

Cultural Daily

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Wadjda: A Conversation with Haifaa Al Mansour

Sophia Stein · Thursday, September 26th, 2013

Waad Mohammed as Wadjda / Photo by Tobias Kownatzki © Razor Film, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

Wadjda (pronounced Wudge-dah') is the first feature film ever to be shot in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and it is the first-ever submission from that country for an Academy Award. An historic precedent. That the film is written and directed, moreover, by a woman, Haifaa Al Mansour – is a great irony, in a country where women are prohibited (in this year of 2013!) from voting or even driving. Like the cheeky, resourceful protagonist in her story, Al Mansour circumvented all obstacles to attain her goal, making this film through determination, persistence, and creative discipline.

The story concerns ten-year old Wadjda's mission to get a bicycle so that she can race her friend Abdullah. Most of the action takes place in Wadjda's home and at her school, the primary spaces in which women are permitted to co-exist in the society. Wadjda lives in close relationship and proximity to her mother. Wadjda's father is warm and loving, but largely absent; he is often inaccessible due in great measure to the particular constraints and customs of the society. Wadjda witnesses the daily trials and tribulations that wrack her mother's life — her mother's enforced reliance upon a disrespectful driver, and her mother's fears that Wadjda's father may succumb to pressures to take a second wife, one who might bear him a son. Dressed in full-length black frocks (abayas), the schoolgirls in the film would seem in mourning for their lives, were it not for the smiles they sport.

While most of us have heard about life in the Kingdom, *Wadjda* allows us a cinematic experience of the everyday realities of that world. Al Mansour grants us an insider's perspective on an otherwise impenetrable society.

Al Mansour earned her Bachelors degree in literature at the American University in Cairo and her Master's degree in Directing and Film Studies from the University of Sydney. She lives today in Bahrain, with her American diplomat husband. Like her husband, Al Mansour is a practiced diplomat, deliberately circumspect in discussing her art. In a place so sensitized as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where to wage full-on revolution may well provoke a violent response, Al Mansour advocates a cautious approach to effecting gradual change through art.

I recently spoke with Al Mansour at The Fairmont hotel regarding the making of her film *Wadjda*, her upbringing, and the factors that set her on her chosen path as a filmmaker.



Director Haifaa Al Mansour / Photo by Tobias Kownatzki © Razor Film, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

Sophia Stein: You were raised in this small village, four hours from the capital, Riyadh. Can

you describe a little bit about your upbringing in Saudi Arabia?

Haifaa Al Mansour: I am from Zilfi, and I grew up in the small town of Al Hassa. I went to public schools. I am number eight of twelve kids. My father never remarried; he only had one wife. My mother never remarried. So it's just one big family. Although my parents don't speak English or anything, they gave us a lot of liberties at home. We were able to watch TV, to listen to music, to read magazines and books. Where I come from, that is very atypical. Saudi Arabia is very conservative, very traditional. When conservative ideologies began to emerge in this society, a lot of it had to do with excluding art. When I was as kid, it was hard to fit in at school. I felt frustrated about being different. It's a small-town and everybody gossips about everybody else, so they knew that we were liberal and open. I wanted to be part of whatever was happening in the wider world, to have more worldly views. Usually, it is only rich families who can afford to travel. We were an average middle-class family; we couldn't afford to live abroad or spend summers in Switzerland.

S2: What did your parents do?

HA: My father was a lawyer and a legal consultant. My mom worked for a while as a social worker. She is an entrepreneur – running lots of businesses. She is such a strong woman. She was always outspoken. She loved working as a contractor. She built our house, our neighbor's house, my uncle's house, and my aunt's house. Seeing a woman like her, just screaming at all of those workers – “No, don't do that! Do this!,” “I told you to bring those kinds of bricks, and to put them there!” It empowered me – just being in her presence.

S2: In Saudi Arabia, women are forbidden to drive. Moreover women cannot go out in public without a male guardian. What did you make of all of this growing up?

HA: At home, I felt like I could do a lot of stuff. Once I went outside – to school or at my friends' homes, or interacting with the society in general, I knew exactly, so many things I could not do. Of course, I wasn't able to drive. Like any other Saudi woman, I would always have to find a solution for that. I was permitted to take taxis; a lot of Saudi women, their families will not let them even ride in a cab! So, it is as if they cannot leave the house. At least I was allowed these types of liberties. In my experience, if you want to be creative, it is important not to think of the limitations, so much as being focused on some goal, and just moving ahead towards it. Saudi is a difficult place, but every place is difficult in its own way. There will always be things that will stop people. It is important to just stay focused on the goal, rather than on the circumstances that surround that goal.

S2: What was your earliest filmmaking experience?

HA: My earliest experiences in storytelling were in theatre. I used to write little plays. In middle school, we would have competitions. Every morning, each class would come up and perform a sketch. Mostly, they were about various traditions or giving advice, but I wanted to break away from that. So I thought about contemporary life in Saudi and tried to write about how we kids, actually were. The plays became really popular. That was perhaps my first encounter directing actors and writing stories.

S2: Saudi Arabia is a country where movie theatres are illegal today. Historically, do you know how that came to pass?

