



63^e SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2024

رَفَعَتْ عَيْنِي لِلسَّمَاءِ

THE BRINK OF DREAMS

a film by NADA RIYADH & AYMAN EL AMIR *فيلم ندى رياض وأيمن الأمير*



A silhouette of a church with multiple crosses on its roof and walls, set against a bright sunset sky. Palm trees are visible in the foreground and middle ground, and a few figures are seen near the church.

INTERNATIONAL TITLE : *The Brink of Dreams*

ORIGINAL TITLE : *Rafaat einy ll sama*

DIRECTOR & SCREENWRITER : Ayman El Amir and Nada Riyadh

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN: Egypt, France, Danemark, Qatar, Saudi Arabia

PRODUCTION YEAR : 2024

DURATION : 102 min

LANGUAGE : Arabic

TECHNICAL INFORMATION : Ratio 16:9 / Sound format 5.1

SYNOPSIS

In a remote village in southern Egypt, a group of girls rebel by forming an all-female street theater troupe. They dream of becoming actresses, dancers and singers, challenging their families and villagers with their unexpected performances. Shot over four years, *The Brink of Dreams* follows them from childhood to womanhood, facing the most crucial choices of their lives.

CAST

Magda Masoud

Haidi Sameh

Monika Youssef

Marina Samir

Myriam Nassar

Lydia Haroun

Youstina Samir

CREW

Directors : Nada Riyadh & Ayman El Amir

Producers : Ayman El Amir, Nada Riyadh, Marc Irmer, Claire Chassagne

Co-producer : Mette-Ann Schepelern

DOP : Dina El Zeneiny, Ahmed Ismael, Ayman El Amir

Editors : Véronique Lagoarde-Ségot, Ahmed Magdy Morsy, Ayman El Amir, Nada Riyadh

Sound recording : Mostafa Shaaban, Sameh Nabil, Osama Goubail, Shadwa Ali

Sound design : Mostafa Shaaban

Sound mix : Lama Sawaya

Music : Ahmad El Sawy



DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

In *The Brink of Dreams* we are confronted by a group of young women who try to build a community of their own, and who are bound to endure an internal struggle between living authentically and adhering to the status quo, a challenge that many face when they don't fit into preconceived standards. The protagonists find themselves on a voyage of self-discovery, one that reveals as much about them as it does about the long-standing traditions that have fuelled the culture of their lovely but stagnant village, but also about the world that exists beyond its borders.

In that particular context, Barsha village turns into a relevant microcosm, not only for Egyptian society, but for life at large. What is fascinating about these teenage girls is their unawareness and utter disregard of the familial, societal, religious and economic restrictions, while the camera holds in the edges of its frame the fear and restrictions those girls refuse to acknowledge. It is something that is unique to that age when a person believes in their dreams so faithfully that their belief transcends their reality. But as girls grow up, frustrations, doubts and desires start to creep into the centre of the frame, forcing them to search for their own identity.

In this coming-of-age story, we focus on these girls, who emanate strength, resilience, intelligence, courage, and love for each other. In our modern culture, that tends to fetishise youthful naivety, to pretend that life goes in a linear movement from the open innocence of youth to jaded experience, the girls' story counters that fetish. Delving into their lives reveals the complexity of becoming a woman in zeitgeist societies.

A mixture of larger-than-life dreams, reality checks, guilt and longing for childhood moments. The film aesthetics has to imitate that intricate journey by transcending genre and form. This allows us to explore the border between tragedy and freedom, control and submission, truth and lies, and the limitations and power of cinema.







INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTORS NADA RIYADH AND AYMAN EL AMIR

What was the starting point for the film?

Nada Riyadh: We met these young women in 2017. At the time, we were working for a feminist organization in Cairo that supports artistic creations by women from disadvantaged communities. In that context, we did a lot of traveling in southern Egypt and it was there, in the village of El Barsha, that we met them. We kept in touch and in 2018, they asked us to organize a screening of our documentaries. They were very curious and the experience was so exciting that we wanted to learn more about them.

So, basically, they asked you to film them!

