

WADJDA (2012)

Presented by the American Film Institute’s Silver Theater and Cultural Center

Educational Screenings Program

*Previewing Information*

Wadjda is the first feature film shot entirely in Saudi Arabia, and the first by a woman director. The director, Haifaa Al Mansour, says on [the film’s website](http://www.sonyclassics.com/wadjda/), “I come from a small town in Saudi Arabia where there are many girls like Wadjda who have big dreams, strong characters and so much potential. These girls can, and will, reshape and redefine our nation. It was important for me to work with an all-Saudi cast, to tell this story with authentic, local voices.” She based the character of Wadjda on her niece.

Al Mansour faced many challenges filming WADJDA. She had to direct outdoor scenes from a van, communicating with her crew via walkie-talkie. Saudi Arabia has no film industry (and had no theaters between 1983 and 2018), so it was difficult to convince people to participate. They could not film in the local girls’ school, so they had to use a boys’ school. The actors who played Wadjda’s parents could not touch onscreen. They would wrap up filming and change location when the religious police were spotted nearby. Making a film was itself not forbidden—it had never been done.

Al Mansour followed all the rules and focused the film on her characters and their relationships, avoiding open criticism. Saudi Arabia was proud of her film, which became its first ever submission for the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film. Here are some excerpts from an interview she did with [The Dissolve](http://thedissolve.com/features/interview/168-wadjda-director-haifaa-al-mansour/):

* I know that the stories of women in Saudi are untold. And I come from that place that nobody knows about. It’s a hidden world. I have so much access, and I wanted to tell stories about that world that I belong to, to the rest of the world.
* I wanted Saudis, when they see the film, to have this sense of ownership…. Because we don’t have film, and I don’t want them to feel that film is foreign, or that film does not represent them. I feel Saudi Arabia is opening up and there is room for change, and I wanted film to be part of that change, and becoming more tolerant, and people enjoying life and learning more about art.
* I tried to respect the laws of my country. I wasn’t trying to break the law and make a radical film. There are certain rules for censorship. I followed every single one of them.
* I don’t want to complain about things. It’s easy to sit and complain and say, “This is bad.” It’s harder to work to change things. It’s better not to complain. It’s better to make the things that you have work. If you have a small thing, make it work and capitalize on it. And that is, I think, is the right attitude. Especially in the Middle East.

What do you think of how the director is navigating social restrictions in the making of her film? Where in the film do you see characters doing something similar? Do you think a more openly critical film would be better? Why or why not?

*Film Terms*

Close-up: a shot showing detail only (e.g. face or hands only)

Establishing shot: A shot, taken from a distance, establishing for the viewer where the action is to occur and the spatial relationship of the characters and their setting

Reverse Cutting: a technique alternating over-the-shoulder shots showing different characters speaking. This is generally used in conversation scenes.

*Post-viewing Discussion*

1. Why does the film begin with a close-up of a girl’s frilly white socks and black shoes?
2. How would you describe Wadjda? What elements of her appearance establish her character? What words and actions? What Western things do you notice?
3. Wanting a bicycle is pretty common—but in this film, how is a bicycle also a symbol?
4. How does the film convey the magic of Wadjda’s first sight of that bicycle?
5. What differences do you see between public and private space for women: how they can act, speak and dress? What kind of space is the roof?
6. How does the neighborhood of the driver (a guest worker, or temporary immigrant) differ from that of Saudis like Wadjda? Why does Abdullah bully him?
7. When do you notice the film using Middle Eastern music? Western music?
8. When do you notice women policing other women? Why do you think they do that? When do you see a male character being Wadjda’s ally?
9. How would you describe Wadjda’s mother? Why is she so fixated on pleasing her husband? How does Wadjda’s relationship with her change?
10. The director said that one inspiration for WADJDA was an Italian “neorealist” film called BICYCLE THIEVES, about a poor Iaborer trying to recover his stolen bike. The “neorealist” style emphasizes realism (of course), is shot on location (not in a studio) and often shows social hardships. How do you see this influence in WADJDA?