

# FILMMAKER

## CHERIEN DABIS'S MOVING DEBUT FEATURE, AMREEKA, FOLLOWS AN ARAB SINGLE MOTHER WHO ADJUSTS TO THE CULTURE SHOCK OF RAISING HER TEENAGE SON IN SMALL TOWN ILLINOIS

By Livia Bloom

Far from the McMansions of America, a single mother wins the lottery-not for million in cash, but for a U.S. Green Card. It's life changing. With a bright smile and masking her trepidation, Muna (Nisreen Faour) takes one look in her rearview mirror, stuffs a wad of bills in a cookie tin and bundles up her teenage son Fadi (Melkar Mualllem). Together they bid farewell to Bethlehem and board a plane bound for the Illinois suburbs.

Amreeka, Cherien Dabis's extraordinary first feature, loosely based on her own family's experiences, premiered to critical acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival, opened the New Directors New Films series in New York City, and had its international premiere at the 2009 Cannes Directors' Fortnight. The film brings humor and warmth to the story of the Palestinian mother and son's rocky adjustment to life in Amreeka (America).

Set in 2003, as the U.S. Army is entering Baghdad for the first time, Muna and Fadi move in with Muna's elegant sister Raghda (played by Lemon Tree's Hiam Abbass) and Raghda's seemingly successful middle-class family. Fadi enters the local high school and, aided by his popular cousin Salma (*Arrested Development's* Alia Shawkat), begins to shyly engage his school's bullies, stoners and teachers. Meanwhile his proud, vivacious mother secretly takes a job slinging burgers at White Castle—a change from her former profession in banking—in order to make ends meet. Together Muna and Fadi find friends and enemies aplenty in their journey to turn a foreign, mythological land into a home. National Geographic Entertainment opens the film September 4, 2009.

### How did you first get interested in film? Did you have an a-ha! moment, when you knew that film was for you?

I had many a-ha! moments. Film and television were my escape as a kid. I grew up in a really small town in Ohio, and I remember looking at all the people around me, thinking, "I don't really want to live my life like that." Film and television became an example of what something else could be. During the 1991 Gulf War my family and I were the only Arabs in this Ohio town of 10,000 people. My father, a physician, went from being the local town-hero doctor to the enemy overnight. My dad's patients were walking into his office, asking for their medical records, and taking off. Apparently they preferred to see a general practitioner or pediatrician two hours away rather than see an Arab doctor. We started getting death threats. The Secret Service came to my high school to investigate a rumor that my 17-year-old sister threatened to kill the president. It was absurd, but it was a political awakening for me, and I became very aware of the media. We were so misrepresented that it became my quest to change what was put out there.

### When did your family come to the U.S.?

I was the first in my family born in the US. My father is Palestinian, my mom is Jordanian, and they immigrated to Nebraska, of all places, right before I was born. I grew up in Ohio and Jordan; we would go back and forth because my whole family was there. So we grew up really in isolation. We were the only ones in this small town in the middle of the cornfields. When I was young, I just wanted to be the all-American kid. I just wanted to fit in; I wanted to dress like everyone else and speak English and feel like I belonged. But in this small town in Ohio, it was really impossible; everyone knows everyone's business in those kinds of places. In a larger city I probably could've easily gotten by and not felt like such an outsider, but in Ohio I was known as "the Arab," and when we'd go to Jordan I was known as "the American." I never quite fit anywhere, and that identity crisis became a big part of my life growing up: trying to figure out who I was and where I belonged. I think that question is present in Amreeka. I also think that's part of the reason why I became a filmmaker: I felt like I was always having to explain myself to the other side; always trying to bridge that gap between my Arab relatives, who didn't really understand the American side of me, and my American friends, who asked all kinds of ridiculous questions like, "Are there cars in Jordan? Do you have telephones?" I started videotaping our summers in Jordan so I could show my friends here, and vice versa. In eighth grade, I made home movies with my friends. I had no idea what a director did; I was just really bossy. [laughs] I guess those were the first signs of my wanting to be a filmmaker, although the inclination to tell stories was always there.

### When did you leave small town Ohio?

I studied creative writing at the same time that I did media and PR at the University of Cincinnati. Then I moved to Washington, D.C., and thought, "Arabs, we need better PR. I'll figure out how we can get our 'message' out there." [laughs] I was in D.C. during the Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal, and it was a crazy time to be involved in politics. It was a time when people were becoming so disillusioned that they were leaving D.C. and leaving the political arena altogether. It felt like there was no room for truth in politics. I decided that the only way to be honest about the stories I wanted to tell was to thinly veil truth as fiction. There can be much truth in fiction. People let their guards down and are willing to engage in a fictional story that they might otherwise be too defensive to really allow themselves into. So I moved to New York and, crazily, ended up moving here the week of 9/11.