Ayman El Amir: They saw the cinematic tool as another means of expressing themselves. At first, we didn't know anything about their lives outside the troupe. Then, little by little, they introduced us to their parents, their families, and their neighbors, and we realized that there was an entire world to be explored beyond that of the theatre.

In your opinion, what was it about your previous film that made them want to work with you?

A.E.A: *Happily Ever After* is a deeply personal film in which Nada and I are the main protagonists. So, they saw us as filmmakers, and also as people.

Though they aren't feminists per se, they're keenly aware of the weight of the patriarchy. Are they representative of their generation?

A.E.A: Let's just say they're trying to move boundaries through their artistic practices. They're representative of their generation in the sense that they're trying to create their own community. In Egypt, the cultural world revolves almost exclusively around Cairo and Alexandria. Anyone who wants to become an artist has to settle down in one of these two cities. Majda, Haidi, and Monika represent a generation of young Egyptian artists who intend to create, act, sing, and dance... without necessarily settling down in one of these two cities.

They're trying to create a community, but also to raise awareness. From this perspective, what they're doing is in fact more about performance or happenings than actual theatre.

N.R: The film shows that the simple act of being together and expressing themselves, saying their thoughts out loud, inspires and empowers them. Living in that remote village, they aren't exposed to feminist thought, but they fully understand the strength the group gives them.

A.E.A: And not being exposed to classical theatre practice either makes drawing on their own experience very important. When our project was still in development, a consultant told us their performances were chaotic – but they aren't aiming to perform at the Opera or in a major theater in Cairo!

There are several moments when we get the feeling that the challenge for them is not so much “making art” as it is simply surviving. That theatrical practice allows them to rattle, if only just a little, the shackles of their assignments.

A.E.A: Exactly. For them, theater is a matter of survival.

N.R.: For me, art has to have an urgency, it has to be necessary. And what they're doing is very important; for example, when they sing popular tunes that aren't known outside their region.

Their very existence is a miracle. Do they have artistic models?

A.E.A: They're Copts, and their church has a very rich theatrical tradition. In fact, Haidi, who wants to become a dancer, draws a lot of inspiration from videos she finds on the internet.

N.R.: The first time I saw them perform, yes, I thought it was a kind of small miracle. They all have very traditional mothers who never wanted to be anything other than housewives. Through the feminist organization I mentioned earlier, they were also able to meet a lot of people, talk to them, and take inspiration from them. But for me, the most important thing remains the community they've created wherein they can become whoever they want and escape all assignments.





In the film, we can see that some families are more open-minded than others, like that of Majda and Haidi, for example.

A.E.A: Filming took four years plus two years of preparation in the village. The girls invited us into their families, there were a lot of discussions, and a relationship of trust was forged. That made everything that came afterward much easier. We spent so much time in that village that one woman eventually suggested we buy a house there!

How do you film in such cramped spaces without the crew's presence disturbing the daily lives of the characters and their families?

A.E.A.: We're a team of three or four people, never more, which helps the characters feel more at ease in front of the camera. And fortunately, the team didn't change much over the four years of filming.

Three scenes stand out in the film: the first, when Majda and her brother fight over the remote control during a soccer match; the second, at the riverside café when Monika talks with her fiancé, Mina; and the third, when you film the incredible conversation between Haidi and her father.

N.R: During a workshop, Majda had written a scene about controlling the remote and the incessant arguments she had with her brother over it. Intuitively, I think we knew the scene would eventually be shot. In fact, the girls are creating a space in the theatre where they can recreate their own lives.

A.E.A.: Each three- or four-minute scene corresponds to two or more hours of filming. We film until something happens.

N.R.: We spent so much time with them that we could often almost predict what was going to happen. But there are always surprises: documentary filmmaking is a school of patience and instinct.

A.E.A: You mentioned the scene where Haidi's father tries to convince her to stay with the troupe: it's important to understand that the relationships with the girls and their families isn't one-sided. In that scene, it's Haidi's father who asked me to film the conversation, no doubt in the hope that my presence would help him change his daughter's mind.

...and find out the truth.

A.E.A.: Of course!

N.R.: Sometimes the camera gives a protagonist the freedom to do what he or she wants to do or say. Haidi's father wanted us to help him confront his daughter. And going back to Majda, I don't think she could have gained the upper hand with her brother had the camera not been there.

