

Wadjda

Good movies can immerse you into an alien or little-known world and give you a palpable sense of another culture. Not many foreign-language films are even shown here, so it is worth noting when one arrives and opens our eyes to an unfamiliar world. Such a one is the new Saudi Arabia film “Wadjda.”

“Wadjda” tells the simple story of the eponymous ten-year-old girl (played by Waad Mohammed) who, more than anything, wants to ride a bike like the neighbor boy, Abdullah (Abdullrahman al Gohani). There’s a bike in the neighborhood store that she craves. Contending against her are—just about everybody: her mom, (Reem Abdullah), who sees her dream as entirely unladylike, her school principal, Ms. Hussa (Ahd), who thinks such a desire stems from the devil, and young Abdullah himself, who feels it’s a dopey wish for a girl. The family may be at a crossroads: Wadjda’s father (Sultan al Assaf), with only one wife and one child, is thinking about a son and, perhaps, acquiring another wife. He loves his daughter (happily playing video games with her) but is away from the family often, finding work more satisfying.

Though she is doggedly entrepreneurial, making deals in her girl’s grade school, Wadjda cannot cover the cost of the bike. Hope comes in the form of a school contest which offers a significant award (1,000 rials) for the scholar best able to recite verses from the Koran. Though hardly pious, Wadjda dedicates herself fully to the Koranic task and wins the prize. Yet when she is asked by Ms. Hussa what she is going to do with the award money, she honestly announces she will buy a bike—a request coldly refused by the headmaster, who directs that it go to charity instead.

To add to Wadjda’s woes, word reaches her and her mother that, indeed, dad is taking another bride. The pending ceremony is celebrated right on their street, yet mom, realizing that she and her daughter still have each other, has a surprise for her enterprising child.

This unassuming tale of a child achieves real resonance because of how it calmly, attentively introduces us to Saudi society. Rarely enough seen in any kind of motion picture (since the Kingdom itself prohibits movie theaters), “Wadjda” reveals the simple intimacies of Saudi family life, in this case middle-class life, where there is ample consumption and modernity (Wadjda digs Western music; the family shops at an upscale Mall).

It also introduces us to Saudi elementary education, a sex-segregated, black (girls) and white (boys) context where dogged conformity reigns. It’s within that educational context that we see how the lively Wadjda quietly challenges that conformity. It’s evident from the film’s first shot, when we see, below abayas, the footwear of three small girls, the two flanking wearing plain black shoes, while the contrary Wadjda (in the middle) sports worn sneakers and frilly socks. It’s of such delicate yet telling moments that the film is constructed.

Other elements of the Kingdom are nicely limned. One perfect example has mother/wife preparing a massive meat-and-rice dish in her kitchen. She scoops this on to a large plate, carries it to a closed door in another room, knocks on the door and waits for her husband to open the door and take the food (intended for male guests who

are forbidden to see his bride), then quietly returns to the kitchen where she, like a kitchen maid, shares the leftovers with her daughter.

Not only is “Wadjda” the first full-length feature filmed in Saudi Arabia, it was written and directed by a woman, Haifaa al Mansour, who has created a singular breakthrough. She had made short films before (none of them aired publicly) but was able to produce this effort with the help of German funding and a complete German crew. Still, the vision is all hers.

And it wasn’t always an easy task. Al Mansour, in an interview, noted that there is no film infrastructure to support filmmakers (much less women filmmakers) and that open casting calls do not exist. She also remarked that she “occasionally had to run and hide in the production van (in some areas) where people would have disapproved of a woman director mixing professionally with all those men.” She later admitted that while she might be a polarizing figure in the Kingdom, “it is definitely not my intention to offend anyone.”

To these Western eyes, she hardly offends; she inspires.
(Rated “PG”, this film is in Arabic with English subtitles and runs 97 minutes).

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