### Welcome to New York.

[laughter] When my relatives on the West Bank were worried about me in New York, you know something's wrong. They were like, "Go back! Go back to D.C.! Go back!" I went to Columbia University - September '01 was when I started. 9/11 really reminded me of where I'd come from and what had happened to my family, as I think it did for a lot of Arab Americans. Also for the first time, people became really interested. One of the first things that many people did was buy books on the Middle East. They said, "Okay, this is now directly affecting us ... and we need to know about it," whereas in 1991 it was, "There's some war happening on some soil way across the ocean ... and who cares?" Then shortly after 9/11, the US. was invading Iraq again and I thought, "It's time for me to sit down and write something." And I didn't want anyone to feel like they were taking medicine; I wanted to entertain and tell a story. I wanted to do something that was unexpected and at the same time, I was really inspired by my family. Family is so important to me and to Arab culture that I wanted to center the film around it. Amreeka's main character was very much inspired by my aunt, who immigrated to the US. in 1997. She is bubbly and hopeful; in the face of any challenge she sees the good, and she assumes a sense of belonging wherever she goes.

### Could you describe your writing process?

I started writing the script in 2003 while I was in graduate school. I was taking a screenwriting workshop with Katherine Dieckmann at Columbia, and it then took me five years to get the project off the ground. Amreeka was such a personal film that I feel like I lived it. Things came to me like pieces of a puzzle that was all out of order. I'd write the first act, and then I'd start getting pieces of the third act - scenes and moments that I'd have to fit together. I'd visualize the structure of the script and move the scenes around. For example I initially wrote the whole beginning of the film that takes place in the Middle East. I wasn't sure what was going to happen when Muna first arrived in the States, and losing all her money came much later, but I knew she was going to get the job at the White Castle, so I skipped ahead and wrote that part. Then I'd say, "Okay, I know A and I know O, now let me figure out how do I get her from A to O. What are all the ways that she 'could get to that next point in the story?" I knew the overall structure, and I didn't know how it was going to end, but I knew what I wanted it to feel like at the end. I often find that I know what I want things to feel like, but translating that feeling into a concrete scene takes a little while. I wanted it to feel bittersweet, hopeful yet melancholic at the same time. I also wanted you to feel that no matter what happened they were going to be okay because they had one another.

Can you discuss the film's long process of development? It won a number of different awards and was in different labs, including the Filmmaker's Fast Track program and the FIND Lab. I also understand that you worked with different producers and traveled a lot for the film.

I did. I started writing the script in film school in '03. Then in '04 and '05, I met with different producers, gauging people's interest in the material. That whole process of taking material out was so new to me. From the very beginning, I wanted to make an authentic movie. I didn't want to cast non-Arabs in Arab roles, but that meant the film was going to be much harder to finance, since it would have no big names. I was going to have to think outside the box and find people who were really passionate about telling this story. "It's a very execution-driven or direction-driven script," I kept hearing. I began to realize, "This film is not going to be financed in any kind of a typical way." At the time, people were looking for Iraq war dramas - that was what was in the pipeline at that time - and Amreeka was too light. The irony of the timing is that now it's the opposite. But then, I had to start looking to my own community for support to get the movie made. I began discovering amazing resources for emerging filmmakers, programs like the Sundance Screenwriters' Lab and Film Independent Directors' Lab and Fast Track and Project: Involve and Tribeca All Access. I thought, "These programs were made for people like me and for movies like this - films that won't stand a chance otherwise." So I applied for everything. I started doing a lot of these labs and it opened so many doors; I even was profiled in Filmmaker Magazine as one of the nine people in the Fast Track program. My producer, Christina Piovesan, read about me in Filmmaker and e-mailed me. She was half Middle Eastern, but she lived in Toronto and had never been to the Middle East. I sent her the script and she loved it. She said, "This character's like my mom." Slowly, over the course of a year, we started working together, even though we'd never met. We were working together via e-mail, strategizing and talking on the phone. We started looking to find Arab-American private equity and considering creative ways of financing. At Tribeca All Access, we were introduced to our executive producer, Alicia Sams, who helped us land our first piece of financing. She opened the door to a whole world of Arab-American private investors. Once that first piece came in, it was much easier to find the rest of the financing. The programs were really instrumental in getting this movie off the ground. Tribeca All Access was where we met our executive producer; Film Independent gave us a Kodak film grant, which enabled us to shoot on Super 16mm; I met my DP when I shot scenes at the Sundance Directors' Lab; through Sundance we were introduced to our distributor, National Geographic. Amreeka is their first fiction-film release. For Showtime Arabia and Rotana, both very big paid and public TV and theatrical outlets in the Middle East, this was the first time that they ever pre-bought an international film. That ended up happening through our co-producer, Zain Al-Sabah, in Kuwait. Through Canadian producers, we were able to secure tax credits and some provincial equity from Manitoba. We found our American private equity through our American executive producer. There was an unofficial co-production between the U.S., Canada and Kuwait in order to get this movie made. We shot the American part of the film in Winnipeg, with some B-unit in Chicago, and we shot the beginning of the film in the West Bank, in Ramallah and Bethlehem.

### Your characters really inhabit their roles, though they range in experience from the lead actress, Nisreen Faour, who's a nonprofessional, to Hiam Abbass, whose elegance I've admired in many films, including Lemon Tree and The Syrian Bride. How did you cast the film?

