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بركه يقابل بركه

Barakah yoqabil Barakah

Barakah Meets Barakah

Mahmoud Sabbagh

Producer Mahmoud Sabbagh. **Production company** El Housh Productions (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia). **Written and directed by** Mahmoud Sabbagh. **Director of photography** Victor Credi. **Editor** Sofia Subercaseaux, Daniel Garcia. **Music** Zeid Hamdan, Maii Waleed. **Sound design** Eli Cohen. **Production design** Zainab Al Mashat, Ahmed Mater. **Costumes** Nasibah Hafiz, Nasibah Hafiz, Samar Idress.

With Hisham Fageeh (Barakah), Fatima Al Banawi (Barakah/Bibi), Sami Hifny (Da'ash), Khairia Nazmi (Daya Sa'adiya), Abdulmajeed Al-Ruhaidi (Maqbool), Turki Sheikk (Turki/agent), Marian Bilal (Sara).

DCP, colour. 88 min. Arabic.

Premiere 12 February 2016, Berlinale Forum

World sales MPM Film

If you were to ask a group of film experts which country is currently the least appropriate setting for a hilarious, truly wacky romantic comedy, the chances are that Saudi Arabia would come out on top. But their guesses would be wrong, as *Barakah yoqabil Barakah* provides more than enough evidence to the contrary. He's a municipal civil servant from Jeddah whose origins are humble to say the least, while she's a wild beauty, the adopted daughter of a rich couple whose marriage has suffered due to their lack of biological children. He's also an amateur actor in a theatre company rehearsing a production of "Hamlet", while she functions as a crowd-puller for her stylish adoptive mother's boutique and runs her own boisterous, widely-seen vlog. Fate brings them together – in an environment hostile to dating of any kind. But the two of them show breathtaking ingenuity to circumvent the system of tradition, etiquette and religious police – with the crucial help of a quirky midwife and a pink push up bra. *Barakah yoqabil Barakah* is a film for anyone who's always wanted to know just what else is going on in Saudi Arabia.

Dorothee Wenner

A gonzo sunlit noir

I want to tell stories, natural and toned-down stories from my own community. Then I would like to connect them to the outer world. Before taking this step of making *Barakah yoqabil Barakah*, my directorial debut, I managed to produce and direct documentaries, shorts and a TV drama series. Through my three-year journey I have undergone extensive training and gained on-set and hands-on experience.

Filmmaking is tough everywhere, but in a country with an underdeveloped film landscape such as Saudi Arabia, things can get more complicated.

We built a production structure and assembled a team from scratch. We picked non-actors for all the roles through extensive casting and from my everyday surroundings and community. Coaching and rehearsing took four months in order to reach a satisfying level for everyone.

I like to think of *Barakah yoqabil Barakah* as a gonzo sunlit noir. I have used new directing methods; anti-heroes, no fancy shots, post-romance aspects and using long lenses in very busy streets. The film was shot entirely in Jeddah, using real locations and streets with minimal production design. Since I also wrote the screenplay, I tried to keep it visual and with raw dialogue.

Barakah yoqabil Barakah is my generation's take on public space, gender inequality, censorship, and freedom. It's about us; the disfranchised youth. I geared my film to be part of a national dialogue and to propel social progress. I hope my film will play a role in igniting more local films by real and raw Saudi talents, and that they are able to present them to the world.

Mahmoud Sabbagh

„It is about disfranchised youth“

Is it correct to call Barakah yoqabil Barakah the first-ever romantic comedy from Saudi Arabia?

Mahmoud Sabbagh: Indeed, that is right: *Barakah yoqabil Barakah* is the first film from Saudi Arabia belonging to this genre. Films from Saudi Arabia are a rare event anyway; mine is an attempt to get our stories told on a larger scale.

Barakah/Bibi and Barakah are an unlikely couple. Could you tell us more about the background of your principal characters, and how much you wanted them to be 'regular' versus 'eccentric' personalities?

Barakah, the male protagonist, is the average Saudi guy you will meet and see in the urban streets of Jeddah. He is polite, sharp, street-smart; a gentleman by his own standards, he prioritises collectivism. At the same time he is also deprived, underprivileged, and sometimes dogmatic. The female lead character, Barakah/Bibi, represents the massive and growing faction of the young people who are most visible on social media platforms these days; they are more expressive and radical, but also crazy and delirious. The relationship between Bibi and Barakah is more paradoxical than convoluted. They empower each other on their mutual journey.

In my perception from afar, the humour of the film's story is very much derived from Jeddah's not being an 'inviting' urban setting for romance to blossom easily. Please correct me if I'm wrong – and place the love story in today's context of Jeddah.

I like to think of *Barakah yoqabil Barakah* as a film about the public space through a coming-of-age story. It is about disfranchised youth, the millennial generation, which I personally belong to. It's a film about love, ambition, life, existence, censorship, equality, authority – all levels of authority. My film is a tribute to this generation.

Since the emergence of the coffee trade in the 1750s, Jeddah has never been a sleepy backwater shore. But the political and economic events of the 1980s have made the city, and Saudi Arabia as a whole, plunge into a monochromatic right-wing interpretation of life and society. Being at once the nation's cultural and cosmopolitan capital, Jeddah in the 1980s was unprecedentedly plagued by xenophobia, gender segregation, intolerance to new trends, and perfunctory behaviours. Nowadays, there is a prevalent discourse which questions this past, and we witness a growing rhetoric of condemnation – my film falls into these efforts to propel social progress.

