



NEW RELEASES

Layla

Layla

Directed by: Amrou Al-Kahdi
©: Layla Film Limited, Film4,
The British Film Institute
A Fox Cub Films production
Developed with the support of:
EIFF Talent Lab Connects Programme
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BFI's Filmmaking Fund
Presented by: Film4, BFI
In association with: Significant Productions,
Aum Group
Distribution Advisory Services: WME Independent
Executive Producers: Farhana Bhula,
Louise Ortega, Nina Yang Bongiovi,
Forest Whitaker, Kevin M. Lin, Michael Y. Chow,
Mary Burke
Produced by: Savannah James-Bayly
Line Producer: Emily Precious
Associate Producers: Emily Everdee,
Samantha Spellman
Location Manager: Chloe Misson
Post-production Supervisor: Gerardine O'Flynn
1st Assistant Director: Dan Gill
Script Supervisor: Ellie Chiang
Casting by: Shaheen Baig
Script Editor: Angeli MacFarlane
Written by: Amrou Al-Kahdi
Director of Photography: Craig Dean Devine
Editor: Fiona Brands
Production Designer: Soraya Gilanni Viljoen
Art Director: Xenia Flint
Costume Designer: Cobbie Yates
Hair and Make-up Designer: Adele Firth
Composer: C.J Mirra
Music Supervisor: Phil Canning
Re-recording Mixers: Helen Miles, Nikola Zivojinovic
Supervising Sound Editor: Glen Gathard
Intimacy Co-ordinator: Eden Barrell-Kane
Cast:
Bilal Hasna (*Layla*)
Louis Greaforex (*Max*)
Darkwah (*Lucilla*)
Safiyya Ingar (*Princy*)
Terique Jarrett (*Felix*)
Sarah Agha (*Fatima*)
Baby (*Cornucopia*)
Rebecca Lucy Taylor (*Emily*)
Tim Bowie (*James*)
Freddie Thorp (*Jonathan*)
Adam Howden (*corporate guy*)
Emma McDonald (*Areej*)
Ali Barouti (*Haydar*)
Rania Kurdi (*Mariam, Mama*)
Adnan Rashed (*Yousef, Baba*)
Buket Komur (*Sara*)
Ghazi Al Ruffai (*Travis*)
Matthew Jacobs Morgan (*Jordan*)
Huw Morgan (*man in sauna*)
Alexis Meshida (*dry cleaner*)
Tim Berrington (*Alfred*)
Ruby Thomas (*Rebecca*)
UK 2024©
100 mins
Digital

A Curzon release

In Amrou Al-Kadhi's directorial feature debut *Layla*, the eponymous drag queen (played with great frankness and sensitivity by newcomer Bilal Hasna) lives a life full of fun, though pocked by conflict. A wild onstage presence in east London's drag clubs, but somewhat shy away from the spotlight, the non-binary Arab performer has a loving and nurturing group of friends but hides their true identity from their family. Having made a hilarious, profane scene at a corporate gig, Layla attracts the attention of Max (Louis Greaforex) and a tentative romance begins.

Al-Kadhi's BFI-backed film, which they also wrote, contains believable moments of tenderness and struggle but reflects the energy of the vital and vibrant scene it depicts. 'The world's a bit miserable right now, politics are all over the place, everyone's broke, and it's all a bit shit,' Al-Kadhi says. 'Ultimately, it's a really joyous, uplifting film, and I want people to feel the joy.'

Sitting down on a Zoom from Sundance Film Festival after *Layla's* world premiere, Al-Kadhi discusses the film, while also explaining how the mentorship of former *Doctor Who* showrunner Russell T Davies and advice from *Saltburn* (2023) director Emerald Fennell helped steer them towards their auspicious debut.

The origins of Layla lie in the first work you did with the BFI Flare Mentorship Programme. Can you tell me about that?

I made a short, in 2015, that Tricia Tuttle [former BFI head of festivals, now director of the Berlin Film Festival] watched and had lots of constructive feedback on. I was still finding my voice as a filmmaker. Then I became a Flare mentee in 2017, where I met [producer] Savannah James-Bayly because she was a mentee on the same cohort that year. We really hit it off and realised that we had similar tastes and ambitions. We made four shorts together in a series of years, and *Layla* came out of our relationship.

What was your motivating force in making Layla?

I wanted to make a film that showed the complexity of this character, to show Layla having to negotiate all these different sides of their life. Their gender, their sexuality, their family, their sex life. A feature gives the space in which to really watch this one character who we've not seen before move through the world in this way.

