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SANS FRONTIÈRES

L'interview de Manal Saad par Alice Kanterian , "Aswan International Women Film Festival





Interview by Alice Kanterian

Interviewee: Manal Saad

Dear Manal, we met in Aswan at the 5th edition of Aswan International Women Film Festival-AIWFF, a very dedicated festival, that took place 24-29.06 in an incredible picturesque city on the Nile, Aswan. We both stayed on the corniche on the Nile at the Obelisk hotel managed by Mr. Abd El Sayed Barcecos, and enjoyed great food, good discussions and a magical atmosphere in the evening while watching the Nile, the feluccas passing by and the stars.

The other festival guests were staying at the Tolip hotel, and this is where most of the workshops and screenings took place, as well as a handicraft exhibition powered by Alexbank. The festival's president Mohamed Abdel Khalek discussed with me his goals during our exclusive interview. One goal is to support the local

cinema production with important partners like Gemini Africa. The whole world is going digital and we need to promote the knowledge of technology and teach the young generation of Aswan, he was telling me. A Cinema-Tech Arbitration took place on the 25.06 at the Tolip Hotel followed by a Cinema-Tech Seminar the next day on the 26.06. I met actor Ahmed Magdy, he was one of the experts arbitrating on the 25.06. Did you attend any of these pitching and tech sessions, how was it?



Due to an unexpected personal event and with the help of the organizing team, I could only make it on June 27. This means that despite my plans to attend all the sessions, I had to reluctantly miss out on most of them. The season I attended was

Women's Image in Cinema 2020.

Andrew Mohsen, the still artistic director of AIWFF underlined the necessity of educating the young generation of Aswan. This was his last mission as an artistic director as he is embracing a new challenge as the artistic director of Cairo International Film Festival. The festival's mission of the AIWFF is to educate the young generation of Aswan by showing films that advocate for women rights and organizing workshops for a new generation of filmmakers. I witnessed myself the acting workshop by famous actress Salwa Ali. Can you comment on this goal, did you attend any of the seminars/workshops. What workshops did you attend? What were your impressions?

As I mentioned, I only arrived prior to my film screening, so I haven't attended the workshop, however, I've met and talked with both Andrew Mohsen and Salwa Ali. I had a discussion with Andrew in which we concluded that supporting Aswan's young talents is one of the festival's prominent advantages. We've seen this through their workshop films which reflect their dedication, passion and openness. I personally believe that there is something in the newly-blossoming societies; they are closer to their roots, hence authentic, they are open, hence, creative, and they are courageous, hence surprising. This is what I've noticed watching the workshop films in Aswan and I believe that Aswan's talents are rich with authentic stories and driven by a great passion for cinema.

The second goal is linked to Bahiga Hafez. She is one of the pioneers in Egyptian cinema, the Egyptian cinema is feminine, Mr. Abdel Khalek explained. Not only was she an actress, she founded her own production house Fanar Films in 1932. With Fanar Films, Hafez co-directed the film al-Dahaya (1932), called "The Victims" in English, in which she also played a major role. She was also the costume designer, composer and editor- So the second goal of the festival is to promote cinema made by women encouraging topics important for women, I avoid using the expression "cinema related to women topics". The collaboration with writer Azza Kamel, one of the founders of the festival is very important, her NUT FORUM is one of the pillars of this festival that advocates for women's rights.

Here I met prominent academic Faiza Al-Kharafi, president of Kuwait University from 1993 to 2002, and the first woman to head a major university in the Middle East. She is the vice president of the World Academy of Sciences. Which activists did you meet? Does Bahiga Hafez play a role model in the Egyptian society, she gave up everything, her social status as a Pasha heiress in order to fulfill her artistic expression. I consider her a pioneer and not just a female pioneer in Egyptian cinema, do you get my point?

I totally agree with you. Bahiga Hafiz has played a major role in the Egyptian cinema. Nowadays, women's contribution to cinema is relatively much easier. Not only because people who worked in cinema were looked down upon by Egypt's aristocrats, caused by not only the natural resistance humans have towards new things, but more importantly that women experienced an utterly different social status at that time; more strict and confining in the roles she is allowed to present in the society and the talks she can participate in her smaller community. However, in every era, there are always those who broke the rules and thrived.

