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Haaretz

Her Brothers Buried Her Alive: Palestinian-Israeli Director Dares to Confront Honor Killings

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As his long-gestating drama 'Fadia' airs on Israeli TV, Nazareth-born Palestinian director Shady Srour talks about why he refuses to stay silent about the murder of women in his society

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Director Shady Srour. 'As a teenage boy, I felt this kind of social pressure myself.' Credit: Gil Eliahu

Ten years ago, director and creator Shady Srour heard a woman saying in Arabic, "I am buried alive." He met her completely by chance and the only thing he remembers about her are those words.

"As soon as I heard that sentence, it was etched in my memory and became an inspiration," he recounts. "I wanted to build a story around it and turn it into a work of art. Burying someone alive was a form of murder that was common in the past in Europe, but Arabs also used to bury their daughters alive."

"*Wad al-Banat*," an Arabic term that describes burying newborn baby girls alive, is an old custom that was common in Arab culture in pre-Islamic times, as well as in other Middle Eastern cultures and China. "This issue occupied my mind and I researched the topic for years," Srour says. "As an artist, I wanted to examine the symbolism of this custom, the societal consent to murdering women and to oppressing them in general – and especially the way in which Arab women deal with it," he adds.

'I'm angry at Arab society for still raising a young generation based on destructive ideas – such as the notion that it's permissible to commit murder in order to uphold a family's honor.'

A decade on, the director has achieved his goal: His drama series "Fadia" focuses on [the murder of women in Arab society](#), and is now airing in Israel on Mekan TV (Channel 33). [At the show's heart is Fadia](#) (played by Yara Jarrar), a young Palestinian woman studying to be a nurse whose family is plotting to kill her for what they claim is her dishonoring them. Her brothers bury her alive.

“Fadia’s story is not just about family honor. It’s a story about a woman who was buried alive but survived. Masculine thinking wanted to bury her, but she managed to put up a fight,” Srour explains. “I’m angry at Arab society for still raising a young generation based on destructive ideas – such as the notion that it’s permissible to commit murder in order to uphold a family’s honor. What kind of notion is that? I’m referring particularly to young people who are still in the process of formulating their opinions regarding everything in their lives, including religion and social norms. This starts at an age when they are still in school, and children become adults who believe this is the right thing to do.”

“Fadia” is the first ever mini-series to be screened on an Arabic language TV channel in Israel. The four-parter was produced by Makan and is being broadcast during the month of Ramadan.

“I first wrote a script that was suitable for a feature film with the hope that it would be accepted,” recalls Srour, who himself plays the part of Tareq, Fadia’s engineer neighbor. “I submitted it to many places, but it was rejected again and again. I didn’t despair and told myself I would rewrite the story and script, and welcome whatever came of it. Ultimately, it was accepted by Makan. I made the necessary changes to suit a TV series. I initially wrote 12 episodes, but was then asked to reduce it to four due to budgetary considerations.”

Srour doesn’t seek his inspiration from Arab or Turkish TV dramas. Instead, he sought to create a unique dramatic language that suits the complexity of Palestinian life in Israel.

“I wanted to produce something new that is connected to who I am as Shady,” he says, noting his collaboration with American cinematographer [Barry Markowitz](#), who shot the series. “I had very productive and professional conversations with him, which helped me construct the scenes in a suitable sequence,” the director says.

Yara Jarrar as Fadia in a scene from the Israeli TV show of the same name. Credit: Barry Markowitz

An invisible tragedy

The tragedy taking place in Fadia’s life also encapsulates the hardships of the younger generation in Palestinian communities – some aspects of which are not discussed or remain invisible. Fadia has to contend with her brother Sharif (played by Ala Dakka), an accountant at the local municipality who is also connected to a crime organization. He is conservative in his views, paying her tuition fees yet continuously trying to control her and interfere in her life.

“As a teenage boy, I felt this kind of social pressure myself,” says Srour. “My social environment expected me as a son and brother of four girls to dominate and oppress my sisters. My masculinity was measured in terms of my ability as a man to control the women in my sphere. That experience stayed with me for many years. After I grew up, I realized the power of social influence on young men. In this series, I wanted to break down the concept of ‘murdering women for dishonoring their families’ into its elements, and make viewers see the reality – just like looking in a mirror.”

