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When it came to choosing a country to reside in, France was not an option for Susan Youssef. "There are many Arabic filmmakers already there," says the 34-year-old writer and director behind "Habibi Rasak Kharban" (Darling, Something Is Wrong with Your Head), a love story set in Gaza that has been screening at festivals across the world this year. In the end, she selected Holland. "The Netherlands was bringing theatre to Gaza, so I thought maybe they would help me."



Youssef was born in Brooklyn, New York, of Lebanese and Syrian parents, but at a young age her family moved to Staten Island. "I grew up in a family where we didn't have the funds to go to Lebanon, or the luxury to go to the Middle East every summer, so I'd never been there until I was 22."

Although she had wanted to be an actress from an early age, it was never to be and only after subsequent careers as a teacher and journalist did Youssef discover that her true calling was behind the camera.

"I always wanted to be an actress and I was a horrible one," she laughs. "It was totally not my calling but it interested me in the theatre, so I started writing stage plays and applied to the Tisch School of the Arts."

Youssef says that she couldn't afford to pay the fees of Tisch, part of the New York University, so attended a public university instead. Later, she moved to Lebanon, worked as a schoolteacher and a journalist for The Daily Star before submitting a short film about her grandparents to film schools in the United States and getting a scholarship from the University of Texas.

Named as one of the "25 New Faces to Watch" by Filmmaker magazine in 2009, Youssef has directed several short films, including "Marjoun and the Flying Headscarf", "Forbidden to Wander", "For the Least", and "West Fingerboard Road".

Her first feature film, "Habibi Rasak Kharban" has been described as a daring romantic drama with an intense, but uplifting political message.

But Susan doesn't agree with this description, insisting that "Habibi" is not political. "I think if you don't look for politics in 'Habibi' and just go in and watch it like you would any film, you won't find any politics. This is my first film and I just wanted to put obstacles true to Gaza in the way of two lovers being together."

"Habibi" tells the story of two young lovers, Qays and Layla, living in the Gaza Strip, who struggle to be together and express themselves through art in a restrictive culture. In order to display his affection, Qays paints graffiti across town, writing poetry from the ancient Arabic love story Majnun Layla.

"Being an Arab-American filmmaker, I feel very conscious of all the odds that are against us in the media and I felt it was important to have a story to rely on and to guide me," says Youssef.

"For this film, I didn't just go to the poetry because it gave credibility to the film, although it did give validity to Arab culture. The main reason I used it was because I thought the poetry was so phenomenally beautiful that I felt everyone should read it."

While there were challenges in introducing such ancient literature to a wider audience, Youssef said it was all part of the experience. "I think it is important for me as an artist to work through different mediums. I like a challenge. Why would someone become a filmmaker if it were easy?"

"Habibi Rasak Kharban" made its world premiere at the Venice Film Festival and its North American premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in early September. A Palestine-UAE-USA-Netherlands co-production, the film made its first appearance in the Arab world in the 8th edition of Dubai International Film Festival.

"I just want people to go in with an open heart and accept the film for what it is," says Youssef.

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