What audience did you have in mind when you started making this film? Besides international festivals – where will your film be seen in your country?

I regard my film as part of the growing discourse that demands reform in Saudi Arabia: we would like to have our own films – and the possibility of screening them in theatres – as a contribution to the on-going dialogue, and as part of the changes we are demanding. The majority of Saudi youth, which constitutes more than sixty per cent of the population, are cinephiles, media-savvy, open to all cultural and cinematic products. We see a lot of films online and we buy media products when travelling outside the country. Thus, my film will eventually be seen, but my challenge is to screen it in local theatres. It will be a sign of change, and a re-claiming of public space. This ambition is reflected also in the very intention of my film, in a way – it is its 'message'.

As an independent filmmaker, producer, and screenwriter: what kind of support could you rely on when making this film?

It is painful to make films in a country with no real infrastructure for film production; but I am not complaining, I am only describing the process! Yes, there are lots of challenges, but there are also some privileges: the challenges stem mainly from the absence of any sort of funds or institutions, the lack of talent, the uncertain and fluctuating regulations and laws, etc. But as a filmmaker, I also enjoy the freedom of this situation – the creative freedom. This is a challenge that pushed my team and me to the limits – and allowed us to discover new areas of filmmaking and storytelling. It is the joy of being part of something noble and sublime; we can always remind ourselves of the glorious outcome. Filmmaking in countries without developed infrastructure will never lose its charm – after all, in such an environment you are always very close to the very reason why art exists in the first place.

You went to film school in the US – and afterwards returned to Saudi Arabia. Can you tell us something about your background? What made you decide to become a filmmaker? What intrigues you about this profession?

I started my career in the confines of journalism in Saudi Arabia. Since the 1930s, journalism has been regarded as one of the most liberal and progressive fields in my country. It is not a very creative environment, but a very reliable one. Beyond

that, I belong to a cosmopolitan family from Hejaz, my great-grandfather was a small entrepreneur in Mecca during the nineteenth century, and this region of my country is the most urban and open to the world. This upbringing and my career choice have shaped me and paved my way to filmmaking. A journalist wants to understand, but a filmmaker wants to create: I choose the second.

I'm still seeking liberation from obligations, in search of a new identity. At the same time, I feel strongly the lack of stories being told from this part of the world. This I see as my role – I want to change this, which is why want to continue making films in Saudi Arabia – a country with an abundance of untold stories.

Interview: Dorothee Wenner, January 2016

Cinema in the Arab World

Saudi Arabia was introduced to forms of cinema shows since 1955 in the open areas in the capital of Riyadh and other Saudi cities, especially Jeddah in the form of the once-called 'Courtyards', in the houses. There were shops that mainly showcased Egyptian films. However, Saudi Arabia has not been introduced to cinema. [...] such forms of cinema displays have been banned since 1980. Saudi Arabia has known photography since the state was established in 1932 and was introduced to television in 1965. The prevalence of magazines and newspapers of photography and television enabled the culture of photography to develop in society. When films started to be distributed on video tapes in 1975 and DVDs in 1995, Saudi Arabia had become one of the largest markets of video and DVDs in the Arab world. [...]

The first film festival was held in 2006. Most of the Saudi independent films were shown at the festival.

In 2004, production of Saudi feature films started and totalled ten films in 2009. Not only did Adullah Al Mohaisin, who studied cinema in Britain, direct the first Saudi film – the short documentary *Improvement of Riyadh City (Tatweer Madinat Al Riyadh)* in 1976 – but he also directed the first Saudi feature-length film *Shadows of Silence (Dilal Al Samt)*. He is the pioneer of Saudi cinema, though preceded by Mohammed Al Qazaz, who graduated from the Higher Institute of Cinema in Egypt in 1968, but has not managed to direct any films up to now.

Thus so far, the film *Menahi*, directed by Ayman Makram, was the only Saudi feature to be screened at the King Abdul Aziz Cultural Center in Jeddah and in a hotel in Taif in 2009. The film was the first to be a ticketed cinema event since 1980 and was viewed by about 25,000 people over ten days.

The challenges surrounding the dialogue of modernity is affirmed by the fact that the *Menahi* screening did not end smoothly. Although they did not combine women and men in one venue and the screenings in the Taif hotel were in two separate halls, they met with criticism. Moreover, the fourth edition of the Jeddah Film Festival 2009 was cancelled on the eve of inauguration.

The most important documentary films so far are: *Women Without Shadow (Nisa'a Bila Dil)*, directed by Haifaa Al Mansour in 2005, which was also the first documentary film to emerge from the Saudi independent cinema movement. It was shown for the first time in Saudi Arabia in the French Cultural Centre in 2005 and then at the Jeddah First Festival in 2006 and deals with discrimination against women in Saudi society. It was a great cultural event. It was the first movie in the history of cinema to be filmed

in Saudi Arabia by a [female, -ed.] Saudi director about the social situation in the country.

Samir Farid, in: Introduction to Cinema in the Arab World, Dubai International Film Festival 2010



Mahmoud Sabbagh was born in 1983 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He studied Documentary Filmmaking at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Since then, he has worked as an independent film director and producer in Saudi Arabia. *Barakah yoqabil Barakah* is his first full-length feature film.

Films

2013: *Story of Hamza Shahata* (43 min.). 2014: *Cash* (TV-series, 10 x 24 min.). 2016: *Barakah yoqabil Barakah / Barakah Meets Barakah*.