at the Jordanian Embassy in the U.S. at ambassadorial rank.

### **Toby Shimin – Editor**

Toby Shimin began her film career as a sound editor, working on such projects as *WORKING GIRLS*, which won a Special Jury Prize at Sundance. She switched to picture editing in 1988 when she cut *THE CHILDRENS' STOREFRONT*, which was nominated for an Academy Award. Since then, she has edited numerous films that have premiered at Sundance, including *HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO*, *A LEAP OF FAITH*, *MARTHA & ETHEL*, *MISS AMERICA*, *EVERYTHING'S COOL* and the Audience Award winning films, *OUT OF THE PAST* and *BUCK*, which was also short-listed for an Academy Award. She has cut a diverse collection of projects for PBS, including *AIDS WARRIORS*, and the Emmy-nominated *SEABISCUIT* and *REPORTING AMERICA AT WAR*. Some of her other films include: *THREE OF HEARTS: A POST-MODERN FAMILY*, *TWO SQUARE MILES*, *MOTHERS OF BEDFORD*, and *A SEA CHANGE* which won several festival awards, including the 2010 NOAA Environmental Hero award. She recently received the Documentary Editing Award at the Woodstock Film Festival for HBO's *32 PILLS: MY SISTER'S SUICIDE*. She currently lives in New York's Hudson Valley where she is co-curator of the film series, *Depot Docs* and is on the faculty at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

### **Laela Kilbourn – Director of Photography**

Chosen by Indiewire as one of "8 More Female Cinematographers You Should Know About", director of photography Laela Kilbourn has accumulated documentary feature credits including *SWIM TEAM*, for which she won Best Cinematography at the Wales International Documentary Festival. She was recently profiled in ICG Magazine's "Generation Next - meet the next generation of Local 600 cinematographers". She has filmed seven Sundance Film Festival competition premieres: *THIS IS HOME: A REFUGEE STORY*, debuting in 2018; the Peabody Award winning *HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO*; *AMERICAN TEEN*; the Emmy-nominated *WORD WARS*; and her additional

cinematography on HOT COFFEE, UNREST, and the Oscar-winning 20 FEET FROM STARDOM. She has worked on projects for HBO, FX, NBC, AMC, A&E, PBS, Hulu, Nick Jr., NickMom, ESPN, History, MTV, VH1, Epix, WeTV, Trio, TruTV, and TV One. She is a member of the International Cinematographers Guild, New York Women in Film & Television, and the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences (Emmy Awards), and has served as a juror for the Brooklyn International Film Festival, Documentary Feature Awards, as a panelist on "The Female Perspective: Women in Cinematography" at the Canon Creative Studio, and as a guest speaker at The New School, Department in Media Studies & Film, Graduate Certificate in Documentary Media Studies. She has a degree in social anthropology from Harvard University.

### **T. Griffin – Composer**

T. Griffin has composed scores for over 40 feature length films, and dozens of live and multimedia projects. Notable titles include the Academy-Award nominated LIFE, ANIMATED and multiple festival award winners QUEST, THE OVERNIGHTERS, and WELCOME TO LEITH as well as the recently Oscar Shortlisted ONE OF US. Besides his work as a film composer and solo artist he has worked as a player and/or producer with luminaries of the independent music world including Patti Smith, Vic Chesnutt, Mary Margaret O'Hara and members of The Ex, Dirty Three, Fugazi and Godspeed You! Black Emperor. He was a fellow at the Sundance Composers' Lab in 2008, and has twice been nominated for Cinema Eye Honors for Original Music Score. He is based in Brooklyn, New York.



## **CREDITS**

### **Directed and Produced by**

Alexandra Shiva

### **Produced by**

Lindsey Megrue

### **Executive Producer**

Princess Firyal of Jordan

### **Executive Producer**

Jason Blum

### **Executive Producer**

Patty Quillin

### **Editor**

Toby Shimin

### **Director of Photography**

Laela Kilbourn

### **Original Music**

T. Griffin

### **Co-Executive Producer**

Marci Wiseman

Jeremy Gold

### **Co-Executive Producer**

Yvonne Huff Lee

Jason Delane Lee

### **Co-Producer**

Stu Pollard

### **Executive Producers**

Jocelyn Diaz

Jill Burkhart

### **Producer**

Valerie Bishop Pearson

**Associate Producer**

Constance Brimelow  
Jenifer Westphal  
Ethan C. Yake

**Associate Editor**

Joy E. Reed

**Field Sound Recordist**

Josh Isaac

**Field Producer**

Meryam Bouadjemi  
Elizabeth Leiter

**Consulting Producer**

Danielle Varga

**Aerial Cinematography**

John Benam

**Additional Camera**

John Benam  
Dominic Mann  
Richard Chisolm

**Assistant Camera**

Nick Gorey

**Additional Sound Recording**

Ivan Basauri  
Brian Garfield  
Mark Mariaca  
Steve Saada

**Additional Editing**

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**Assistant Editor**

Judd Blaise

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Rouane Itani  
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Sanaa Yazji  
Assil Nemer Frayha

**Production Assistants**

Amanda Ferrarese  
Daniela Mileykovsky  
Andrew Nagl  
Katelynn Zimmerman

**Featuring**

Iman with Aya, Batoul and Maria  
Khalidoun & Yasmen with Linda, Mohamad, Omar and Sedra  
Madiha & Mahmoud with Ahmad, Ayman, Mohammad and Mohannad  
Mohammad with Abdullah, Hadi, Hani and Reem

**And**

Sawsan Al-Sayyab  
Kelitah Armstrong  
Simon Briggs  
Kiemani Butler  
Kristin Ege  
Mustafa Fadel  
Alison Gray  
Luke Gibbons  
Eric Haber  
Leah Hayes  
Hanan

Hussein  
Imud  
Israa  
Hershey Johnson  
Evan Kelley  
Kiera McCarthy  
Lataya Mes  
Christina McPherson  
Mohammad  
Sarah Nagy  
Rebecca Noto

Catherine O'Malley  
Christopher Prater  
Rania  
Mary Ricchezza  
Kirsten Sabares-Klemm  
Abdul Sayyab  
Ana Shraga

Amjad Sraur  
Romeo Taylay  
Wafaa  
Hannah Ward  
Camille Wathne

**Colorist**  
Will Cox

**Conforming Editor**  
Gil Litver

**Post Production Project Manager**  
Caitlin Tartaro

**Post Production Facility**  
Final Frame

**Sound Design**  
Margaret Crimmins

**ADR Recordist**  
Mike Frank

**Re-Recording Mixer**  
Tony Volante

**Post Production Sound Facility**  
Harbor Picture Company

**Title Sequence**  
Dan Schrecker

**Visual Effects**  
OH, MY! Productions  
Joy E. Reed

**Music Supervisor**  
Mary Ramos

**Office Manager for Gidalya Pictures**  
Kerry Monnelly

**Fiscal Sponsor**

Utah Film Center

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**Musicians**

T. Griffin: guitars, banjos, electronics and frame drum  
Brian Prunka: oud

**Composer's Assistants**

Matt Wong and Gavin Brivik

**Licensed Music**

"The Air I Breathe"

Written by Kerry Muzzey

Performed by The Candlepark Stars

Courtesy of Loafin Magic Music

"El Dini Emm"

Written by Salim Assaf

Performed by Saad Ramadan Ft. Suzanne Ghattas

Courtesy of Mawla Production

"One Among Many"

Written and performed by Bryan Senti

Courtesy of Hook & Line

**Other Music**

"Visa"

Performed by Ismaeel Tamr

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