

Anatomy

OF A SAUDI FEMALE FILMMAKER

HAIFAA AL-MANSOUR



RIYADH, Saudi Arabia—Developing *Wadjda*, the first full-length feature film ever shot entirely inside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and directed by a woman, posed some wholly unique challenges that come with making a film in a country where cinema is illegal, public displays of art are vilified, women are marginalized, gender segregation is strictly enforced, and tribal and fundamentalist groups stand resolutely against anything they feel threatens their values.

Moreover, the film focuses on what a difficult place Saudi Arabia can be for women. It tells the story of a feisty 10-year-old girl from Riyadh who enters a religious competition, memorizing passages of the Quran in order to raise enough money to purchase a bicycle. The bicycle is a metaphor for freedom of movement that does not exist for women and girls in Saudi Arabia. If I want to go anywhere, I need permission. I cannot drive a car, walk the main streets, or even take a train with-

Haifaa al-Mansour is a Saudi Arabian film director whose first feature-length film, Wadjda, a multiple award-winner released by Sony Pictures Classics, was the first filmed in Saudi Arabia and the first directed by a woman.

out family permission. But my film is not about complaints or accusations; it is more about what we can do to move ahead, to change our world, and to create a positive space on an intrapersonal level.

I come from a small town in Saudi Arabia where there are many girls like Wadjda, who have big dreams, strong characters, and so much potential. I set out to tell their stories with authentic, local voices, and to do it with an all-Saudi cast in the very heart of Riyadh.

The trajectory was often tortuous, but my goal was clear. And here I have attempted to set forth the various steps along this path toward final production, suggesting the problems of sex and gender—the politics and the social context of this project that seems to have touched so many people across the globe.

I workshopped the script for several years, in various international screenwriting labs, to polish the structure and make the themes as universally understandable as possible. My biggest fear was that international audiences would find it difficult to relate to this very foreign and hidden world that I called home. Once the script was ready, I traveled around the world for several years to find the right partners and financial backers to bring it all together.

Shooting in Riyadh was also quite a challenge. I had to shoot a lot of the outdoor scenes from a van because the country is segregated, and women are not expected to work in public with men. It was difficult not to be as close to the set as I needed to be, but it made me work that much harder. In the end, any of the difficulties we faced were worth it.

It is my hope that *Wadjda* encourages women to tell their stories—and to take chances. It wasn't easy to get this film made, but the positive response from audiences around the world should inspire Saudi women to put themselves out there. It is worth the struggle.

The fact that *Wadjda* was made demonstrates how much the Saudi landscape is opening up—to the idea of film, and even to the idea of women participating more openly in the society. While many still oppose the idea of opening theaters in the Kingdom, the tone of the debate has changed. There is a pervasive sense of inevitability to the changes that are coming. We had riots in the 1970s over the introduction of television, when the *mutawa* (religious police) used to shoot the satellite dishes off of people's roofs. But a 21st century reality has overshadowed the television debate, and the increasing flow of information into the Kingdom has become too pervasive to effectively control.

There is incredible momentum for the Gulf film industry now, with many film funds and festivals emerging in the region to support local voices. We now have millions of young Saudis posting videos and commentary on the internet, and scores of young Saudi filmmakers developing films of their own. I look forward to being a part of this movement and to shooting another film inside the Kingdom. It is such a ripe environment for drama, and there are so many stories yet to be told. The interplay between tradition and modernity creates just the right amount of tension for great stories. ●

ANATOMY

THE MAKING OF WADJDA



DEVELOPING THE STORY

- The film arose from frustration over the issues women face in Saudi Arabia:

LIMITED MOBILITY / NO AVENUES FOR ARTISTIC EXPRESSION / MALE GUARDIANSHIP REQUIRED / TRIBALISM MIXED WITH RELIGION / ALL OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES FOR WOMEN RESTRICTED / WOMEN DYING IN CAR ACCIDENTS BECAUSE OF INEXPERIENCED DRIVERS AND BAD ROADS

