



Big Screen Classics

Wadjda

Wadjda

Director: Haifaa al Mansour

Production Companies: Razor Films, High Look Group, Rotana Studios

In co-operation with: Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Bayerischer Rundfunk

Producers: Roman Paul, Gerhard Meixner

Co-producers: Amr Alkahtani, Layali Badr

Executive Producers: Hala Sarhan, Christian Granderath, Bettina Ricklefs, Rena Ronson, Louise Nemschoff

Assistant Director: Manuel Siebert

Screenplay: Haifaa Al Mansour

Director of Photography: Lutz Reitemeier

Editor: Andreas Wodraschke

Production Designer: Thomas Molt

Art Director: Dr Tarik Saeed

Costume Designer: Peter Pohl

Composer: Max Richter

Sound Designer: Sebastian Schmidt

Recording Mixer: Marc Meusinger

Re-recording Mixer: Olaf Mehl

Cast:

Reem Abdullah (*mother*)

Waad Mohammed (*Wadjda*)

Abdullrahman Al Gohani (*Abdullah*)

Ahd (*Hussa, the headmistress*)

Sultan Al Assaf (*father*)

Mohammed Zahir (*Iqbal*)

Saudi Arabia-Germany 2012

97 mins

Digital

The screening on Wed 17 Jun will be introduced by Sarah Agha, The Arab Film Club curator

Become a BFI Member

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Sight and Sound

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info:

sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk/subscribe



BFI Player

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

'My name is Haifaa al Mansour and I'm working on a script about a young Saudi girl.' So began the 2007 email plea Saudi director al Mansour sent to as many Western film companies she could find online that did co-productions. The resulting silence didn't come as much of a surprise: who would take a chance on a first-time director from a country with no history of showing or producing films – and where cinemas are actually illegal? 'We don't have the cinematic heritage of other Arab countries such as Egypt or Morocco,' al Mansour explains. 'People invest in films from directors and countries that know how to make them.' Five years would pass before her spirited, sneaker-clad rebel protagonist received a standing ovation in Venice and widespread critical acclaim.

'A bicycle is no flat screen,' says al Mansour but for *Wadjda's* titular 11-year-old, living in a strictly controlled, gender-segregated society, 'it's as much a symbol of modernity'. *Wadjda's* mother is incredulous when her daughter asks for one. 'Have you ever seen a girl ride a bicycle?' she demands. The film follows *Wadjda's* quest for two wheels and her need to prove to her friend Abdullah that she can beat him in a race. Ever resourceful, she discovers a sudden interest in the Koran when a recital competition promises the money she needs. The film shows the narrow age window in the life of a Saudi girl when she can still get away with being cheeky, questioning the world around her and talking to Abdullah on the street before the black *abaya* robe beckons and, after that, marriage.

'I come from a very liberal family I've never had a ceiling on my dreams,' explains al Mansour. 'But also I come from a small town and I went to a government school. A lot of my classmates there had so much potential and wanted to do so many things. But from the age of 15 they were married off and their lives changed completely. This film is for them. Every ideology in society falls on middle-class girls. They have to protect all the values: that women have to stay home; they have to get married; not to work with men.'

In *Wadjda*, the bicycle could have become an all-too-easy metaphor for freedom. The film, after all, is a protest song but it's one in which character comes first. Al Mansour cites two neorealist works as her influences: the Dardenne brothers' *Rosetta* (1999) and Jafar Panahi's *Offside* (2006), both of which register a cruel world through young female eyes. In *Wadjda* the religious police are mentioned; there's gossip about a girl caught with a boy who's not a family member. But mostly al Mansour zones in on small acts of rebellion – *Wadjda* colouring her sneakers in black so they can pass as school uniform or scribbling her name on her father's male-only family tree.

At the heart of *Wadjda* is the issue of the female voice. 'Women in Saudi are always invisible but they are also silenced,' says al Mansour. The outspoken *Wadjda* is constantly being told off and warned that people can hear her. However, for the competition scene in which she sings verses from the Koran, al Mansour 'wanted her voice to be both beautiful and vulnerable. I wasn't trying to show religion specifically as oppressive'.

