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## Aspiring Saudi Filmmakers Offer a Different Take

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia -- Aspiring Saudi filmmaker Mohammed al-Khalif is having a hard time finding a leading woman for his short film, "Garbage Bag."

Partly, it is because Saudi Arabia does not allow unrelated men and women to mingle and has no movie theaters or film schools, and no culture of actors or acting.

And partly, it's the subject matter.

"Garbage Bag" is about a woman stuck in a public restroom because her abaya, the black cloak women in Saudi Arabia must wear in public, has been stolen. After an agonizing night in the restroom, she fashions an abaya out of a black garbage bag and walks out.

"It's almost impossible to find a woman to act in a movie and even harder to find someone willing to wear a garbage bag as an abaya," said Khalif, a 23-year-old graduate student who sports a goatee and white-rimmed glasses. "My intent is not to insult the abaya, but to use film to ask why it has become such a shackle for Saudi women."

Khalif is part of a new group of young Saudi movie buffs who are making films that question their country's strict, puritanical mores and customs and its ban on movie theaters. The group, called Talashi, which means Fade Out, includes a pharmacist, a teacher, a lawyer and five film reviewers, mostly secular Saudis who say their worldviews were influenced by their love of film and the worlds to which it has exposed them.

But in pursuing their passion, the group is confronting the kingdom's powerful clerics and going up against decades of culture that branded movies a Western evil that would strip the country of its conservative Muslim nature.

"What was acceptable for my father's generation is not acceptable for me," said Mohammed al-Hamoud, 24, the lawyer who is working on a film about a 15-year-old girl forced into an arranged marriage. "I want to question the way we live, the things we once accepted blindly. We want to make up our own

minds about how we live."

Saudi Arabia has banned movie theaters since the early 1980s after a rise in religious conservatism. More recently, its neighbors, especially the United Arab Emirates, began developing fledgling film industries by financing young filmmakers and hosting annual film festivals, inspiring the region's youth.

Though foreign films had been allowed into the kingdom, they were censored and limited in scope and number. But with an explosion of satellite television channels, DVDs and movie downloads from the Internet, film aficionados have been able to watch nearly anything, from all over the world.

Filmmakers sometimes arrange for private screenings at their homes or at the homes of friends. Over the past couple of years, short films have been shown sporadically in auditoriums and literary clubs. To circumvent the wrath of powerful anti-film groups, the showings are advertised in the local media as "educational films" or "visual shows."

Last year, film lovers organized Saudi Arabia's first film festival, in the eastern city of Dhahran. And in a sign that movies are becoming more acceptable, a locally produced film was screened publicly in Jiddah, the country's most liberal city. The screening was approved by the provincial governor, Prince Khalid al-Faisal.

The screening attracted fierce criticism from the country's powerful clerics and many citizens. "Our position on this is clear: Ban it. That is because cinema is evil and we do not need it," newspapers quoted the head of the religious vice police, Abdullah al-Ghaith, as saying.

The cleric later said that showing "some movies" in the kingdom might be good, but many young Saudis say change is not happening fast enough. Some regularly make the 300-mile trip from Riyadh, the capital, to neighboring Bahrain just to watch movies.

In 2000, Talashi's leader, Fahad al-Estaa, co-founded a Web site that publishes reviews and information about new and classic films. Soon, the others now in the group found their way to the site.

But the idea for a filmmaking group came one night last April in graduate student Khalif's hotel room in Dubai after they attended the Gulf Film Festival. Many of the films they saw were made by young Emiratis. "We sat and talked with them. They were nice but had nowhere near our knowledge or love of film," Khalif said.

"We thought, "They have government support, they have private-sector

support, and we don't have that in Saudi Arabia. But we have each other,' " Estaa said.

The group's members returned home and agreed that they would each enter a short film in the next Gulf Film Festival. Pooling \$8,000, they bought a camera, tripod and case. They are now working on postproduction and some final scenes so they can send in their films before the festival's deadline next week.

One of the first movies they worked on was Mohammed al-Dhahri's, which tells the story of a street kid who is sexually molested by a young man, while society turns a blind eye, condemning sexual abuse but not doing anything constructive to get kids off the street.

"Filmmakers have to broach taboo subjects and cross red lines," said Abdul-Muhsin al-Mutairi, 28, a former salesman who reviews movies for al-Watan newspaper. "There is no place for coddling religion or traditions in art. The religion we defend is humanity."

Hussam al-Hulwah, 26, a human resources employee who sports a ponytail, said he was tired of the conformity imposed on Saudi youth. His film, shot at home when his parents were out of the country, is about a group of people, almost clonelike in their appearance, who get rid of the one guy in their midst who looks different.

Several weeks ago, Estaa's wife and children went to her family's home so that he and the other Talashi members could finish their films.

Nawaf al-Mhanna, filling in as actor, sat in Estaa's living room on a red couch and dialed a number on his cellphone.

"If she answers, fine. If not, it's over," he said.

"Cut!" yelled Abdul-Muhsin al-Dahbaan, who went to talk to Mhanna about the scene as the room filled with other members, fixing lighting, checking sound and watching playback on the camera.

Dahbaan's film is a satire on the absence of women in Saudi society. In the story, the film is supposedly directed by a woman, but throughout the movie, in coffee shops, on the street, not one female image is shown. Dahbaan said that the film is about how marginalized and invisible women are in Saudi Arabia and that he hopes it will make people question the extent to which Saudi society is segregated.

"If you can't convince people about your ideas, maybe you can show them a movie that will make them rethink them," Dahbaan said. "It's the best we can

hope for."

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