



Wadjda

Director: Haifaa Al Mansour
Country: Saudi Arabia
Date: 2012

A review by Robbie Collin for *The Daily Telegraph*:

“A woman’s voice reveals her nakedness,” scolds Wadjda’s teacher, as she and a friend run laughing from a Riyadh sidestreet into their school playground. “What if a man had heard you?”



Well, plenty of men will hear her now. Wadjda is the first film to have been entirely filmed within Saudi Arabia, by that country’s first female director, no less. It tells the story of this ten-year-old schoolgirl, and many like her, and it is the best thing I have seen at this year’s Venice International Film Festival so far.

Haifaa Al Mansour’s picture has a kind of neorealist clarity and simplicity that feels like a welcome splash of ice water after the ponderous, muggy fare that has so far been screened in competition for the festival’s Golden Lion award. (Wadjda is showing in the Orrizonti strand, dedicated to new trends in world cinema.)

Like one of the great Italian neorealist films, it centres on a child and a bicycle. All Wadjda wants is a bike so she can race against the little boy who lives next door, but her mother (Reem Abdullah) refuses to buy her one: in Saudi Arabia, little girls do not ride bicycles. After careful consideration of the matter Wadjda cannot see the logic in this, so she takes matters into her own hands and decides to raise the money for a bicycle herself.

Wadjda is perplexed by the Kingdom’s restrictive culture, particularly where women are concerned: it seems incompatible with a child’s logic. Even though she covers herself up in accordance with modesty laws, an elderly man still leers at her openly in the street, and the confusion that flickers across her face speaks volumes.

Waad Mohammed, a 12-year-old born and raised in Riyadh, is utterly disarming in the title role: she strikes the perfect balance between cheek and impudence, and her tomboyish grin lights up the screen. The film largely consists of little vignettes in the home and at school, and while many of them are very funny, we get an acute sense of the little everyday frustrations and burdens that Saudi women have to shoulder.



Al Mansour reveals in the film’s production notes that she often had to direct from her production van via walkie-talkie when filming in more conservative areas, but Wadjda offers the hope that for the next generation of Saudi women, things might be different. Modest as it may look, this is boundary-pushing cinema in all the best ways, and what a thrill it is to hear those boundaries creak.

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