



IBRAAZ

Platform 007

INTERVIEWS

Emergent Cinema

Ahd in conversation with Sheyma Buali



*On the set of Sanctity.
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Ahd's directorial debut, in which she also starred, *The Shoemaker* (2009), premiered at the Dubai International Film Festival in 2009. Since then, she has

been a director and actor to watch. Leaving New York City after working on projects such as Peter Berg's 2007 film *The Kingdom* and a number of short films, she has now resettled in Saudi and become a force of strength in the Gulf film scene. Her second directorial project, *Sanctity* (2012), was shot entirely in her hometown of Jeddah. Soon after that, she expanded her visibility playing Ms. Husa, the strict headmistress in the ever-popular coming-of-age movie, *Wadjda* (2012). Seeing the expansion of the Saudi film industry through her work makes an interesting prism due to the maturity of her own production path, as well as the topics touched upon and the characters developed. In this interview, Ahd fleshes out issues of Saudi society as they are in three dimensions: the private, the public and the virtual; and how less-spoken issues can be dealt publicly with on the movie screen.

Sheyma Buali: We first met in 2009 at the Dubai International Film Festival. It was after the screening of *The Shoemaker*. But you were living in New York then, having shot *The Shoemaker* in Egypt. How has it been moving back to Saudi?

Ahd: I came back in 2012 when I got a grant from the Center for National Cinematography (CNC) in France, to shoot *Sanctity*. I wasn't moving here initially, but then two weeks later *Wadjda* happened, so I was off to Riyadh to shoot that. There's definitely been a lot more traction since I moved to the region. I think there is a lot more to be done here, for me. After 2008, the 'indie' filmmaking scene in New York was pretty much gone. I was jobless for a while. I have a very specific look so in terms of auditions I couldn't go for just anything. It was really getting harder and harder. When people see you or know that you are Arab but speak English, you are still Arab to them; they have a lot of assumptions, there is a lot of typecasting going on. In terms of commercial work, I wasn't the demographic they were looking for. It was hard towards the end. So when I moved back here it was really nice, I felt alive again. I shot my film, and it is hard to shoot a film in Jeddah and put it all together. Then *Wadjda* came along and that was very exciting.

SB: It's almost ironic that going from New York City, a supposed haven of creativity, to Jeddah, where there is a supposed dearth in creativity, things worked out that much better.

A: The region is booming right now. I think the western world has plateaued creatively. Especially in terms of competition, there are so many people competing with you there. Here, I am one-of-a-kind and I have so much more access to work and to projects. And the network of people I know is much larger here than in New York, which helps a lot.

SB: I remember in 2009 after *The Shoemaker* you did a Q&A, and of course the inevitable 'Saudi female director' topic came up. You mentioned that actually being a female director in Saudi has its advantages. Is that still the case?

A: Saudi women right now are so trendy. It's really that simple. It opens the door, but it is up to us to walk through it. The work has to speak for itself at the end of the day. I tell people, I never thought I would be so proud to be a Saudi woman. Throughout my life there were so many things that I had problems with being

from Saudi. But funnily enough, like you said before, it is ironic that being Saudi actually helps a lot right now.

SB: Perhaps that can be a little uncomfortable too. How do you feel about it?



On the set of *Sanctity*.
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A: I hope I am known as an artist who happens to be from Saudi. I don't want to hold any national flags or be typecast in that sense. That is why my first film wasn't at all about Saudi. It was about what I was able to create. But from a marketing point-of-view it is an angle I have to play. But of course, being Saudi also informs my experience in many ways. As artists and filmmakers, we start with what we know, and this is what I know. It bugs me when people come to me and say, 'oh no but you have to cover', or 'your parents must be from somewhere else' or 'you must've grown up abroad'. I was not, I am 100% from Saudi, my father is from Mecca. And I grew up here and there are a lot of girls like me.

SB: Clichés are strong when it comes to the perception of Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf as a whole. We are consistently battling with this idea of the 'rich Khaleeji', for example. You address that a bit in *Sanctity*. The glitz that has been used to promote the region covers up a lot of the reality on the ground including poverty and, until 2011 maybe, the political and social complications that do exist in the region. How do you use your role as a storyteller to cut through these false images and clichés?

A: I try to tell the story truthfully. If one focuses on breaking clichés then you immediately have an agenda and that moves away from what expression and art is to me. With me, for *Sanctity*, it was a question of this woman: what does she do now that she is alone without a man? I am an orphan, I lost both my parents, I have four brothers who are amazing, but at the same time it is debilitating to have to rely on them constantly. I've been in situations where I have been extremely frustrated. But then I thought of my situation and I am very privileged. Whatever happened to me isn't even an ounce of what happens to someone

who does not have as much. So my question was, what would a woman in that position do? That is how the film was born in this instance.

