



AMREEKA

A FILM BY CHERIEN DABIS RELEASING SEPTEMBER 2009 www.AMREEKA.com



Features

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Amreeka: From Tribeca to Sundance

By Kristin McCracken

As Amreeka hits Sundance, director Cherien Dabis talks about the film's genesis and how Tribeca helped her get to Park City.



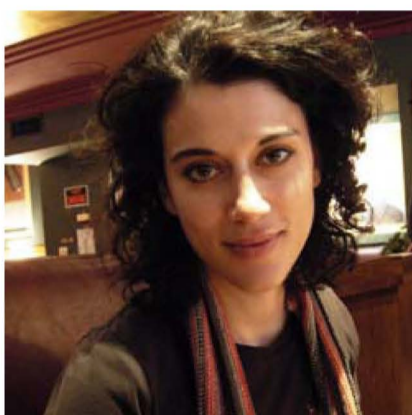
Amreeka, the feature film debut of **Cherien Dabis**, will screen in the US Narrative Feature Film Competition this month at the **Sundance Film Festival**. The story of a Palestinian single mother who gets the chance to leave the West Bank and take her teenage son to America, *Amreeka* is an examination of the American dream as it exists today. Raising issues of stereotypes, prejudices, and assimilation, it is, above all, a celebration of family, of love, and of making a home where you are.

As a film, *Amreeka* has roots in the **Tribeca All Access** program (part of the **Tribeca Film Institute**), which provides support to filmmakers who are traditionally under-represented in the film industry. At TAA 2007, **Cherien Dabis** was chosen as the winner of the first **L'Oréal Paris Women of Worth Vision Award**, which allowed her to dive into production on *Amreeka*.

Tribeca Film sat down to talk with Dabis just after she got the good news about Sundance.

Tribeca: Congratulations on getting into Sundance! Can you tell us about the story of *Amreeka*?

Cherien Dabis: Thanks. I am super-excited! The story of *Amreeka* has been with me since I was 14. It's loosely based on my family's experience during the first Gulf War in a small town in Ohio. My father was a doctor, and his practice suffered immediately. We received threats on a daily basis in the month of February (1991). There were a bunch of silly rumors going around that my father's son was fighting in Saddam's army—my dad has five girls, and doesn't have a son. The most egregious thing was that the Secret Service came to my high school to investigate a rumor that my 16-year-old sister was plotting to assassinate the president. It got so absurd.



As a 14-year-old, I had spent my life not wanting anything to do with my parents' ethnicity—really rejecting the Arab side of me—and just wanting to fit in as a kid and be all-American. It took [the Gulf War experience] to really appreciate the fact that I have this hybrid identity, and this unique view of the world. I got to travel a lot, which gave me really interesting perspective on politics and the media in particular—the way things are reported in the US as opposed to how they are reported in the Middle East.

The coverage during the first Gulf War [in 1991] made me very aware of the media, and how the media perpetuated stereotypes of Arabs, and how that was directly impacting us in this town where people were believing those stereotypes. And that really stayed with me.

Now is the time to tell this story.

Tribeca: How did your experience after September 11 compare to your experience after the first Gulf War?

CD: With the first Gulf War, people were content in their ignorance, because it just seemed so far away, and it didn't seem urgent or necessary for them to educate themselves on why anything was happening. There were soldiers who were killed, but not like the recent Iraqi invasion.

9/11 is different because it happened on US soil. After 9/11, people actually started learning about the Middle East. Literally, a friend of mine was like, "The first thing I did was I went out and bought two books on Islam." People became interested in the region, in the politics, in the geography, in the religion, in everything.



Tribeca: Can you give us a little background on your process in getting the film made?

CD: This film is definitely a success story of the Tribeca All Access program. I started writing the script in 2003, went out in 2004 and 2005. I did a number of development labs, including Sundance, to help me with the script. So by the time we did Tribeca All Access, we had a script that was really tight, really close to production.