HA: A lot of people say that they were banned in the 1980's, but I don't think they even existed in the 80's. I don't ever remember seeing a movie theatre in Saudi growing up. There were maybe a couple of theatres in sports clubs, but with the emergence of all the conservative ideologies in the country, they started to close down all public exhibitions of art, including movie theatres. I remember a lot of video stores. On every other corner, there was a video store. We watched all the

American blockbusters, whatever was available at the video store.

S2: When did it become a dream in your mind, to become a filmmaker? — in this country that had no movie theatres!

HA: It was never a dream in my mind to become a filmmaker. After I finished college in the early 90's, I started working for an oil company, and I felt so invisible. It was a low point in my life. I felt like I wasn't able to assert myself. I tried, but when it comes to women, the culture was just like that. Today, that company has changed. As the country started changing in relationship to women, many of my girlfriends started being promoted; they became supervisors and managers. But it wasn't until 2007, when I left that job. So for a long time, I just wanted to escape that reality. I started making films as a hobby. I wanted to create a different reality — where I could have fun and find my voice. For me, it was not about becoming a filmmaker. It was not about “the career.” It was “self-expression” — that drove me to making films.

S2: As a film student in Australia, of course, you could make films without any restrictions on your freedom of expression. What kinds of films did you make as a student?

HA: I made an animation film — a stop-motion, 8 mm, experimental short. I had spray paint, and all these figurines — Madonna and all these other amazing, unmistakably accomplished, very recognizable women. I started veiling them. (She demonstrates how she sprayed them with the black paint.) Shhh, shhh, shhh — showing how they become anonymous. I wrote the screenplay for *Wadjda* as part of my master's degree. I wanted to make a film about where I grew up – my hometown, my school. I wanted to empower women and girls. *Wadjda* is about freedom.

S2: What elements did you adapt from De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*?

HA: The Italian neorealist style of documenting life, moving out and away from the studios. This fresh type of outlook on everyday life. Like the Iranian cinema, the Italian neorealists capitalized on the little room they had to express themselves. In a conservative culture, there are many things that filmmakers are struggling to express. From [the Italian neorealists], I learned a lot about how to make a film that may seem simple, but projects a lot about the culture. The bicycle in *Wadjda* roots the story in reference to cinematic history, which I felt was important — in that, I come from a place where there has been no cinematic history at all.



Waad Mohammed as *Wadjda* / Photo by Tobias Kownatzki © Razor Film, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

S2: What does the symbol of the bike in the story mean to you?

HA: Of course, acceleration, independence, and moving forward. A bike is not intimidating; it's a toy. I'm not a loud person. I do not believe in violence or aggression. I believe in changing the world by working hard, by training, by cleaning our houses and neighborhoods, by waking up and smiling at everyone you meet. Many people think, those kinds of changes don't matter. But I think, it is precisely that, which matters. I may want to be in a place, standing next to a person who is quite possibly very conservative; but at least, when they greet me in the morning, they smile, and we can co-exist. For me, that is the approach we need to adopt in a place like the Middle East.

S2: In the United States, we are having a chapter in history where people are having trouble co-existing with people who don't share their ideologies also. So we could take some lessons from the diplomatic tolerance you are advocating. Did the Saudi censors require any script changes at all?

HA: No, they didn't. But I knew their thinking. I put myself in their place, and I tried to write

something that they would okay.

SA: Were there things that you did not write, because you knew that they would not get by the censors? Did you self-censor?

HA: I didn't self-censor, but I did adapt a certain style, for sure. I had a child as the protagonist. I started just documenting life. Not being judgmental, saying that this is right or that is wrong. Not inventing a story, so as much as just bringing in situations that I found interesting in life, and hoping that people will make some discoveries in them.

S2: How did you secure financing for your film. You finished writing the screenplay, and what happened next?

HA: I started trying to find producers. I wanted producers from Europe because it is difficult to find the market for a film like this in Saudi (where we don't have any movie theatres) and the Arab world is so closed off to film from the region. I emailed every single producer who had ever made a film in the Middle East, and none of them answered me. Then I wrote to Razor Film Production (Berlin, Germany), and they said, "Send the synopsis" — which was amazing, because they had produced *Waltz with Bashir* and *Paradise Now*. Then I started applying for every workshop in the world for film. Everywhere! Of course, it was important to observe all the application requirements — if they wanted 100 words, 100 sentences, whatever they asked for. I was accepted into the Sundance Writer's Lab, for Middle East writers. They put in a good word on my behalf with Razor. Razor became committed and found money in Germany. We wanted to partner with a Saudi production company. A lot of Saudi producers were reluctant; there were lots of rejections. Then Rotana Studios decided to come onboard. They saved the project. It is a co-production between Razor and Rotana.

S2: What were some of the hurdles that you had to overcome during the seven weeks of shooting on location in Saudi Arabia?