Obviously making the choice to play her as a poor woman raises the stakes: its not about who can get out of the situation – it's about how you can't get out of it. And there are a lot of women who cannot. I wanted to explore the idea of feminine strength in this film. I mean, yes, right: we are oppressed, we don't have rights and all that – but we are not weak, not at all. Among the strongest women I know in my life are Saudi women. The strength is in the endurance and there isn't as much emphasis on that. People talk about men's strength and being able to do whatever you want, but I think there is a lot of strength in endurance and I wanted to show that.

SB: Yes, both your short films are about women enduring. In *The Shoemaker* her husband was just coming back from prison, they have a grown child. While in *Sanctity*, the husband just died and she is pregnant. What is it about this theme of a woman being alone that you find interesting?

A: It is funny how that happened – I didn't notice that consciously, it is only after that I noticed. With *Sanctity* I wanted to show strength and endurance, and also as a whole, ask the question: what is feminine strength? Biologically we are built for endurance, we can carry less weight but we can carry it for a much longer time. It is evident in the point that we carry the child, we carry that weight: it's a strength we have.

SB: In *Sanctity*, apart from the troubles that the woman has, there are other points that seem like they'd be controversial or difficult to touch upon in Saudi (and the Gulf), including the young boy dealing drugs, her complicity in it, the sleazy guy demanding money that her deceased husband supposedly owed him while making advances at her. What kind of response do you get from Saudi audiences regarding these points that people hardly talk about in closed circles, let alone on the big screen?

A: Shock, at least at the beginning. But then they begin to register it. I think I was lucky and successful at telling the story without pointing fingers, just allowing the audience to make up their own mind. Many people felt helpless and didn't know how to react, which is what I wanted; I wanted people to be moved by it and understand what is happening from a visceral, feelings-based point-of-view, rather than understanding it intellectually and debating it. A lot of people loved it. Some people said it was like a 'big confusion' because there are a lot of points being tackled. In discussions some would ask: is this what she is supposed to do, as an Arab 'Gulf' woman and so forth? My response is that that is exactly what I am challenging: we live by what we are supposed to do, but that is not the reality of things. We have the '*mafroodh*' (what is expected) aspect in our society where we constantly look at expected codes of conduct.

SB: Going along the same line, perhaps no more or less controversial is the conflict that she has to deal with through the film: the inheritance of debt.

A: It is not as much about the debt, but how it is claimed or verified. How does a woman with no access to anything verify it when someone comes to her telling her that her husband had a debt to repay? How will she be able to fight it, who

would she go to? That is a big question because as women we are not clear what our rights are, they change by the day, depending on someone's mood or whatever else. There is no clear way of how you do things, there is no paper that states our rights. And it's relative; it depends on your class, on your family name and the government's role in situations like this. In Saudi, we have this thing: no woman can exist without a guardian. This is a big issue – my grandmother needs to ask her son permission to travel. This is something I like to challenge, and ask objectively: what is the reason behind it? You are trusting women to raise your next generation, so isn't she entitled to be responsible for herself and not just the children?



Still image from *Sanctity*.
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SB: Yes, and the guardianship issue is being digitized now. There is that text that the next male kin will receive when his female kin leaves the country.

A: I keep making fun asking when they will just invent the 'electronic *mahram*' (male guardian) and make life easier for everyone. That you need a man for everything its extremely frustrating.

SB: This goes into the issue of 'unmarriageable kin', which you also touch upon in the film. The thing about this is that it is actually going on behind the camera, where men and women are working together on set. But as part of the story, you have to act out certain things, like revealing your legs to the young boy (Mohamed Osman) in *Sanctity* and his looking at them. I remember your DIFF screening of *The Shoemaker*, some schoolgirls were giggling at the scene where the wife character, played by you, gets close to her husband (Amr Waked) in bed. At the time I was wondering if they would have giggled if they didn't know the actress was Khaleeji.

A: I think the way we look at sex is a very big question that I address in both my films. Sex is such a big part of life. It is the elephant in the room here; they segregate people in order to prevent them from having sex, but then it is the only thing they think about. It is ridiculous, whatever thoughts a man is having in his head are his thoughts, they don't belong to me, he needs to deal with it, covering me up won't change it. Its like an ostrich sticking their head in the sand hoping that it will go away. Sex is a part of life, we all come from sex, so we have to be able to address it. I especially address it in the second film where the boy is going through adolescence. At this age, they're having hormonal changes and appetites are growing, we need to be able to address this. We need to talk

about it in order to grow. There are so many problems related to it. Homosexuality is really common in Saudi, and I don't mean that in a homophobic way. Here men and women don't know how to be together so it is just easier for people to be with the same sex. And there are other issues: we don't have sex education and we need it. Things are very Victorian.

SB: To what extent have your films been screened in Saudi? What kind of venues do you screen in?

A: It has been screened in diplomatic premises like consulates, private screenings in people's homes, and in a gallery once. We also had a screening at the Young Presidents Organization.

SB: In terms of your own processes, how is it taking on the main role in your films?