We cast in New York City, Dearborn, Los Angeles, Chicago. I had tapes coming in from all over the country. We also did Winnipeg, Toronto, Paris, Beirut, Amman, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Haifa, Tel Aviv. And I was traveling to all these places on my own. I had casting directors in New York, who were helping me set up sessions in the U.S. and Europe, and then I had various people in the Middle East helping me in different countries, from Jordan to Lebanon to Palestine. I had people looking for me in Egypt. I was watching so many movies and television shows. When I was writing the role of Raghda, Muna's sister, I always had Hiam Abbass in mind. And so as early as 2007, I went out to her. I was part of the Berlin Film Festival's Talent Campus with my short film and she was on the jury, so I found a way to her and sat down with her - that was amazing. Alia Shawkat was one of my favorites on *Arrested Development*. When I found out that she was half Iraqi, I was thrilled because she seemed so great for the role of Salma. I found the actress to play Muna at a casting call in Haifa through my Palestinian casting director, Iman. Nisreen came to the casting call and was just very cute from the moment she walked in with her two sons, who ended up watching the audition. She had this innocence about her, this pure nature; she saw everything as good, and was super optimistic. That's such a rare quality to find in people. I also didn't want the humor in the film to be forced. She's not trying to be funny at all, and I thought there was the danger of that in casting that role. The casting process over there is really interesting, especially with Iman. This is the way she does it: She sits me down, we go to dinner, and we have a three-course meal, we smoke hookah at the end of the meal, and the entire time she asks me a million questions about the character. Which is fantastic, because it gets me talking about the character and gets me thinking and really delving deep into who this person is. Then, three hours after she asks all these questions, she writes down four names. That's how I found Muna; Muna was one of the four names.

### Let's talk about your directing process. I'm always curious, with women filmmakers in particular, what challenges you faced?

I was insanely prepared for this film. I knew the characters inside out, I knew the world inside out. I had even storyboarded the whole film from the first frame to the last frame - although they were horrible drawings. [laughter] But it was an exercise in starting the visualization process. When you're writing, you're visualizing as well, but when you're directing you go to a whole new depth. I didn't yet know my locations, but I wanted to start visualizing the blocking, how I was going to tell the story with the camera, and what some of the visual themes might be. Some of the scenes changed drastically from their initial storyboards, and in other cases the first idea did end up being the best idea.

I had months and months of early prep, and then four weeks of prep in Winnipeg. I learned a lot about myself. As a director - and particularly as a female director, since you brought that up - one of the most important things is to be confident in your own vision and trust your own instinct enough to take control of the situation. Don't be afraid to vocalize what you want. Many people become afraid of what they want, and I did not want to do that. It was a process of learning to trust myself - though for me, I had no other choice. If you're not going to trust yourself then why are you there? They're all there for you. They're all there because they fear your vision, so you just have to do the same thing and not give in to whatever fear or doubt you have. You just have to be really prepared, and then go with your instinct.

I rehearsed as much as I could, and I even rehearsed on set while we were shooting. I spent a lot of time analyzing the material and thinking about how I was going to talk to the actors. That was very important to me, because I wanted to communicate everything that I needed to all of my keys and then trust them to do their jobs while I focused on the actors on set. I was working with an amazing D.P.; we had talked a lot and he knew what we were going for, so I was then really able to focus on the actors.

The script was written in English and then translated into Arabic, which lent a certain amount of flexibility to the text. Any lines that were translated into Arabic became open to improv. We were always saying, "What's the best translation of this line? What are you trying to say? What's this moment really about?" The lead actress spoke Arabic as her first language. The brother-in-law spoke Arabic as his first language. Hiam Abbass spoke Arabic as her first language. The actor who plays Fadi, Melkar Mualllem, spoke Arabic as his first language. So I worked closely on all of the dialogue translation with my translator. Everyone who spoke English had the English version of the script although, if they had Arabic lines, then I gave them Arabic dialogue. Not all the actors were comfortable doing improv, but I wanted to improv because I wanted to find the truth of the scene.

### Could you touch on the aesthetic of your film?

I wanted it to feel very real and very natural. Everything was shot on location. We ended up shooting on the Arri 416. It's a super lightweight, portable Super 16 camera that allowed us to be in tight places and gave us that smooth, kind of handheld look that we were going for. My dip. and I looked at Robert Altman quite a bit for the very natural blocking and the way that the camera followed the characters and found different people.

### Like Nashville?

Yes, and *Short Cuts*. I looked at a lot of photography as well; I looked at a lot of Lee Friedlander. I put together a whole look book of photographs of inspiring images that I found, like Dorothea Lange and Gary Winogrand and Philip-Lorca diCorcia. I also wanted each person's wardrobe choices to express their personality within the realm of sort of what's real.

### You mentioned watching lots of television and seeing lots of films while you were growing up. Can you talk about some that were influential for you?

I grew up watching a ton of Egyptian movies, actually. Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s was the Hollywood of the Middle East, and there were some really great movies that came out of that time period. There is an Egyptian film that I love called *Dreams of Hind and Camilia* (1989), though that came later on. As a kid, I watched a lot of movies with Fatemeh and Adel Imam and Egyptian singers and Egyptian musicals. They're bold films, and they tackle taboos more than most films do today in the Arab world."