HA: The country is segregated. So whenever we were outside, I had to direct the actors using a monitor and walkie-talkie in a van. I could not be on the streets mixing with the men. We had permits from the television office for all our locations, but the culture itself is not prepared for film. We were swimming against the current, so progress was difficult. Access to locations was not always there. When we would arrive, the art design was not completed. Punctuality was an issue for some actors who were accustomed to a different working model. We were working with a German model, where things were timed very precisely; the actors were accustomed to coming late and staying forever. When we reached the halfway point in the shoot, my producers asked me to cut scenes because there was no way to finish, we didn't have the money. It was not only sad, but scary — because I didn't know what to cut, and what not to cut?! I was scared that we would never finish! I learned a lot. I thought — Everything is an exercise, you just need to work through it. Just don't stop! My advice to aspiring filmmakers: Don't stop!

S2: You have been quoted as saying: "I want the arts in Saudi to create an atmosphere of tolerance, that's what the arts are for."

HA: Art is something you enjoy. It makes people happier. It has taste and music and all that is sensory about it, so it is cool. It is not like "a lecture." It is provocative in a way that you feel it. It touches you, and you start talking about things from a new perspective. Not because you are angry. For me, it is a gentle way to catalyze a change.

S2: In your experience, what percentage of the population are militant-traditionalist-conservatives, in respect to those people who embrace change?

HA: Conservatives — maybe 80%. There are a lot of people in the grey area, you never really know, but the mainstream is ultra-conservative.

S2: Do you feel that reforming life in the Kingdom, is part of your mission in life?

HA: Saudi Arabia is my home, so I want to contribute, making art about the country. Saudi is such an amazing place, so complex, so rich in culture and layers of religion. It is such a young country – 65% of the population is below the age of twenty-five today. I want to return to my mother's house and start drawing upon inspiration to talk about how the people of Saudi cope with all this tradition and are exposed to all these new ideas, on their own time. I hope that people will enjoy my films, and that they will effect change. But I wouldn't call it my mission in life. I am more of an easy-going person. I just want to make films and enjoy them.

S2: In 2007, you married an American diplomat. In what ways has your life changed, as a result?

HA: To meet a diplomat is exciting, but I didn't realize how nomadic that life can be. We've traveled all over the world. Brad is such an amazing guy. I've changed my life, just to be with a good guy — who is always supportive, who never lets me down, who always gives me this shoulder to lean on. It's nice to have a partner who is very kind. Brad is a Public Affairs Officer, so he does a lot of outreach programs for local artists. We met during his first tour (which was in Saudi). When they invited me to screen my documentary, *Women Without Shadows*, we fell in love. In *Women Without Shadows*, I interviewed Saudi women of all ages, to examine the effect of the oil boom and urbanization on women. The older women had no formal education, maybe they could not read and write, but they contributed to the household economy. The women who were my age, had grown up with this very conservative interpretation of religion, where women were expected to stay at home, and schools became these places where we were taught what not to do and do. Many of the women of this generations left their hometowns to find work in the big cities. The younger kids who grew up with the internet, they are amazing. They want a lot more from life. These kids won't take no for an answer. Actually, meeting those kids, that was the starting point for Wadjda's character coming to life.

S2: You say that Saudi Arabia is opening up. How so?

HA: Well, for one, they submitted the first nomination for the Oscars, ever! [She bursts with laughter.] Last year, they sent two girls to compete in the Olympics. Two women were appointed to the Shura Council last year, so we now have political representation. This past April, women were finally permitted to ride bikes and motorcycles, but only in recreation areas with male supervision [when the ban by Saudi Arabia's religious police was officially lifted]. And next year, women will start voting [in municipal elections] for the first time. So lots of things are changing.

S2: How long do you believe it will take until women are treated as equal members of the society?

HA: As equal, I don't know. But better — that's happening. A lot of women (and men) are being educated all around the world. I think that generation will come back and change how the society functions. Within five to ten years, I believe that Saudi Arabia will be a very different place.

S2: Do you feel tempted to live elsewhere? Or are you committed to building a life in Saudi?

HA: I am following Brad. Wherever he goes, I'll be with him. Most probably, it will be somewhere else in the world. But I always return to Saudi, to visit my mother. I know that life in Saudi is hard — but I miss the coffee, and the heat, and my family, all of that. It is home, after all.



From left to right: Reem Abdullah as Mother and Waad Mohammed as Wadjda / Photo by Tobias Kownatzki © Razor Film, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

S2: What does your family make of your accomplishment with this film?

HA: I told my mom about Saudi putting the film up for the Oscars – I didn’t want her to learn about it in the press. As soon as I heard, I went straight home to deliver the news to her myself. “Oscar — Who’s that?,” she asked. “No, mom, it’s a really prestigious competition,” I told her. “So, it’s a good thing?” “Yes! It’s a good thing!!” [Haifaa laughs.] I am honored that Saudi Arabia has acknowledged the film, and I hope that it will earn the Academy’s nomination. Still, it is a really long process, with very tough competition.

S2: If Academy voters choose your film, and *Wadjda* earns the Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film, what would that mean for the people of your country?

HA: It would be BIG! in Saudi. It would be huge. It would be a victory for art. It would be a victory for non-militant ideologies. It would signify that there are a lot of people who believe in change and empowering women. Yeah, that would empower a lot of people.

Wadjda is currently playing in selected theatres throughout the country. [Details here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

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