As for the scene between Monika and her future husband, we'd already filmed them several times. It's a classic crisis between two people who are about to live together for the rest of their lives. But that scene also masterfully shows what the patriarchy does to women, their bodies, and their minds!

A.E.A.: The doxa is that the patriarchy operates through physical violence, but that isn't always the case. It also operates in gentler forms, through jokes like the one made by Monika's fiancé, and through manipulation, by changing people's minds. Patriarchy can also take the shape of love.

N.R.: It's important for us to show that people are more than just stereotypes. Southern men are often caricatured. *The Brink of Dreams* explores other forms of oppression, such as manipulation or control, but we also see that Haidi's father is very different. He supports his daughter through to the end.

Some characters disappear at the end of the film, like Monika.

A.E.A.: At first, the "Panorama Barsha" troupe was bigger, with around ten members. But over the years, some gave up or got married. We could have filmed them up until the end of the shoot, but we wanted viewers to be able to feel their disappearance from the public eye. It's an artistic choice.

N.R.: We can't make up a happy ending. Those girls disappear, period, and that's what the patriarchy does to women: it makes them disappear. For us, showing this is a moral issue.

How did you approach the editing process?

A.E.A.: With over 400 hours of rushes, editing was a challenge. We had four main characters, then we focused on three.

N.R.: The two editors, Egyptian and French, allowed us to distance ourselves from the enormous mass of rushes.

A.E.A.: For us, this village is a microcosm of Egyptian society. The film talks about the moment in life when we want to be ourselves, to discover our true identity while still belonging to our community. Do we fall in line or rebel? This internal struggle is unique to us all – and it's the subject of the film

Interview by Elisabeth Lequeret





Nada Riyadh

Nada Riyadh is an Egyptian filmmaker. Her debut feature documentary film, *Happily Ever After*, which she directed with Ayman El Amir, premiered at IDFA 2016. Her short fiction film, *The Trap*, was selected for the official competition of La Semaine de la Critique, Cannes Film Festival 2019.

She is an alumnus of various international film programs including Cannes' La Fabrique, Next Step Program La Semaine de la Critique, Berlinale talents, American Film Showcase and Film Independent.

Ayman El Amir

Ayman El Amir is an Egyptian filmmaker. His recent work includes directing, with Nada Riyadh, the feature documentary, *Happily Ever After*, premiered at IDFA 2016 and producing the short fiction, *The Trap* selected for La Semaine de la Critique at the Festival de Cannes 2019.

He has worked as a script consultant for many labs and institutes including TorinoFilmLab, Doha Film Institute, Marrakesh Atlas Atelier, DW Academy and Full Circle Lab.

FILMOGRAPHY

FAKH (THE TRAP), Nada Riyadh
(Critics Week, Cannes Film Festival 2020)

HAPILLY EVER AFTER, Nada Riyadh & Ayman El Amir
(IDFA 2016)





IMPACT CAMPAIGN & AUDIENCE DESIGN

The Brink of Dreams is supported by the **Torino Film Lab Audience Design**, the **Aflamuna Impact Fund** and the **FIFDH Impact Days**.

In the frame of these supports, new initiatives are developed to promote *The Brink of Dreams*:

- A **series of community screenings** in the MENA region and within Egypt in different provinces with a focus on the southern region. The screenings will be accompanied by the **performances of Barsha troupe**, **panel discussions** and **Q&A sessions with the filmmakers**, the troupe's members and women's rights activists.
- A series of panel discussions and **collaborations between artists in different fields, activists, women's rights defenders** on the intersectionality between **art, gender and freedom**.
- A support to the Barsha troupe in launching a **fundraising campaign** to help them in designing, building and sustaining the first theatre in Barsha village.
- To produce **music for the troupe** advocating for girl's rights to support the troupe's artistic development and broaden their audience by distributing it in the MENA region.
- To produce **performances for the troupe advocating for girl's rights** to support the troupe's artistic development, **bring attention to their work and broaden their audience**.

In addition, in collaboration with **THINK-FILM Impact Production**, a panel with the filmmakers will be organized in Cannes. It will dive into the current state of play for female representation in film and festivals to understand how impact could be leveraged.

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