A: It's hard and easy at the same time. It is hard because there is a trust issue, I had a great director of photography, a great producer, a great assistant director – I trusted them a lot, but it is difficult. But at the same time, it is easy because I know what I want so I can get it out much faster. Also, there are a lot of issues around what women can do and what they can't do. I didn't want to deal with that so I take on the role myself.

SB: Can you explain what it is like to shoot *Sanctity* in Jeddah: what kind of problems did you face?

A: The biggest problem we had was time. We had seven days to shoot, so there was a lot to get out in a short time. Another obstacle we had was that a lot of my crew members were first time crew members on a film set. They had worked before, but mainly on commercials, and nothing as hectic and precise as a film set. They would take three hours to set the lighting, so it was hard to get things going – but as soon as we were rolling they all stepped up to the plate and delivered. And we were shooting for 16 hours a day – for two days we shot for 18 hours. But it was so much fun, gruelling, but fun. The people in the neighbourhood we shot in were phenomenal. At the beginning, I was covered up and being very cautious of where we were. By the third day, I was standing in the middle of the street in a turban chilling with the neighborhood thugs. They completely embraced us! I was so pleasantly surprised by the whole thing.

SB: I liked your anecdotes in the production notes about how the difference between acting and reality wasn't quite settling in.

A: Yes, we cast some people from the neighbourhood for the opening scene, which was the funeral. They were all older ladies. So we did the first take and they got up to leave – they didn't know what was going on, and I said to them, 'no there are more takes.' So they sat back down and got back into it, and at one point I started to cry. And one of the women looked at me and said, 'Wow, you are crying for a man you don't even know.'

SB: You shot *The Shoemaker* in Egypt, right? What was the difference in production in Egypt (*Shoemaker*) versus Saudi Arabia (*Sanctity*)?

A: The crew. In Egypt you have a fully-fledged industry, here there are a lot of first timers, we didn't run into the same issues there. And how do you manage the film set? There it is much more common to see a film set than it is here in Jeddah. They were both somewhat guerilla in the sense that you are managing real people in real situations so you have to anticipate things, as opposed to a studio which is a more controlled environment. But both were extremely fun. Shooting in Saudi, though, is close to my heart; I'm shooting in my hometown, getting to know the people, seeing these neighbourhoods. I grew up here, but I was completely sheltered, and then I left. When I came back, I was a divorced, single woman and my parents are not around. It's a very different experience, and I was very glad to be able to get in touch with all of this.



On the set of *Sanctity*.
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SB: I am really glad to hear that you had so many screenings. There is this myth that nothing is being shot and seen in Saudi. But I see that after *Wadjda* the discussion on cinema in Saudi has become more serious. How do you see the path continuing in regards to cinema in Saudi?

A: There is shooting. All the *YouTube* kids are doing their thing – it is more the idea of a cinema or shooting a film with a Saudi story. We are still in our infancy, so there is a lot of talk that has to happen and there's the question of whether or not the government will embrace it or not. But I am very, very, very optimistic. There is me, there is Haifaa al-Mansour (director of *Wadjda*), and there is a lot more talent out there. We have reached the international screens, which shows that there is a demand for these stories.

I call it 'Saudi, the Magic Kingdom' – things happen in their own way here; we have to have films to open cinemas. I would love to see theatres here, but with the Internet and all the platforms that we have, access is not an issue. You can access audiences and audiences can access you. Everyone has a smart-phone, it is insane: everyone has a *YouTube* channel, a *Twitter* account. There is a whole virtual existence emerging here. It is Victorian in a sense in that you have a public and a private sphere, but now there is a virtual existence.

SB: A 3-D existence.

A: Yes, and it has made people behave differently. Virtually, people are meaner, communicating behind screens gives them permission to be meaner, or nicer, or explore more. Publicly, there is a code of conduct to abide by. And privately, well, a lot of shit happens.

Ahd, A native of Saudi Arabia, is an award winning filmmaker and actress who moved to New York City in 1998 to study Law at Columbia University. She then completed her BFA in Animation & Communication from Parsons School of Design and went on to a Directing degree from the New York Film Academy. Ahd studied acting under William Esper and then went on to act in her self-produced and self-directed short films before starring in *Wadjda*. She also worked as technical advisor on Peter Berg's *The Kingdom*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sheyma Buali

Sheyma Buali is a London-based writer specializing in arts and culture from the Middle East. Her work has been published in Arabic and English in numerous publications including *Asharq Alawsat*, *Harpers Bazaar Art*, *Little White Lies*, *Al Arabiya*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* and *Image & Narrative*. She is particularly interested in popular relationships with social and political arts, visual and urban cultures from the Gulf and histories of Arab cinemas. Buali is currently a programmer and organizer with the London Palestine Film Festival. Prior to this, she worked for ten years in a range of roles in TV, film and documentary production in Boston, Los Angeles, and her native Bahrain.