
Arab American filmmaker opens eyes, inspires

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In accordance with National Women's History Month, award-winning filmmaker Susan Youssef visited Gonzaga's campus Tuesday to engage students about the filmmaking process and to screen two of her productions.

Youssef is an Arab American, independent filmmaker whose talents have been praised by some of the industry's biggest names. Her breakout film, "Forbidden to Wander," has screened at the Sundance Film Festival, Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. It also won the Bettye Nowlin Award for Excellence at the 2004 Cinematexas International Film Festival, landing her a spot on Filmmaker Magazine's 2010 "25 New Faces."



Jake Kelly photo

Susan Youssef speaks to GU students and faculty before showing her breakout film "Forbidden to Wander."

Youssef's tale of success, however, is more than nine years in the making.

In 2002, at the age of 25, as a graduate student at the University of Texas Austin Film School, Youssef sought to travel to the Middle East to create a film as a student project. After UT rejected her proposal, she decided to pursue the film independently and withdrew from the university.

According to Youssef, the film she had in mind was a convergence between her American culture and Middle Eastern heritage.

"My original idea was to make a film about Christian Palestinians," she said.

Youssef's idea dissolved before ever boarding the flight to Palestine.

"I immediately felt the weight of my concept after having difficulty in the airport," she said. "Looking back, my initial idea seemed silly — family, dinners, everyday life."

The lack of direction that followed ultimately resulted in Youssef's world-renowned film "Forbidden to Wander."

Prior to screening the film during her afternoon lecture, Youssef reiterated that the piece was a "student work." Yet, it is the film's amateur angles and distorted audio that convey a sense of honesty to the audience, offering an uncensored glimpse into the lives of seemingly average Middle Easterners.

Carolyn Cunningham, an assistant professor in the communication arts department and UT alumna, played a key role in bringing Youssef to Gonzaga.

"The film's message coincided well with Gonzaga's mission of social justice and what's happening in the Middle East," Cunningham said.

The film catalogs Youssef's travels through Palestine and the conflict she experienced at the Israeli border, though the true plot lies in her self-proclaimed story of "falling in love in Gaza over the summer."

"Forbidden to Wander" is shot almost entirely from a first-person perspective using a handheld camera, with the exception of a single clip, in which a member of the Israeli border patrol

smashed her camera.

Youssef combines the devastation and destruction that surrounded her in Gaza with personal, revealing conversations with her newly acquired lover.

Despite the romantic undertones, junior Austin Fisher found the film's insight to be informative.

"I realized just how good we have it in America," he said. "Most of the U.S. is never in a constant state of fear the way the Middle East is."

According to Youssef, there were numerous interviews with Palestinian officials and other credentialed professionals that were left on the cutting room floor.

Following the film's screening, Youssef spoke to the crowd, offering her own strategies for the filmmaking process. She revealed secrets for acquiring funds and networking, focusing heavily on her "hybrid" approach to distribution — a blend of traditional and grass-roots tactics.

Later in the evening, Youssef graced GU with the first partial public screening of her latest feature, "Habibi Rasak Kharban."

According to Youssef, the film is a modern telling of "Majnun Layla" — a sixth-century Arab love story.

"Telling a love story allows people to universally relate to the Gazan experience," Youssef said.

Though only a fraction of the film was shown, the similarities between the two are undeniable. Youssef attributes many of the themes in "Habibi" to her experiences while filming "Forbidden to Wander."

A premiere date has been set for "Habibi," but it has not been disclosed to the public.

"You may not believe what I say," Youssef said. "But you will believe my love story."