

# HUFFINGTON POST

03.11.14, E. Nina Rothe

## The Abu Dhabi Diaries: Making the Impossible Possible, for Great World

### Cinema

After all is said and done, the movie screenings finished, the red carpets rolled away and the party venues dismantled, what should a film festival leave a cinema lover with? If the event is the [Abu Dhabi Film Festival](#), and the cinema lover yours truly, it has the power to change the world -- my world. And somehow that's enough, because the filmmakers whose masterpieces were showcased this year in Abu Dhabi confirmed for me that the power of one can be way stronger than we all imagine.

So now I'm not only an idealist to my critics, but also an individualist. OK, I'll accept that label, but only if it gives me a free pass to exalt the power of cinema. Arab cinema, which slowly but surely is coming into its own, finding new ways to tell the stories of the region, and bypassing traditional themes and symbolisms to experiment with new visions. And audiences here in the Gulf are catching up more quickly than most world audiences, except maybe the French, with these new voices, these new styles of filmmaking. One only has to see the success at ADFE of films such as Shahad Ameen's *Eye & Mermaid*, which won first prize Narrative in the Emirati short film competition, or *Theeb*, which walked away with numerous awards on closing night, or even *Iraqi Odyssey*, which my fabulous co-jurors and I awarded with the NETPAC trophy, to know just how audiences are wholeheartedly getting what it means to believe in the magic of the movies.



The Netpac jury with the team of *Iraqi Odyssey*, including filmmaker Samir (center)

But let me be precise with my statement, or I'll risk having another label bestowed upon me, that of clueless orientalist. Egyptian cinema has been around longer than Italian cinema or our dear old Hollywood. It can be argued that the moving image was invented in Egypt, and not by the Lumière brothers as more often claimed. Lebanese cinema has for years had a way of getting to the heart of the matter, hitting the soul of its viewers, with long-lasting images that most world filmmakers can only dream of creating. Palestinian filmmakers like Elia Suleiman have reinvented cinema as we know it, so I need to explain that my statement above is directed at new Arab cinema, those young filmmakers who look to Abu Dhabi, the Dubai International Film Festival, the Doha Film Institute and now perhaps even Cairo and Marrakesh, as their jump-off platforms into world markets. These incredible new talents, and by that I mean new to me and perhaps American and European audiences, are at the avant-garde of a movement that is making the cinematic art achieve new heights, and in the process, creating films that explain a region to outsiders, and allow for a roadmap to solve its problems. ISIS and the likes should be afraid of the seventh art, very afraid. Because the worst enemy of fundamentalism and ignorance is learning that "the Other" is really just like us. Simple as that.

During the festival, I was impressed by the familiar faces I observed walking into screenings, searching for, and finding great cinema. On a bustling Friday night at Marina Mall, where most of the screenings for ADFE were held, I saw CNN's Becky Anderson, a journalist I deeply admire for her care in telling the stories of the region. I then started a conversation with one of my favorite filmmakers in Venice this year, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, whose film *Tales* screened in the festival. ADFE artistic director Ali Al Jabri is always a welcoming force, and his passion for cinema can be felt throughout the selections, while meeting for the first time both Iraqi-Canadian rapper The Narcicyst, AKA Yassin Alsalman and actor Ali Suliman were personal highlights. The Narcicyst had a fantastic short film, *Rise*, in this year's festival, while Suliman served on the Narrative Jury. Both were the kind of interviews that journalists dream of getting, and we continued talking long after the recording device was turned off. Oh, and on closing night, I sat next to Australian filmmaker Cate Shortland and her gorgeous daughter, and awaited the red carpet with Narrative Jury member and writer/filmmaker Steven Shainberg, who made me giggle with his spot-on statements and sharp humor.

Then there was our jury, comprised of Vietnamese master filmmaker Dang Nhat Minh and NYU Abu Dhabi beloved professor Dale Hudson. We had the arduous task of deciding the best film to be awarded with the NETPAC prize, the organization which stands for the "Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema." Our selection included films from India, South Korea, Taiwan, Georgia, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and the UAE. And finding a winner among such exceptional films like *Labour of Love*, *The Valley*, *Tales*, *Memories on Stone*, *The Wanted 18*, *Queens of Syria* and *Corn Island* was probably the most difficult task I've ever faced. Adding to my personal struggle was the great passion I felt for some of the projects, and how close I'd gotten to their filmmakers. There was one particular film which was made with a 12,000 Euro budget by the youngest filmmaker on our list, yet the final product looked like visual poetry, filmed by a master. My heart sank at the thought that we couldn't give more than one prize.

But the final selection *Iraqi Odyssey* simply had a way of decoding Iraq, in a way that made the struggles seem very personal and human. Our jury's citation on the film read: "Weaving social and personal history, *Iraqi Odyssey* decodes a country constantly portrayed only in terms of its most recent events and statistics -- giving a face and voice to the displaced. It's not only a film about one Iraqi family but a story about all of us."

And finally, a bit of a bone I have to pick, regarding a well-respected publication. A couple of days before the end of the festival, the festive atmosphere was disrupted by a strangely negative piece about **DIFF** in *Variety*. While I understand that journalists should tell the truth, and are often persecuted for doing so, I hate reading pieces that leave out the full story. I also think that the main goal, for all of us cinema lovers, should be to see flourishing industries, all over the world. I know for me, when I read about the impending "demise" of the grandest festival in the Arab world, I felt disheartened. I thought of all the great, young, upcoming filmmakers who would never get a chance. But apparently, so did DIFF. Their budget cuts were more about refocusing and rethinking their strategy and Dubai Film Market Manager Samr Al Marzooqi, who was quoted as confirming "without comment" (whatever that means) in the *Variety* piece, was allowed to explain himself completely in a piece in *The National*, the widest read, most respected newspaper in the UAE. Turns out, supporting films that audiences outside of film festivals will never get to watch is a huge waste of talent, according to Al Marzooqi, and DIFF's management has created a brand new partnership with the most successful distributors in the region, such as my personal favorite **Front Row Filmed Entertainment**, to distribute films showcased at their upcoming festival. Because at the moment, even the Palestinian Oscar-nominated *Omar* has yet to be distributed in the Emirates.

So here's to great cinema, wonderful film lovers and a world where someone like me can be asked to walk the red carpet and finds at the end a group of women who scream, at the top of their lungs, "We love your hair and your dress!" Bless you ladies, you made me feel like a star! Yeah, because it's all possible, you see, in Abu Dhabi. I'll miss you ADFF. Till next year, inshallah.

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