Cairo—and it won a number of awards. There was a lot of interest in it—people wanted to know what I was doing next. What the short did was give us a lot of momentum in a lot of ways. It proved that I could direct a film, so it made a feature film feasible.

When I applied for **Tribeca All Access (TAA)**, I was in a good place. I had my initial interview with **Beth Janson**, and she was really excited about the project. Because she recognized that it was ready, she was like, "Let's see what we can do. I have this friend **Alicia Sams**, she's an independent New York producer, she's Arab-American, I think she would really dig this." So she tried to set up a meeting during TAA, but Alicia was out of town, but—and this is how much care she took—she made sure we made contact with Alicia, because she knew what a good fit it would be. We met Alicia, and as it turned out, she got us our major investor. That was really a result of TAA, and the care of Beth Janson.

Tribeca: At Tribeca All Access, you won the first L'Oréal Women of Worth Vision Award. What was that like?

CD: First of all, I didn't even know there was an award at TAA! The night of the ceremony, I was running late. I got a text from my producer, and she was running late as well. We both started getting texts from **Tamir Muhammad**, who works at TAA, and he's like, "Where are you Where are you Where are you?" like, really alarmed. And so of course, I am thinking, I am going to win something and I am not going to be there. The cab had taken me up to the Village—to Greenwich Avenue instead of Greenwich Street—and I was stuck in traffic. When the cab finally pulled up, he literally grabbed my hand on the curb and walked me all the way inside. I got there just in the nick of time.

The award was \$15,000, and was presented by **Kerry Washington**, who is one of my favorite actresses. It's such an amazing panel of women who presented the award. I will never forget it.

Tribeca: What did that award mean to you?

CD: We were ready to go into prep for the film, so what that \$15K meant for us was that we were able to hire a casting director and a line producer (to do a budget and a schedule), so we could start the process of envisioning what the production would look like. So that money was instrumental for us.



I really admire what L'Oréal Paris is doing with their Women of Worth campaign. I am proud to be the first recipient of their Women of Worth Vision Award. L'Oréal Paris is super-excited about the film, meeting me and hearing about all the good buzz. They want to work with us in a longer-term plan in figuring out how they can help promote the film—maybe a cross-marketing campaign?

To know that L'Oréal is so interested in supporting women—and women filmmakers in particular—is very exciting and unique. We've had some fantastic conversations.

Tribeca: How has your family reacted to the film?

CD: I grew up with super-proud Arab parents--so proud that we spoke Arabic at home, and we got up early on Saturdays for Arabic lessons. (My mother used to say, "As long as you live in this house, you live in Jordan." I put that in the film.) We moved from Jordan to Nebraska in 1975, and we went back and forth to Jordan every summer. My parents were really proud of me and my sisters, and encouraged us and taught us we could do anything we wanted to do. But when I said I wanted to go into film, my dad was always like, "But you're an Arab." Like that was not something that was ever going to happen. They are super-excited now, though. [Smiles.]

Tribeca: Do you feel the love for this film?

CD: There are so many people getting really behind this film. It's kind of shocking to me. Right now I think there is so much potential for the film. And I am so proud of it, knowing that was where I came from, and knowing the challenges of getting a movie like this made.



Tribeca: What do you want your film to say?

It's the quintessential question, isn't it? It's really simple. I don't have a political message. I want people to walk away with a feeling of familiarity. I want them to leave knowing that we are so much more than the stereotype. So many people have the same immigration story in many ways, and I think *Amreeka* is very universal in that regard. But it's also so specific about this particular community, and that's the part of it that hasn't been done before.

I want to speak to mainstream audiences. In a lot of ways, the film is a celebration. It's dedicated to my family, and there's a lot of love in it. I want people walking away with that feeling in mind: celebration and family and love. It all sounds kind of cheesy, and that's why I am so reluctant to answer that question, but that's what it means to me. I don't have any larger motivation.

Amreeka is showing at the **2009 Sundance Film Festival**.

In her other life, Dabis has written for *The L Word*, launching its new season this weekend on **Showtime**. We interviewed **Mia Kirshner** in November.