You took part in the short film competition with your short "Strawberry" which was screened on the 28.06 at the Tolip Cinema as part of the Short Film Competition 3 from 11 am-1 pm. I attended the masterclass with Palestinian filmmaker Najwa Najjar at the same time and missed your film, available now only on VIU. And a day before I missed the masterclass with French actress and producer who worked with Godard Macha Méril because I was visiting the Philae Temple that day, and the day before to culture heritage Abu Simbel, these great trips were organized by the Tourism Board of Egypt, a partner of the festival. But unfortunately I missed your film, what is it about and how did the afterwards Q&A go?

My film is about a terminal patient who meets an anesthesiologist and engages in a spontaneous life-changing talk. It screened on June 28 and rescreened on June 29. The Q&A session was to the point and held by Aliaa Talaat. I was asked about the experience of the shooting, the director's expectation and relation with the audience's reaction and the craft of condensing the events in a very short time.

I've also enjoyed the attendees' reaction, they clapped twice, one at the film's climax and another at the end.



How come your film is available only for VIU subscribers? How is your experience with subscription-based streaming services, what do you think of online platforms like Netflix and VIU?

My film is not yet on VIU. VIU has provided the contestants with a period of 6 months upto 1 year for filmmakers to distribute their films at festivals before VIU's release, which - I think - was a great advantage as the filmmakers would experience the whole cycle from creation to distribution and all the joy or benefits that can accompany this journey.

I was attending a panel at Berlinale last year, it was organised by a Women Association, they were criticizing the algorithm saying that it discriminates against women? On the other side Netflix is also a producer supporting local film productions and giving independent films that might have difficulties to find an audience a stage and providing viewers- What is your take on this?

The second one. I like to focus on opportunities rather than conflicts. With this mindset, a woman can be more open about her chances to voice her thoughts in the way that suits her idea best. The predetermined stance in my opinion is limiting. In other words, even if it's true, I'd still take my chances.

I was impressed by the winning films.

For the power of storytelling which helps the viewer to identify with the characters and feel sympathy, switching from one side to the other, and using visual metaphors to reflect this change of emotions, also for developing an intense dialog in the courtroom, the Best Script Award went to the Portuguese Leonardo Antonio with SUBMISSION.

Although we don't see many emotions on his face, I appreciated the ability to get under the skin of an enigmatic character, enduring life as it comes, and with the capacity to express the inner solitude. The Best Actor Award went to Daniel Katz for his performance in THE DOG WHO WOULDN'T BE QUIET.

Being not only the sole leading character, but also in the centre of the screen, looking into the camera for a 100 minutes, while the story develops behind her back, she manages to reflect on her face the most narcissistic emotions to manipulate everyone and assimilate a troubled character nevertheless. The Best Actress Award went to Mariana Di Girólamo from Chile for her performance in LA VERONICA directed by Leonardo Medel.

Creating a mesmerising intimate story of taciturn graphic designer Sebastián, which expands over several years, and for the decision to shoot in black and white, offering a timeless perspective upon a very contemporary, almost prophetic story which speaks volumes about the actual global pandemic health crisis the Best Directing Award was offered to Argentinian director Ana Katz and her cinematic film THE DOG WHO WOULDN'T BE QUIET.

For the imminent importance of the topic and for the injustice made to Lebanese women, and to all women fighting to maintain custody after divorce under Islamic law the jury decided to give a Special Jury Award to HEAVEN BENEATH MY FEET by Sandra Madi produced by Lebanese producer Abir Hashem, who also attended the festival.

The jury admired the ability to convey mistrust and anxiety, for effectively communicating the dynamics between victimhood and aggression by activating strong emotions in the audience. Also for questioning the growing power of the aggressor in front of defenceless characters, the jury has decided by voting system the Best Film Award went to BAD ROADS dir. by Natalya Vorozhb

Have you watched any films screened at the festival? Which films did you like?

One of the award-winning films that I've enjoyed is the syrian film About Her directed by Rabab Mrhege. About Her was in the shorts program 3. It had a daring attempt using a surrealistic and symbolic approach to narrate the film. I've also enjoyed the Malaysian film, The Cloud Is Still Here by Mickey Lai. Both won an award at the festival.

What are your plans for the future, share with me your artistic goals?

I am currently developing a feature film which is also coincidentally about a woman. That's the first on my list.

Where can the festival improve? Andrew Mohsen sees the festival still in the beginning and would like to add more sections and invite more journalists from abroad in order to ensure an international coverage. But in order to do so interpreters would be required, this could be improved in the future.

There is room for improvement in different aspects. But if the festival helped new local talents make films, screened international short and feature films that 80% of them are made by women, helped people to network and take part in discussions, it achieved its purpose to me. The improvement shall be directed on how to better the approaches rather than the objectives which experience and



time provide the answer for.