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ON SCREEN



Making time: Clarkson and Siddig

Cairo Time

BY JASON ANDERSON October 07, 2009 21:10

“I can’t begin to tell you how many times we were almost arrested and almost thrown out of the country,” says Ruba Nadda of the travails of making *Cairo Time* in the city that inspired its name.

As she explains last week in an interview in a west-end Toronto café, complicating factors during the film’s creation would range from the government censor who tried to control what was shot, to the gawkers who had to be held at bay nearly every time Nadda prepared a scene. “The set,” she says, “was a constant moving target.”

No wonder so many people back home in Canada told her she was crazy during the years she spent looking for financing. Nadda says that even Atom Egoyan, who exec-produced her 2005 feature *Sabah*, had a question after reading the script. “What have you done?” he asked. “It’s impossible to shoot in Cairo!”

So why take on that kind of challenge? “It makes you feel alive,” Nadda says simply. And since the film was inspired by her impressions of Cairo on trips made on her own and with her Arab-Canadian family as a girl, she knew it couldn’t take place anywhere else. “Cairo is beautiful, but it’s an assault to the senses — it’s not a very gentle city.”

It takes the full force of Cairo to bust open the life of Juliette (Patricia Clarkson), a middle-aged woman who’s there with her Canadian diplomat husband (Tom McCamus). When he’s delayed by a crisis, she acquires a gentleman guide in the form of Tareq (Alexander Siddig), his former employee. What ensues is a modest but graceful variation on *Brief Encounter* and

Before Sunrise. Giving her two leads the room they need to develop the chemistry that makes their almost-romance so believable, Nadda knows how to make the film's quietest moments speak volumes.

Not that it was so quiet on the set. "The movie looks languid and calm," she says, "but outside of that frame, we had hundreds of people watching — it was just insane. Crew members had to link arms to keep people back. It was just them being curious. We never got angry."

There were a few other people she admits to nearly punching in the face, like the man in charge of the child-labour pool seen in one scene. (Despite the film's postcard-ready views, it's very frank in its depiction of Cairo life, no doubt to the displeasure of that censor.) But Nadda thrived on the chaos and her efforts have thus far been vindicated. After making its world premiere at TIFF last month, Cairo Time was named the fest's best Canadian feature. Besides giving the 36-year-old director's latest film the attention it deserves, the prize is also belated recognition for the intrepid filmmaker: Cairo Time and Sabah were preceded by a largely self-financed bounty of work that includes two indie features and 13 short films since 1997.

"I've never had anything show at TIFF so I was excited about that," Nadda says. "And I've never won anything as an artist so that was such a shock. It was so difficult to get this movie financed and made, so to get that reaction has been amazing."

What many people have reacted to is the simplicity and subtlety of the relationship at the movie's core, and how well Nadda and her cast capture that moment of flux and uncertainty that can send a life in another direction. "Juliette does what we always do with ourselves. We say, 'In a year I'm gonna take that vacation' or 'In a year I'm gonna do this.' And before you know it, you've spent your life waiting. I was interested in having this woman who's sad and kind of closed-off in this crazy city."

No one can blame Juliette for being vulnerable to the charms of Tareq, a man whose courtly demeanour seems to belong to another age. "It's that old-world charm," says Nadda. "My father's like that. I find there's a little bit of that missing in North America. I'm a feminist and I can open my own doors but when I'm with my father there are still codes that we maintain. The Middle East is crazy like that. Yes, there are tonnes of contradictions but at the same time, they treat you like a woman and there's nothing wrong with that sometimes."

One of the few problems she did not have to contend with while making Cairo Time was sexism on the part of her crew. "I had certain perceptions going in," she admits, "but the Arab crew was phenomenal. They were so proud. They saw me as a Canadian but also as an Arab filmmaker coming back with all these people and making a film in their country. They were loyal and hard-working. I never got any trouble from anybody."

Nadda suspects that may be because her film also captures a moment of flux for the city itself. "Unlike other parts of the Middle East, Egypt is still a more open country and the younger generation is making advancements. Westernizing is not the right word, but everyone's obsessed with North American culture. It's a common misperception that everyone there hates everyone

here — it's just not true.”

Filmmakers bored of setting their own low-key love stories in the hipster enclaves of the West should take note of Nadda's example. At the very least, we'd get to see more hookahs.

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