

Mongrel Media
Presents

Wadjda

A film by Haifaa Al Mansour
(97 min., Germany, 2012)
Language: Arabic

Official Selection
Toronto International Film Festival 2012
Venice Film Festival 2012
Tribeca Film Festival 2013

Distribution



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High res stills may be downloaded from <http://www.mongrelmedia.com/press.html>

CAST

Mother	REEM ABDULLAH
Wadjda	WAAD MOHAMMED
Abdullah	ABDULLRAHMAN AL GOHANI
Hussa	AHD
Father	SULTAN AL ASSAF

CREW

Director	HAIFAA AL MANSOUR
Screenplay	HAIFAA AL MANSOUR
Director of Photography	LUTZ REITEMEIER
Editor	ANDREAS WODRASCHKE
Production Designer	THOMAS MOLT
Costume Designer	PETER POHL
Composer	MAX RICHTER
Sound Designer	SEBASTIAN SCHMIDT
Re-Recording Mixer	MARC MEUSINGER
Producers	RAZOR FILM ROMAN PAUL, GERHARD MEIXNER
Co-Producers	HIGH LOOK GROUP AMR ALKAHTANI ROTANA STUDIOS NORDDEUTSCHER RUNDFUNK BAYERISCHER RUNDFUNK
World Sales	THE MATCH FACTORY
North American Sales	UNITED TALENT AGENCY
Middle Eastern Sales	ROTANA STUDIOS

Saudi Arabia/Germany, 2012, 97 min, Digital, Dolby Digital, Arabic

Synopsis

WADJDA is a 10-year-old girl living in a suburb of Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. Although she lives in a conservative world, Wadjda is fun loving, entrepreneurial and always pushing the boundaries of what she can get away with. After a fight with her friend Abdullah, a neighborhood boy she shouldn't be playing with, Wadjda sees a beautiful green bicycle for sale. She wants the bicycle desperately so that she can beat Abdullah in a race. But Wadjda's mother won't allow it, fearing repercussions from a society that sees bicycles as dangerous to a girl's virtue. So Wadjda decides to try and raise the money herself.

At first, Wadjda's mother is too preoccupied with convincing her husband not to take a second wife to realize what's going on. And soon enough Wadjda's plans are thwarted when she is caught running various schemes at school. Just as she is losing hope of raising enough money, she hears of a cash prize for a Koran recitation competition at her school. She devotes herself to the memorization and recitation of Koranic verses, and her teachers begin to see Wadjda as a model pious girl. The competition isn't going to be easy, especially for a troublemaker like Wadjda, but she refuses to give in. She is determined to continue fighting for her dreams...

Director's Statement

I'm so proud to have shot the first full-length feature ever filmed entirely inside the Kingdom. 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. These girls can, and will, reshape and redefine our nation. It was important for me to work with an all-Saudi cast, to tell this story with authentic, local voices. Filming was an amazing cross-cultural collaboration that brought two immensely talented crews, from Germany and Saudi Arabia, into the heart of Riyadh. I hope the film offers a unique insight into my own country and speaks of universal themes of hope and perseverance that people of all cultures can relate to.

- Haifaa Al Mansour

In Conversation with Haifaa Al Mansour

You chose to approach a complex theme like the situation of women in Saudi Arabia through the seemingly simple story of a girl who wants a bike. Why?

I wanted to give the intellectual debate a human face - a story that people can relate to and understand. The film does not present a big story but a small one, a story about the emotions of a few main characters, a young girl and her mother, the lives of these characters within their society. I don't think people want to sit through a film and be lectured to as much as go on a journey that is inspiring and touching. As simple as the story may seem, I think that more complex themes are woven into it. It was important to me that the story was an accurate portrayal of the situation of women in Saudi Arabia, and that the characters were believable as ordinary people who have to maneuver through the system the only way they know how.

Is the character of Wadjda inspired by your own childhood, are there any autobiographical elements to this story?

Well, I come from a very supportive and liberal family. I remember when I was a kid my father took me along with my brothers to get bicycles and I chose a green one. I am extremely lucky to have a father who wanted me to feel dignified as a woman, but it was definitely a different story for my classmates and friends who would have never even dreamed of asking for a bicycle. But I think the heart of the story is something anyone can relate to, which is the idea of being labeled different or deviant for wanting something outside of what is traditionally considered acceptable.

The Saudi culture can be especially brutal and unforgiving to people who fall out of step with the society, so there is a real fear of being labeled an outcast. So in some ways, the story is part of my life and the things I encountered in my life. A lot of my experiences, along with those of my friends and family, are reflected in the film in some way – they didn't just come from a concept in my mind.

*There are several strong female characters - Wadjda herself, her mother, the school principal...
Is WADJDA a women's film?*

Maybe it is a women's film! But I really didn't intend it that way. I wanted to make a film about things I know and experienced. A story that spoke to my experiences, but also to average Saudis. It was important for me that the male characters in the film were not portrayed just as simple stereotypes or villains. Both the men and the women in the film are in the same boat, both pressured by the system to act and behave in certain ways, and then forced to deal with the system's consequences for whatever action they take. I do really like the scenes of the mother and the daughter together, and I think that a lot of love and emotion comes through in their relationship, when they are cooking or singing together, there is something very beautiful about it.

Growing up in a country with no movie theaters, how did you discover cinema and decide to pursue it as a mode of expression and a career path?

