



Shahad Ameen: I wanted to "borrow the codes of fantasy to talk about the female condition "

With Scales, the Saudi filmmaker Shahad Ameen signs a captivating and poetic first feature film about the place of Arab women in a patriarchal society. The director spoke about the genesis of this committed and impressive film.

Scales describes the fate of young Hayat, confronted with the patriarchal traditions perpetuated in her fishing village. You use the mythological figure of the mermaid in this story. How was the story of Scales born ?

I have always loved the fables, tales and poems of Arab literature. I wanted to make a film about the condition of women, but it was important for me not to fall into the stereotype of the Arab woman as a victim. This is the image that some people have, but personally, I have experienced the opposite ! As a child, I was a tomboy, I played soccer with boys. I was lucky to have a father who was a great feminist, that's why the father's character is present in the film. At puberty, your body changes and it's a difficult time, no matter your culture. It's a bit like a fight against your changing body. The figure of the mermaid allows us to approach this question of the transformation of the body, it is also the goddess of fertility from a mythological point of view. I didn't want to write a classic story about the place of women, which is what we usually see. It seemed to me more interesting and original to borrow the codes of the fantastic via this mythological figure of the mermaid to speak about the female condition.

Why did you decide to make this film in black and white ?

Scales was shot in color and then we added black and white during the post-production process. This choice allows us to bring a "mythological" side to this story which uses the symbolic figure of the mermaid. It is also a way to play on the contrasts present in this story : the water of the sea facing the arid land of this fishing village; the young Hayat, representing the women, facing the men. While searching for the setting, I googled "Arab fishing village" and came across photos of the beautiful village of Kumzar, in the region of Oman. It is an incredible place, I invite you to discover it! We had the chance to shoot the film a few kilometers away from this village, in the Musandam peninsula, in the north of Oman. This place lent itself perfectly to the setting of this story and the inhabitants welcomed us with open arms. Some of them are also part of the extras in the film.

Basima Hajjar is the wonderful character of Hayat, the heroine of Scales. How did you go cast her ?

It's a long story (laughs) ! When I came back from London to Saudi Arabia after my studies, I met a Danish filmmaker who was making a video clip in which Basima was playing: she was five years old at the time. I kept her name in mind and when I made my second short film Leila's window three years later, I offered her the lead role, which she accepted. In 2013, when I shot Eye & Mermaid, I called Basima again to play the fisherman's daughter, she was incredible in this role! So it was obvious to me that she should play the young Hayat from my first feature film, Scales. I wrote the role for her! But the casting was not easy: one day before the beginning of the shooting I was told that Basima could not play in the film because of her studies. The headmistress of her school had warned her parents that if she missed any days of school, she would not graduate. I called this principal to try to convince her, but to no avail. One of my team members even wrote to the Ministry of Education and Basima's parents to assure them that she would not miss her school year because of the shooting. We suggested that a teacher be there during the shooting to give her lessons. Finally, we got the agreement of the school and the parents so that she could make the film. She didn't miss her year, and she is now a university student !

Laura Lépine