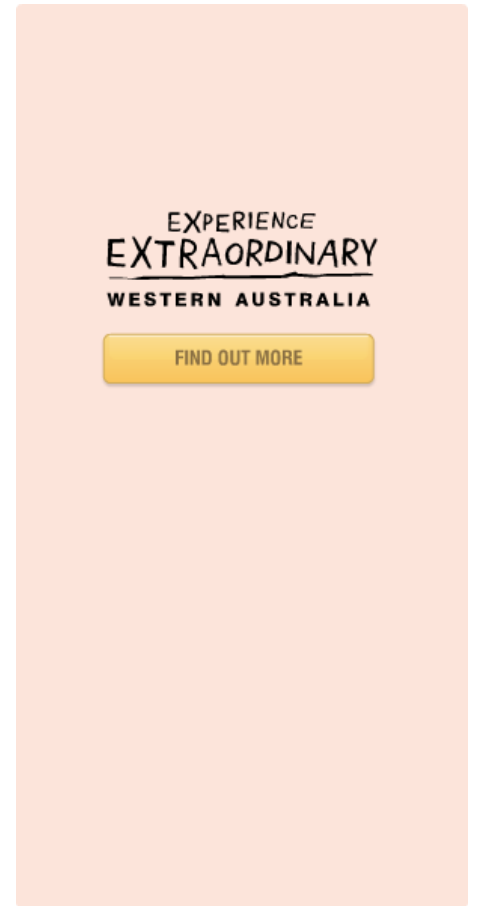


Habibi



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CREDITS: Directed by [Susan Youssef](#) and starring [Kais Nashif](#) and [Maisa Abd Elhadi Abd Elhadi](#).

DETAILS:

SYNOPSIS: A story of forbidden love, set in Gaza. Two students in the West Bank are forced to return home to Gaza, where their love defies tradition. To reach his lover, Qays graffiti's poetry across town. Habibi is a modern re-telling of the famous ancient Sufi parable Majnun Layla. The full Arabic title is Habibi Rasak Kharban, which translates as "darling, something's wrong with your head."

GENRES: [Romance](#)

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Doomed love in the West Bank.

HABIBI REVIEW / SIMON FOSTER

The West Bank setting gives weight to this familiar riff on the doomed young lover scenario. Susan Youssef's *Habibi* is a raw, immediate work that sometimes suffers because of—but ultimately benefits from—its obvious budgetary constraints and digital lensing.

RATING

FESTIVALS & AWARDS

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Habibi is based upon the epic poem 'Majnun and Layla', a ninth century verse that told of a failed 7th century love affair set against a backdrop of regional conflict (specifically, the defeat of the Byzantines and Persians by the Arabs and the subsequent conquering of Syria and Iraq). Insightfully, Youssef draws parallels to the modern tensions, in particular its impact upon family and society (the random death of a young man is handled with a harsh frankness, indicating just how entrenched violence and grief is in the region).

Our 'Romeo' and 'Juliet' here are dreamy artistic spirit Qays (Kais Nashif) and ambitious engineering student Layla (a terrific Maisa Abd Elhadi). Though from two diametrically opposed backgrounds, they connect over passages of traditional poetry at university. They are kept apart by familial and social forces, yet their love strengthens. He writes graffiti-poetry to her, though such public displays of affection are culturally unacceptable in her enclave; her protective father (Yosef Abu Wardah) is embarrassed and her brother Walid (Jihad Al-Khattib), whose moderate views have begun to veer towards Hamas, is enraged.

Writer-director Yousef, making her feature debut, seems to come alive when her protagonists are faced not with issues of the heart but with how their frowned-upon love reflects the traditions and mores of their culture. A scene in which two young men bully the lovers with quotes from the Qur'an, only to have Layla turn the text against them, represents one of several politically-volatile statements the director makes against the ongoing misuse of the ancient book to propagate conflict.

To the film's detriment, one never quite believes that Qays and Layla are that deeply in love. Their central plight is suitably engaging but not particularly engrossing (Nashif is a rather passionless romantic lead). They fight passionately with anyone who denies them togetherness, but when united, they seem to dither; they act in defiance of their tradition when apart, but are crippled by anxiety at what might happen now that they have what they wanted. When questioned by immigration officials as to their motives and backgrounds, Layla folds with a weak-willed peep, seemingly oblivious to the fact she is on the cusp of a freedom she has craved all along. I struggled to find some deeper metaphorical meaning to these actions as they seemed frustratingly incongruous, but none came.

Regardless, it is an impressive first effort by Yousef. Having adhered to an ultra-realistic aesthetic for the entire film, she offers some poetic flourishes of her own in the final moments that are well-chosen. When her intellect and artistry finds its soulmate in the form of a strong narrative, a major work will emerge; in *Habibi*, she has crafted a flawed but ambitious and worthy debut.



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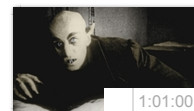
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Sunday, 30th Dec

22:35 Kikujiro

00:45 The Sovereign's Servant

Monday, 31st Dec

13:00 The Circle

22:20 Paris, Je T'aime

00:25 Kisses

Tuesday, 1st Jan

22:00 Amelie

23:50 The Band's Visit

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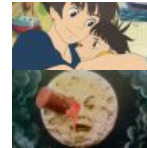


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