

Israel/France

2016

96 minutes

Cert 15

Director and Writer: Maysaloun Hamoud Music: MG Saad
Editors: Lev Golater and Nili Feller Cinematography: Itay Gross

Cast:

Mouna Hawa as Layla Sana Jammeliéh as Salma
Shaden Kanboura as Nour

When Maysaloun Hamoud said she wanted to "stir things up" with her movies - she achieved it.

Her first feature film, *In Between*, has resulted with her being issued with a fatwa (Islamic religious ruling), as well as death threats.

The movie is about three young Arab women sharing an apartment in the Israeli city of Tel Aviv. Away from the traditions of their families, they find themselves "in between" the free lives they're aspiring to lead and the restrictions still imposed on them.

"It's naive to say, 'no I didn't expect any comeback' when I wrote it," says Hamoud, "but I didn't know how big it would be. I knew when I started to write these characters that it could not be passed by, but I did not expect the extent of the reaction."

The film is also set within the Palestinian underground scene (a group of young Palestinians living in Israel who are using music to forge a new cultural identity for themselves) and features an electronic soundtrack from local DJs.

With scenes featuring nightclubs, drug-taking and homosexuality, the director admits that "characters like this haven't appeared in Palestinian cinema before," adding that while initially frightened by the level of violence threatened against her and her actresses from ultra conservatives, she stands by her film.

"I wanted to take provocative action, we need to shake things up and see different things on screen. If we keep making things that people think they want to see then it's not art, it's not cinema. I think I have a job to develop my society and that means changing reality. The essence of an artist is to bring change."

Hamoud was born to Palestinian parents in Budapest in 1982, but is now a resident of Jaffa in Israel. Her first short film, *Sense of Morning*, was set in the Beirut war of 1982, but believes this film "is every bit as much a political film".

That would appear to be borne out by the reaction, particularly in the conservative Arab town of Umm-al-Fahm in northern Israel, where one of the characters, Nour, comes from. According to Hamoud, it was the mayor here who first declared her film "haram", or forbidden.

"Palestine has a young cinema and there are not a lot of genres here yet," she explains. "I think there was actually a lot of confusion here when the film first appeared as to whether it was a documentary or a fiction film. I think some people watching it actually thought it was real life, and this is when the local leaders said they were ashamed of it, and started to go against the movie, and started talking about closing the cinemas down where it was playing. So my film was declared "haram", the fatwa issued, and we started getting death threats. There was a very violent atmosphere for a couple of weeks that was pretty scary."

"But there is no such thing as bad publicity," she adds. "More people started coming to see the film to see what all the fuss was about, and it ended up playing at cinemas for months. I've had great reaction from both men and women."

In Between has since been nominated for 12 Ophir Awards - Israel's version of the Oscars, while Hamoud was given the best young talent award by the Women in Motion movement at the Cannes Film Festival, with Isabelle Huppert calling the three women characters of the film "heroines of our time."

Maysaloun Hamoud says that while the three women she wrote weren't necessarily representative of her or her own friends, "they do represent the things that we have never talked about in our society before. All three characters represent huge amounts of invisible women, women who have never had their voices raised before in cinema from this part of the world. Finally, the film has made people talk about it and I'm glad."

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-41112388> article dated 3.9.17



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With this year's OWW theme being "The World is Changing", this BBC article seems appropriate:

Saudi Arabia: Why is going to the cinema suddenly OK?

Saudi Arabia is about to open its first cinema for 35 years. After being banned for decades, why is it now OK to go to the movies?

The ending of the ban on cinemas is part of a wider change across society. In the 20th Century, its ruling Al Saud dynasty could rely on two sources of power: plentiful oil wealth and an informal pact with conservative religious clerics.

But now the country has to adapt to a 21st Century where oil wealth will not be enough to fund government spending and create jobs, and where the clerics have less influence than they once did with the new leaders of the royal family.

Like other Middle Eastern countries, Saudi Arabia is overwhelmingly young: most of its 32 million people are under 30. King Salman has promoted one of his youngest sons, 32-year-old Mohammed bin Salman, to the elevated position of Crown Prince, partly to connect with this young majority.

But MBS, as he is known, has a difficult task. He needs to oversee a transition to a less oil-dependent economy where young Saudis will probably not enjoy the same standards of living that their parents did. They won't be guaranteed public-sector jobs, and will have to work harder in the private sector. The cost of housing is a frequent complaint, while healthcare and education are starting to be privatised.

Western observers have often thought that Saudi Arabia would eventually have to cut back on economic handouts to its population, and that this would result in pressure for more political rights.

But MBS seems to be offering a different model. In effect, he is saying: "Work harder, don't criticise the system, but have more fun." Like neighbouring Dubai, he is offering some degree of greater social freedom rather than greater political freedom. Cinemas are part of this. But do Saudis actually want a more liberal society?

For years, Saudi officials said the population was highly conservative; now they give the impression it is open, dynamic and tech-savvy. In fact, social attitudes in Saudi Arabia are very diverse.

People are spread over a large territory with very different life experiences and income levels. More than a million Saudis have now studied abroad, while others are immersed in very traditional culture. Women's lives in particular vary greatly, as their ability to study, travel and work is decided by their male "guardian" - their father, or husband.

As the government has overturned the ban on women driving, and started to promote concerts and films that were banned for years, there is a debate about the pace of change and the types of culture the country should develop. This is especially the case when it comes to women's rights.

When it comes to film, however, technology had already made the cinema ban close to being an absurdity.

A 2014 survey suggested that two-thirds of Saudi internet users watched a film online every week. Nine out of 10 Saudis have smartphones. People who take a budget flight to Bahrain or Dubai can go to cinemas there. The state airline, Saudi Airways, shows in-flight films, although "inappropriate" images such as bare arms or bottles of wine are often pixelated out. There are even film festivals using pop-up screens.

And a few Saudis have started making films, including the critically acclaimed **Wadjda** (which WNCC screened in 2014) and a romantic comedy, **Barakah Meets Barakah**.

A government body estimated that in 2017 Saudis spent \$30bn (£21bn) on entertainment and hospitality elsewhere in the Middle East. That's close to 5% of Saudi gross domestic product (GDP), which is a measure of everything produced by the country in a year.

When oil wealth is down and the country is searching for new economic sectors to develop, there's an obvious economic argument for opening up the entertainment sector - and bringing that money back home to create jobs.

Indeed, the first cinemas opening in Saudi Arabia are in fact owned by the government's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund, in partnership with international chain AMC. The government is not just permitting cinemas, but hoping to profit from them.

Instead of asking: "Why now?", the question might be: "Why has it taken so long?". But the ban was never just about public opinion - conservative social policy was designed in part to appease influential clerics. This informal bargain saw clerics mostly preach obedience to the ruler, gaining sweeping influence over social life and family law in return. The political and social role of those clerics is now changing.

The state appointed conservative clerics are still in place, but they defer to the decisions of political leaders.

