

The Perfect Candidate

The world is changing—specifically in Saudi Arabia—in the new film “The Perfect Candidate,” the illuminating story of a partially liberated young woman making her way in the world. A modest film, but one full of resonances in the time of the #MeToo movement

In 2012, the director-writer Haifaa Al Mansour released the well-received “Wadjda,” about a feisty ten-year old Saudi girl who dreams of owning a bike, a desire seen as unladylike. It was the first feature film made by a woman in the Kingdom, but even then the filmmaker, who could not be seen mixing in public with a male crew, had to hide in her production van to direct the shooting! With her new effort, the “creeping liberalism” in Saudi Arabia has filtered into Saudi life.

For example, the new ability of Saudi women to drive appears right up front when we see the film’s protagonist, Maryam (played by the energetic Mila Al Zahrani), driving her own car through rutted roads to her job in a small clinic in a rural town. She’s a young but already mature ER doctor whom we see early confronting an aging curmudgeon, who steadfastly refuses to be treated—much less touched—by a female.

She receives an invitation to attend a medical conference in Dubai, but, in attempting to board her flight, she is refused at the gate because she lacks a document from her “guardian” (a responsible male) permitting her to leave the country. She scurries to acquire such a document, but, after an official mix-up, ends up signing a form making her a candidate to run for her municipal council, which had refused her entreaties to pave the muddy road leading to her clinic. Forced into this new role, Maryam tackles it with determination, eager to fight for her personal cause of the new road. Luckily, she has the fervent support of her two bright younger sisters, Sara (Nora Al Awadh) and Selma (Dhay Al Hilali), the latter of whom has semi-pro video skills. She uses those skills at one point to have Maryam appear in a live video feed to an audience of Saudi men.

Maryam’s father, Abdulaziz (played by Khalid Abduraheem) is a widower, a bandleader, and a skilled player of the oud (a lute-like stringed instrument), working against the odds to get prominent outlets for his musical group (his story underscores Al Mansour’s intention to highlight Saudi culture in her work). A decent and laconic man, he is sympathetic to his outspoken daughters, in part because they reflect the activism and spunk of his departed wife, also a musician. Al Mansour works out the rest of the film in shifting, parallel sequences: Maryam’s fluctuating campaign fortunes contrasted with Abdulaziz’s search for a major gig.

Freed from her earlier restrictions of just years before, Al Mansour (now living in California) was thrilled to be working in a much more open environment. (“It was really good to be out of the van,” she said.) She has more money, a

larger crew, and an ability to move about freely within her locations and set-ups. As she herself has noted in an interview:

“The changes are extraordinary for local filmmakers. It was incredibly difficult to make a film in 2011, and people were still very hesitant to embrace any public form of artistic expression. Film especially was seen as taboo, and the idea of opening theaters had become a red line that most of us thought would never be crossed. Of course, now everything has changed, and we have cinemas going up all across the Kingdom. But the larger issue of a lack of infrastructure in the film industry remains. We have a lot of work to do in building up the tools and resources necessary to make quality films... But things are happening fast, and I think we will see a lot more Saudi films in the coming years.”

Still, with “The Perfect Candidate”—as with “Wadjda”—Al Mansour has told a touching and heartening story of the newly-emerging Saudi woman. (*The film is unrated and runs 101 minutes.*)

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