- I filtered these issues through films that had influenced me from around the world:

OFFSIDE (JAFAR PANAHI) /
BICYCLE THIEVES (VITTORIO DE SICA) /
ROSETTA (DARDEENE BROTHERS)

- The result was a tragic/angry/bleak story about Saudi women as victims. From there I work-shopped it through a number of international film labs. From each lab I brought new elements to the story:

A HOPEFUL MAIN CHARACTER / A STRONGER MAIN CHARACTER/ FEMALE CHARACTERS WHO PERSEVERE / A CHARACTER WHO IS MASTER OF HER OWN DESTINY



Hours before the contest for the world's largest cash prize for a film in progress (the Shasha Grant at the Abu Dhabi Circle Conference) I changed the ending, from tragic (the mother dies) to hopeful (she buys her daughter the bicycle).

IT WORKED:

"I won the contest and \$100,000 for the film's development!"

Compiled by Haifaa Al Monsour
Designed by Meehyun Nam-Thompson



PACKAGING THE FILM

- Packaging the film was a challenge for a host of reasons:

SAUDI ARABIA HAS NO INFRASTRUCTURE OR FILM INDUSTRY / FILM IS ESSENTIALLY ILLEGAL IN THE KINGDOM / CONSERVATIVES CENSOR AND VILIFY THE ARTS / REGIONAL PARTNERS ARE AFRAID TO PARTNER ON FILMS THAT COULD ANGER THE KINGDOM / MANY IMPORTANT ISSUES ARE CONSIDERED TOO TABOO FOR PUBLIC DISCUSSION



- I applied for hundreds of outside funds and grants and won support from:

HUBERT BALS FUND, ROTTERDAM INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL / ENJAAZ, POSTPRODUCTION FUND, DUBAI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL / CORT-SWEDLIN FILMMAKERS GRANT / DORIS DUKE FOUNDATION (SUNDANCE INSTITUTE)

- The real momentum started when I partnered with Razor Film in Germany (distributors of earlier Middle East-based films *Paradise Now* and *Waltz With Bashir*)

They brought in over half of the budget from German and European Film Funds.

We were turned down by every regional film fund, until Rotana Studios (Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal's Production Company) filled the remaining gap.





SHOOTING THE FILM

SHOOTING IN RIYADH HAD ITS OWN CHALLENGES:

PROBLEM: Cinema is illegal.

SOLUTION: We applied through the same process used by television productions.

PROBLEM: Casting calls for young women draw too much attention.

SOLUTION: Word of mouth auditions. We found the lead actress through an agent who put together cultural heritage shows.

PROBLEM: We found many great girls, but their families would back out at the last minute. Acting was not acceptable for a young lady.

SOLUTION: Kept auditioning.

PROBLEM: Women cannot work with men in public.

SOLUTION: I had to direct outdoor scenes from inside a closed van.

PROBLEM: Sandstorms.

SOLUTION: Delays.

PROBLEM: Angry, conservative bystanders chased us out of neighborhoods.

SOLUTION: More delays. Waited, then returned and quickly snagged the rest of the footage we needed.

PROBLEM: Locations backed out at the last minute out of fear.

SOLUTION: Worked on the fly with handheld cameras wherever possible.



PART 4

RELEASING THE FILM

→ After its 2012 premiere at the Venice Film Festival, the film won some 20 prizes at festivals and competitions around the world. It was the highest rated 2013 foreign film on Rotten Tomatoes website.

→ The film's success has sparked debates about cinema in the Kingdom and the role of women in Saudi society. It has proven that the world is eager to hear from filmmakers from the Gulf. And it has given me a whole new set of frustrations for my next film!



CRITIQUES:

"The film does not blame the government enough!"

"The film is against our religion and values!"

"It is only successful because it was made by a woman!"

"It isn't radical enough!"

"We shouldn't show our problems to the world!"