Finding a girl who could both act and sing was a long process. 'We come from a culture that is not very close to our feelings,' the director points out. 'To open up in front of the camera is quite a big thing. But it was at least easier to cast the young girls. They are not at the age where they have to wear a veil. It was still an issue with the children in the school – we didn't have access to

Big Screen Classics

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

Mon 1 Jun 14:30; Sat 6 Jun 18:00; Fri 26 Jun 20:50

Late Spring Banshun

Tue 2 Jun 14:30; Sun 14 Jun 13:00;
Tue 16 Jun 20:45; Sun 21 Jun 12:10

Jour de fête The Big Day

Wed 3 Jun 18:15 (+ intro by Diana Cipriano,
BFI Programme and Research Coordinator);
Fri 12 Jun 20:55

Une femme est une femme A Woman is a Woman

Thu 4 Jun 20:55; Mon 8 Jun 18:20;
Wed 17 Jun 21:05

Hiroshima mon amour

Fri 5 Jun 20:50; Sat 13 Jun 15:10; Thu 25 Jun 20:45

Bicycle Thieves Ladri di biciclette

Fri 5 Jun 21:00; Mon 29 Jun 18:15

Call Me by Your Name

Sun 7 Jun 18:00; Thu 18 Jun 12:15;
Sat 20 Jun 20:20

Barbara

Tue 9 Jun 20:45; Thu 25 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by
Diana Cipriano, BFI Programme and Research
Coordinator)

Breaking Away

Wed 10 Jun 18:00 (+ intro by Philip Dobson,
founder of upCYCLE LDN); Fri 19 Jun 20:50;
Sun 28 Jun 12:30

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial

Thu 11 Jun 20:45; Sat 13 Jun 12:15

The Kid with a Bike Le gamin au vélo

Mon 15 Jun 18:00; Mon 22 Jun 20:45

Wadjda

Wed 17 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by Sarah Agha,
The Arab Film Club curator); Tue 30 Jun 20:50

25 & Under

We want to open up great independent and classic film and TV for all, making it as accessible as possible. If you are under the age of 26, you can get discounted tickets for BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. BFI Southbank cinema tickets are £4, with festival tickets £6, so you can enjoy the very best of cinema from around the world at an affordable price.

Sign up today and verify your age online, and you can start enjoying discounted tickets immediately.

BFI Southbank

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

everyone... Waad's family are OK with her being in the film but they don't want her to be an actress when she grows up. Now she's a little girl she can have some fun. When she's older she has to take a more respectable occupation – a doctor or a teacher, but not an entertainer'. Of Saudi TV actress Reem Abdullah, who plays Wadjda's mother, al Mansour says, 'it was a very different style of acting to what she's used to. I wanted something much more subtle. It was important that you could feel what she is thinking even when her face was covered.'

The difficulty of finding a cast and crew and of getting permission to film in Saudi meant the only previous nationally funded feature, *Keif al Hal* (2006), was shot in neighbouring UAE. By contrast, Wadjda spends as much time roaming the dusty roads of Riyadh as it does behind closed doors, highlighting the huge gulf between public and private worlds. For al Mansour it was crucial to shoot in Saudi. The big screen has transported audiences to cities all over the Middle East but, she says, 'nobody knows what the streets of Saudi are like.'

'Getting permission as a female director wasn't that difficult,' she continues. 'We had a very good line producer who did a lot of TV before and he treated it like any other TV show and it went through. For the authorities there is no problem but then you have to deal with the public. A lot of people were very welcoming and would stop us and want to appear. But a lot also weren't – they felt the film was threatening their values. They had never seen a woman with a camera before.' Getting around such restrictions entailed a lot of planning, location scouting and petitioning for access. 'A government school would have never let us shoot there. So we had to find a private one that looked like a government school.' One scene in a mall proved particularly difficult when permission to shoot was refused at the last minute.

'We chose certain times of the day when there was lighter traffic and we tried to choose neighbourhoods that were more tolerant,' she explains. 'But we still ended up in some conservative places. In Saudi you can't escape them. The landscape in some of these areas is amazing – for example the end scene, when she rides the bike. I wanted to pan around an urban landscape and end up on an open horizon.' But the only place they could find was a very conservative area, which meant al Mansour had to direct from the back of a van. 'I had a monitor, a walkie-talkie and a telephone,' she says. 'We would rehearse the scene before and the DP would block it. Then I would disappear but my voice would stay there, telling Waad to look up. It made me work more closely with the actors so if we were separated they knew what to do.'

The ban on cinemas, in place since the 1980s, means Saudis may miss *Wadjda* on the big screen (the film lost out on an Oscar nomination as a result) but it was vital for al Mansour that they can see it on DVD or TV. 'I tried not to film anything that would be censored but you never really know what they might not like,' she says. 'It's crazy and unpredictable but I hope they won't cut anything.' She says she tried to make the film as authentic as possible. 'I added details – phrases, particular accents, jokes – that Westerners won't notice but that Saudis will.'

Despite its sense of humour and its irrepressible protagonist, al Mansour's film laments the sad reality of life for many women, particularly in the story of Wadjda's mother. While faithful to the girl's point of view, it details, through snatches of arguments, her mother's precarious situation: that since she hasn't given birth to a son, her husband may be matched with another wife. But it is also a film that's hopeful of the changes that a younger generation could bring.

Isabel Stevens, *Sight and Sound*, August 2013