



Ahmed Yassin Al Daradji: "The lead producer, Huda Al Kadhimi, mortgaged her house to finance the movie"

With Hanging Gardens, the Iraqi filmmaker Ahmed Yassin Al Daradji was unanimously acclaimed by the audience at the Institut Lumière. A story as poetic as it is powerful, which has already been awarded in many international festivals. Meeting with this director whose talent is no longer to be proven.

In *Hanging Gardens* you have written a poetic and powerful story about Iraqi society, which deals with themes such as capitalism, war and sexuality. How did the story of the film come about ?

It was born basically when I was in Bagdad in 2006 when Irak was under occupation. A friend showed me a sextoy that his cousin brought from the american military he worked with. But actually, what made me write this story was seeing the movie American Sniper by Clint Eastwood. This film upsetted me so much : the way that Americans sexualize war and how they promote war and make it so fun. I went back to Irak right away and decided to write a story about what happened in 2003 from Iraqi perspective.

Hussein Muhammad Jalil, who plays the young As'ad, gives an incredible performance in this film. How did you find this young actor ?

In the beginning it was so complicated to find a kid for this character : to act in a very sensitive story, because this subject is a tabou for so many Iraqis. I kept casting kids that were great, but the family of some of them refused because of the sensitivity of the story. A friend of mine met Hussein and he convinced me to met him. The first time I met him, I doubted that he could be that character because he was so far from As'ad : he was so clean, well educated and he has a Chiite accent. I had doubted he could be As'ad until the first week of the shooting. One day we were rehearsing one of the scene in the middle of the dump and at a moment he played in the middle of the dump with other kids : I felt he blended in the environnement and this is how I knew he could be As'ad.

After the screening of the film, you explained that this project took seven years to materialize. What were the main difficulties encountered in the making of *Hanging Gardens* ?

Obviously, the first difficulty was the financing, it was a nightmare honestly until the shooting, we have not got any support from anywhere. My lead producer, Huda Al Kadhimi, mortgaged her house and borrowed money from Iraqi bank to finance the production of the movie. The lack of infrastructure to make films in Irak was also a huge difficulty. One of the biggest challenge was to bring three sex dolls to Irak : the first plan was to place the dolls and transport it from London into a diplomatic shipment but we were not lucky enough and we had to send the dolls throught the official channel. The dolls were discovered at the Bagdad airport and there were kept over there for three months as we were struggling to get them back. Thanks to some contacts that we had, we have managed to contact the Prime Minister office and they

allowed us to have the dolls for a short period of time : three months and then we had to send it back. There were so many difficulties : there was no enough material, we have shot the movie with two lenses, with no light but we managed to got it together. At the end, the main difficulty was to bring the dolls to Irak.

What film projects are you currently working on ?

I am currently developping two feature films. One that I am writing alone and the other that I write with a friend, Mustafa Al Rukabi. The first one is called *Madness and Honey Days* : it is a story of a theater's director named Salem that executed his fellow actors and must confront the gallows prepared by Saddam Hussein's security men upon the accusation of insulting the president stage. Salem succeeds by convincing the military court of his insanity. He lives the last months before the fall of Saddam's regime, exiled in a psychiatric hospital with the hazard of being executed if the doctors announce his recovery. The second feature film is called *The Silk Seller* : accused of violating the tradition by advertising his women's clothes design using his own body, Ryath, a 37 years old teacher, challenges his community in a journey to win his individuality and prove he is a man.

Laura Lépine