

SUSAN YOUSSEF ON HABIBI

BASED ON THE ANCIENT ARABIC ROMANCE OF MAJNUN LAYLA, HABIBI TELLS THE STORY OF YOUNG GAZAN LOVERS WHO ARE PREVENTED FROM SEEING EACH OTHER BY FAMILY, SOCIAL TRADITION, AND POLITICS. THE IDEA CAME TO WRITER-DIRECTOR SUSAN YOUSSEF WHILE SHOOTING FORBIDDEN TO WANDER IN 2002, A DOCUMENTARY THAT RECOUNTS HER OWN ROMANCE WITH A THEATER DIRECTOR IN GAZA. HABIBI IS SET TO SEDUCE AUDIENCES WORLDWIDE, STARTING WITH ITS PREMIERE AT THE VENICE FILM FESTIVAL. YOUSSEF, A NEW YORKER, TALKED ABOUT THE FILM BY PHONE FROM AMSTERDAM, WHERE SHE LIVES PART OF THE YEAR.

Why use Majnun Layla as your source material? You could've written the script from scratch.

Susan Youssef: There were two advantages. One, it gave me a structure that had been working for centuries. Two, I was completely enchanted by this idea of a poet who existed in the seventh century and whose name other writers for centuries have used to author their own love poetry. There's an argument that the Majnun Layla poems aren't by the original poet Qays ibn-al Mulawwah. I felt I could connect to that tradition of hiding behind his poetry.

But why choose a romance to tell a story about Gaza?

SY: It was easy to make it a romance because my only link to the Gaza Strip was my own personal romance. And Gaza is an incredibly romantic place. The landscape is beautiful: there's the beach, the tropical climate, fruit, palm trees. Then there's the heroism of everyone that lives there. The landscape and the nature of the people living there and surviving seemed very romantic.

This is your second film set in Gaza. You're Arab-American, but your father's Lebanese and your mother's Syrian. What draws you specifically to Gaza?

SY: My first screenplays were almost identically linked to me: one was an Arab-American screenplay that I wrote as my thesis when I was an undergraduate, and one was set in Lebanon when I was a journalist in Beirut. I felt like I didn't have the distance in order to give my characters the truth of their existence; I ended up telling the stories too much as myself, which does not make for very good narrative. I'm much more honest when I'm telling the story through another setting. Gaza, Palestine—it's still the Levant, we're still Semitic people. It's almost what I know, but there's a little bit more distance.

What was the process of making Habibi?

SY: I fell in love in Gaza and the idea was just handed to me: I saw children acting out Majnun Layla in a gymnasium in Khan Younis. I found the poems at the New York Public Library. I went to Gaza in 2005 to shoot sample scenes. People were very willing to support the production. Across political positions they were really excited.

But you didn't end up shooting the film in Gaza. Why?

SY: In 2007, I wasn't allowed back into Gaza. I waited in the West Bank not knowing what I was going to do. But Palestinians are very innovative people, and very hospitable and helpful. I met people from Gaza who were living in the West Bank—they suggested I try to fake Gaza there. But I delayed. Part of the reason it took me until 2009 to shoot was my belief that I'd get back into Gaza. When we filmed in the West Bank it was so painful, because there was a limitation on what we could film. How could I fake Gaza while shooting the West Bank landscape, with mountains in the distance? We couldn't have wide shots—but that worked to create the suffocating feeling of Gaza. We had many other obstacles—I'm deeply grateful that I was able to find a way to tell the story.

What was the shoot itself like?

SY: Because I'd been so adamant about shooting in Gaza for so long, I closed a lot of doors financially, in terms of being able to find producers, investment... The film had an extremely limited budget. That limited the number of people we could have on the crew. But I believe the camaraderie and intimate nature of the film set resulted in a film made out of love. I'm very superstitious: I believe the kind of energy that goes into a film goes a long way. Youssef, a New Yorker, talked about the film by phone from Amsterdam, where she lives part of the year.

What's your ultimate objective with Habibi?

SY: I love the idea of bringing this poetry back to the mainstream.

So that's one goal, to share how amazing I find my heritage to be. And I believe in the hope of collective consciousness: that greater understanding of the situation in Gaza will somehow improve things there. This film is part of a continuum. I look to the u.s. civil rights and gay rights movements—much of their success has to do with collective consciousness coming through media, culture.

You were born and raised in New York City. How did you end up in Amsterdam?

SY: Well, Mohammed in Gaza, with whom I had the relationship, advised me to go to the Netherlands—it was one of the countries he knew was funding theater in Gaza. It was ironic because in 2002, on the way to Gaza, I was detained at Schipol by Israeli security for interrogation. I applied for a Fulbright fellowship to the Netherlands and it worked out. I found a mentor my first week, Dr. Ihab Saloul, a scholar of comparative literature. He knew the Majnun Layla poetry, was from the Gaza Strip, but he also lived in the Netherlands and understood what was needed to culturally translate the story.

And what about Mohammed?

SY: Things with Mohammed ended up not working out. Instead, in my last month of my Fulbright fellowship, I met my husband, Man Kit Lam, who edited the film with me. So I came to Holland out of love and I stayed in Holland out of love. [Laughs]. I have to thank this film and I have to thank the Gaza Strip because it's completely defined my life through love.

Interview by Sean Kennedy (www.sean-kennedy.com).