How much of it springs from your own life experiences?

I take a lot out of my own life experiences in order to make my work, and I'm a drag queen and grew up in east London and performing there. A lot of it is personal, but the film is also quite a heightened world. It has a sense of emotional realism to it in terms of the aesthetic and the visuals; I wanted to make a film that didn't feel like it was a gritty, realistic world that I grew up in. *Layla's* a bit of a dream space, a world that doesn't actually fully exist yet.

It's a hopeful world, which is why I always say the film is like a drag queen in itself, because it's quite heightened: a fantasy and a dream. There aren't clubs in London for queer people that are as epic as the one we found in *Layla*, so we built that club in a tunnel. Obviously Layla or Max wouldn't be able to really afford where they're living. The emotions are real, but the world is a fairytale.

You wrote for Hollyoaks. Can you tell me about that?

That's how I got started as a screenwriter. I'd been writing my own scripts, but that was my first foray into writing TV that got produced. I would encourage any fledgling screenwriter to cut their teeth on a soap, because you really learn how to make stuff quickly. They make an episode of *Hollyoaks* for every day of the week.

How do you feel Russell T Davies helped you on your way?

He was the mentor I was set up with through BFI Flare. That was in 2017, and almost seven years later he still reads all my scripts and still mentors me. So he's a dear friend. He really pushes me to write stuff that's not lazy and not predictable.

NEW RELEASES

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From Fri 25 Oct

Layla

From Fri 25 Oct

Anora

From Fri 1 Nov

Bird

From Fri 15 Nov

All We Imagine as Light

From Fri 29 Nov

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From Fri 25 Oct

Point Break

From Fri 8 Nov

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He's always told me off if my writing feels lazy or if the characters are saying or doing things that don't feel utterly authentic.

What Russell does so well is create characters and stories that are vibrant, accessible and really entertaining. What Russell has always pushed me to do with my writing is not just concentrate on the politics or the themes but actually make it fun to watch, because that's really what viewers need.

You've also worked with Emerald Fennell, is that correct?

I was writing on her show for an American network, but it's not going ahead anymore after the strike. She's an amazing collaborator and really pushed me to write one of my favourite scripts I've ever written. She's very clever, brutal and daring, which I love.

Why was Bilal right for the role of Layla?

We went on a big hunt and saw a lot of amazing people. Layla, as a character, has so many different sides to them. They have their drag identity, but they also have lots of different presentations in the film, from masculinity – and to being quite shy romantically – to being really daring on stage. They lie a lot in the film, and they hide a lot about what they feel and what they're thinking. The trick of the film, and also of Layla, is to have a character who can embody all those different contradictions, and Bilal's auditions were able to show that he could tap into all those different sides of the character.

What was the hardest bit in making the jump from shorts to features?

They're both hard in a different way. At least with a feature, you have the budget and the infrastructure to work long-term on it. With shorts, it's a little bit more ad hoc sometimes. With a short, you're quite constrained to maybe one location or one exploration.

One thing I found hard with *Layla* is that we're juggling so many different locations and themes and tones. One of the more challenging elements of the film was giving equal weight to those things and making sure that all of them were pitched right. Because the film does jump around so many different places throughout the movie. I think it's much more of a balancing act.

How did you get Self Esteem, who is featured on the soundtrack and appears in a cameo, involved?

I know Self Esteem really well, because in 2017 we were both in a pantomime together in Oxford. She was the fairy godmother; I was the villain. We were both broke artists, and we did a pantomime to make money. It was a really fun experience, and we got close. It's been a full-circle moment, now being able to make features, and obviously she has a really extraordinary pop career. I wanted to get her in the film, and I think she gives a really funny performance.

You're already working on the next film?

Yeah. Well, just starting to write it. This film took six years to go from script to screen, so you have to get started early.

And it's got a Pedro Almodóvar feel to it?

Yes, it does. It's a really twisted Almodóvarian drag mother, drag daughter tale of revenge.

What is it you like about his work?

He creates very queer worlds that are just a little bit not-of-this-world. He introduces characters and plots that you have to deal with without question, whether it's drag queens fucking nuns in *All About My Mother* (1999), or *The Skin I Live In* (2011), which is the plastic surgeon making his rapist into his wife, who he then assaults. He just creates these really absurd realities that you buy into and I like that. I want to do that with my work.

Lou Thomas, bfi.org.uk, 23 January 2024