

**ely film society** = **the notes**

**august 2015**

**latest news**

Go north, film lovers! As an alternative to Ely and Cambridge, there's now the Luxe Cinema in the middle of Wisbech - small but perfectly formed, "offering a whole new experience for movie moguls", and showing both mainstream, arthouse and streamed live events. Tickets are £6 regular, £7 peak, so quite a saving on the same at the Arts Picturehouse! Check out : [www.theluxecinema.com/about](http://www.theluxecinema.com/about)

**Wadjda** *وحدة*

**Haifaa al-Mansour,  
Saudi Arabia 2012**

**Music : Max Richter  
Cinematography: Lutz Reitemeier**

**Reem Abdullah ..... Mother  
Waad Mohammed ..... Wadjda  
Abdullrahman Al Gohani  
..... Abdullah  
Ahd ..... Ms. Husa  
Sultan Al Assaf ..... Father  
Nouf Saad ..... Koran Teacher  
Ibrahim Almozael ... Toy Shop Owner  
Mohammed Zahir .... Iqbal the Driver**

One of the first features shot in Saudi Arabia, and certainly the first to be written and directed by a woman, this beguiling German-Saudi co-production turns upon an image that has been a cinematic metaphor for freedom, self-empowerment and lyrical liberation from Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* through Ford's *The Quiet Man* to Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* – a man or woman on a bicycle.

(affectingly played by 12-year-old Waad Mohammed) is a spirited, lower-middle-class schoolgirl in Riyadh, troubled by the impending separation of her parents, who longs to own a bike to race against her friend Abdullah. The implication is that she's rapidly approaching the age of not being able to cycle, meet a boy or go out of the house unveiled.

The eponymous 10-year-old Wadjda

You'd need a heart of stone not to be won over by *Wadjda*, a rebel yell with



a spoonful of sugar and a pungent sense of a Riyadh society split between the home, the madrasa and the shopping mall. In conservative Riyadh, we are told, girls do not ride bikes and are barely even permitted to laugh out of doors.

The story is an admirable necklace on which to string facts, anecdotes and insights that illuminate in a good-natured way the lives of women in an unthinking, patriarchal, totalitarian society. Did you know that a woman was not allowed to read the Qur'an while menstruating? Had you appreciated the extent to which Saudi women conspire in their own repression without the assistance of the zealous moral police? This is a simple, admirable film, sharply photographed by Lutz Reitemeier.

As the first woman to shoot a Saudi Arabian feature film, writer-director Haifaa Al Mansour has already assured

herself of a small place in history. And yet *Wadjda* stands on its own merits. The road through is dusty, bumpy and fraught with danger. But up ahead lies a bittersweet party and the scent of a happy ending. *Wadjda* knows it is there and she bears down on the pedals.

A study of the cinema of Saudi Arabia would be incredibly brief, and would essentially begin and end with Haifaa Al Mansour. The 39-year old writer-director shot three short films before making her 2005 documentary *Women Without Shadows*, in which she interviewed Saudi women who spoke frankly about their role in the country's society. After leaving the Middle East to earn her master's degree in directing and film studies from the University of Sydney, Al Mansour returned to Saudi Arabia to shoot *Wadjda* with an all-Saudi cast and German co-producers. It's the first narrative feature to be filmed

entirely in Saudi Arabia, where public movie theaters have been outlawed since the 1980s.



*Al-Mansour: It's the challenge of censorship. It's good sometimes, good to be economical. [Pauses, reconsiders.] It's not good. We shouldn't have it. But I don't want to complain about things. It's easy to sit and complain and say, "This is bad." It's harder to work to change things. It's better not to complain. It's better to make the things that you have work. If you have a small thing, make it work and capitalize on it. And that is, I think, the right attitude. Especially in the Middle East.*

## The producer's perspective



*How did you come across the content for the film and meet director Haifaa al Mansour, who had been studying film in Sydney?*

**Roman Paul:** Haifaa actually came to us. She sent us an email and offered us the project. Actually, she'd done that with just about every other European film production company. But we were the only ones that were interested.

*Was it difficult to film in Saudi Arabia? No feature film has ever been filmed there, and cinemas are banned. And then you come with a film about a girl that wants to ride around on a bicycle.*

**Roman Paul:** The film presents a very complex view of life in Saudi Arabia. It was important for us to show how the people there live, what characterizes their lives and that we don't make a film that's just about suppression.

Haifaa originally wanted to film in the [United Arab] Emirates, but we asked her whether we could film it in Saudi Arabia. Haifaa said, "There aren't any regulations against it." We went to Saudi Arabia together and visited the eastern region and the city of Riyadh and met with TV producer Amr Alkahtani. [Eds: *While feature films are banned, television programs are filmed in Saudi Arabia.*] He was certain he could get us the proper permits.

And that's how it happened.

It's not the case that social issues – and this also comes up in the film – aren't discussed in Saudi Arabia. We in the Western world look at countries like that as if they were rigid and not very dynamic. But especially in Saudi Arabia, it's really dynamic in its core. Since you can't just pick up and travel to Saudi Arabia very easily, you don't get any personal impressions.

The film is meant to change that. At the same time, it was also made for a Saudi audience. It's already been shown at the German and American embassies in Riyadh. There, Saudis could also watch the film. It passed the Saudi censorship bureau and will be shown on TV in Saudi Arabia.

*You were on-site during the entire filming. What was your impression of Saudi Arabia?*

**Roman Paul:** Before we went, I was somewhat scared of the country. I'd pictured it in pretty dismal colours. But the people were very happy and friendly and open-minded towards us. That surprised us. There's a whole political spectrum there that goes from left to right. You meet people with very different viewpoints.

*The film is set in Riyadh, and yet you don't see much of the city in the film. Was it your intention to show the close*

*quarters that Wadjda lives in?*

**Roman Paul:** It didn't feel like it was so cramped. It takes place in a quarter of the city where *Wadjda* lives with her family. Then she goes on an excursion to Riyadh's Old Town – where she goes with Abdullah. They run into each other in a mall, which plays a big role in Saudi Arabia. Shopping malls are a big pleasure for Saudis, since there aren't any movie theatres or bars or anything like that. So the film shows very different sides of Riyadh.

*Wadjda's big dream is a green bicycle. The colour green stands for hope, but it's also the colour of the Saudi flag. What do you see in the colour green?*

**Roman Paul:** The bike is green. It's a symbol of dreams that one can accomplish – even in the face of societal pressures – without harming anyone. *Wadjda* wants to make her dreams come true. She gets no support, and only meets continual resistance. But she stays at it.

**Interview: Bernd Sobolla**  
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NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS  
**ED WOOD**  
(Tim Burton, US 1994)  
**Monday 21 September**

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