I grew up in a small town in Saudi Arabia. I don't want to make it sound like we were totally isolated from the outside world, but we weren't exactly jet-setting around either. Although my parents were well traveled, we only took a few regional trips while I was growing up. All of my young life was centered around our town. The concept of the big world ended at the cities a few hours away. The world beyond that seemed very far away and out of reach.

I always read books and watched films and wanted to be a part of the bigger world somehow. Saudi Arabia is a country without movie theaters and bans cinema, but my father made film accessible to us and we had family nights where we would all watch films together. I loved films so much, but I never thought I would be a filmmaker, let alone the first female filmmaker in Saudi Arabia.

How did you cast your actors?

In a place as conservative as Saudi Arabia it is hard to find women and young girls who are willing to appear on camera and in public. That obstacle was only compounded by the fact that we don't have a local film industry or infrastructure to support the process. Open casting calls for example do not exist, so it took a while to figure out how to go about it. Waad came to one of the sessions we set up in Riyadh and I could see that she already had the look and attitude for the part. All the girls that we had seen before her did not have the spirit that was needed; they were either too sweet or not cheeky enough. And suddenly Waad appeared, with her headphones on her head, wearing jeans and with tattoos on her hands. I was also looking for a girl that has a nice voice to be able to sing with her mother, memorize and chant the Koran, so a good voice was a necessary requirement, and Waad has a very beautiful and sweet voice.

I had seen a lot of Reem Abdulla's work in television so I always thought she would be a good fit for the mother's role. She did a great job of adjusting from TV to film acting, and I think she turned in a powerful performance.

What was it like for you as woman to direct a movie in Riyadh?

Challenging and extremely rewarding at the same time. Every step was difficult and it was quite an adventure. I occasionally had to run and hide in the production van in some of the more conservative areas where people would have disapproved of a woman director mixing professionally with all the men on set. Sometimes I tried to direct via walkie-talkie from the van, but I always got frustrated and came out to do it in person. We had a few instances of people voicing their displeasure with what we were doing, but nothing too disruptive. We had all of the proper permits and permissions so overall it went relatively smoothly.

*How are you perceived in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world? Are you considered an exception?
A pariah? A pioneer?*

I guess I can sometimes be viewed as a polarizing figure, as some people think the idea of a woman making films or working in media is controversial. But it is definitely not my intention to offend anyone. I don't believe in stirring up trouble for its own sake, I just think we should be working to figure out how to incorporate inevitable change and modernization into our culture in a reasonable way. Of course death threats and the like can be scary, but we can't let extremists affect the work we do and the goals we have to develop our country.

I hope I have made a film that is close to the lives of Saudi women and inspires and strengthens them to challenge the very complicated social and political encumbrances they are surrounded by. Although it is hard to deconstruct the deeply rooted traditions that deny women a dignified existence, especially since they are mixed with narrow interpretations of religion, it is a purpose that is worth striving for.

What is the current situation for Saudi women who have creative or artistic aspirations?

I am so impressed with all of the young women I meet in Saudi Arabia now and know that they are growing up in a different era than I did, with so many more opportunities. I want to help provide a platform for their unheard voices and help them tell their stories to the world. It is so hard for women to be themselves. If they act outside of accepted norms they are considered "controversial" anywhere in the world, let alone in a conservative and a very socially strict place like Saudi Arabia. Women are always expected to be a certain way and whenever they break away from that, they are usually labeled and stigmatized. I hope my films will help some of them find the courage to take risks and talk about the issues that are important to them.

About The Director

HAIFAA AL MANSOUR is the first female filmmaker in Saudi Arabia and is regarded as one of the most significant cinematic figures in the Kingdom. She finished her bachelor's degree in Literature at the American University in Cairo and completed a Master's degree in Directing and Film Studies from the University of Sydney.

The success of her three short films, as well as the international acclaim of her award-winning 2005 documentary *Women Without Shadows*, influenced a whole new wave of Saudi filmmakers and made the issue of opening cinemas in the Kingdom a front-page discussion. Within the Kingdom her work is both praised and vilified for encouraging discussion on topics generally considered taboo, like tolerance, the dangers of orthodoxy, and the need for Saudis to take a critical look at their traditional and restrictive culture.

Through both her films and her work in television and print media, Al Mansour is famous for penetrating the wall of silence surrounding the sequestered lives of Saudi women and providing a platform for their unheard voices.

About The Cast

REEM ABDULLAH (Mother) is the most well known actresses in Saudi Arabia. Coming from a traditional background, and having lived her entire life in Saudi Arabia, she is praised as one of the few Saudi actresses to challenge the strictly private role of women and go on to become the Kingdom's foremost television star.

She started her career on the hit show "Tash Ma Tash", a Saudi comedy series known for its liberal slant and criticism of the extreme and intolerant ideologies within the society. She continues to play leading roles in the most popular series on Saudi television. *Wadjda* is her first feature film.

WAAD MOHAMMED (Wadjda) Born and raised in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, twelve-year-old Waad Mohammed landed the role of Wadjda as one of the last girls to audition for the part. As the first film ever shot in the Kingdom, finding the right actress to play Wadjda proved especially challenging, with most families firmly against the idea of allowing their daughters to appear on camera. Through word of mouth and carefully planned auditions, Waad was chosen after over 50 girls read for the leading role. Having previously acted in local and regional theater productions, Waad came already sporting Wadjda's signature Chuck Taylor sneakers and defiant, rebellious attitude. *Wadja* is also her first feature film.