A scene from the Israeli TV series “Fadia.” Credit: Barry Markowitz

He continues: “There is a rot in Arab society, and the series uses truth as a slap to the face. It’s more convenient not to take responsibility, to put all of the blame on the government, on the establishment. We always flee from responsibility, socially and politically, and that angers me. With every problem, people say ‘The Jews are to blame.’ But we have problems in our society that we need to address. Why do people in Arab communities consider emigration, with some of them even

leaving Israel? Because of the Jews? No. If there were no problems in Arab society, people wouldn't leave."

He recalls an incident involving his wife. "She was driving in [the predominantly Arab city of] Nazareth and was about to start moving when the light turned green. Suddenly, a man burst forward, trying to cross the street even though there was no crosswalk. She didn't know what to do, and he started pounding on the car. My daughters were with her and they returned home very frightened. What was I, as an Arab man, supposed to do? At that moment, I said to my wife that we needed to emigrate."

Shour indeed manages to capture the distress of Palestinians living in Israel in his work, also knowing how to express the distress of the invisible Palestinians who live on the other side of the border.

Sheren Falah Saab - Are you still thinking about emigrating?

Shady Shour - "Of course, all the time. If I had a good job opportunity overseas, I wouldn't turn it down. My daughters are now in ninth and 12th grade, and for me as a father, it's hard to think about not being to help them when they're scared. I tell them they have to act wisely and know how to be sensible when a situation is unsafe. I feel helpless in confronting Arab society and the state, which is doing nothing about our problems. I'm in despair, telling my daughters to study overseas and stay there. It pains me a lot to say that. I had hope that change would happen here, and that I'd be part of that change. But this hope recedes as the years go by."

There is a real sense of fear even among Arab artists when it comes to speaking out against burgeoning crime rates. Do you feel that way too?

Shady Shour, left, on the set of his 2017 film "Holy Air." Credit: Gil Eliahu

"It's not just artists. It's every Arab in Israel - and [after the war started \[last October\]](#) it's even more difficult. I went with a colleague recently for a work meeting to a café in Jaffa. A young [non-Arab] woman sat beside us, holding a gun with the barrel pointed at me. I was really scared and asked my colleague to move, since I couldn't make a comment about the woman's weapon. What could I have said to her? My accent is Arabic and I look like an Arab. I was afraid she would shoot me, so I preferred to shut up and change places."

What did you feel at that moment?

"It was very painful. I'm a father to a family and, ultimately, I want to survive. Any one of us in that situation prefers to keep silent. We are not only excluded; we exclude ourselves and forgo the right to express an opinion, since the price for speaking up is very heavy. Who is it possible to convince? I always remind myself that I'm an artist, and that I can bring all this pain and express it in my work."

'They called me bin Laden'

Shour, 47, is married with three children and lives in Nazareth. He obtained a B.A. in theater from Tel Aviv University in 2001. Following desperate and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to work in his field in Israel, he decided to move to the United States and study for a master's degree in film at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco.

“Those were the days of the second intifada and I was looking for myself in that situation, wanting to begin a career in acting,” he recalls. “But my look did not fit the roles intended for the character of the Arab or the terrorist. In one audition, they thought I was there for the role of a character called Boris. I told them: ‘No, I’m here for the role of Ahmed – the Arab character.’”

A scene from “Holy Air.” Credit: Daniel Miller

Reality bit Srour again when he headed for the United States: he landed on September 7, 2001, just four days before 9/11. “Suddenly, the situation in the United States was the same as in Israel. When people saw me in the street, they called me bin Laden. I felt afraid,” he says.

At the end of his studies in 2004, he returned to Israel with the ambition of making movies. That didn’t happen right away either.

He started working with at-risk youth, and taught film and drama at the Open University. He also developed and shot his Nazareth-set movie “Holy Air,” which was first screened [at the Tribeca Film Festival](#) and Jerusalem Film Festival in 2017, before being released a year later.

The film is a comedy drama about a Christian-Arab man called Adam who sells bottles of holy air to pilgrims. Haaretz’s film critic Uri Klein, who watched the film twice, wrote that “on second viewing, I noted to what extent the comic element was but a means of turning the movie into an allegory with satirical elements, dealing with the status of Israeli Arabs – locating this issue within a description of an existential crisis that exceeds the issues of the origin, religion, identity or status of Arabs in a country in which they comprise a minority in distress.”

Srour indeed manages to capture the distress of Palestinians living in Israel in his work, also knowing how to express the distress of the invisible Palestinians who live on the other side of the border.

In 2019, he made a short movie called “Oslo,” dealing with the status of Palestinians working in Israel. The 15-minute film, which was also screened at the Jerusalem Film Festival, follows Ziad, who is prohibited from coming to work in Israel. Since he has promised his daughter some meat for their dinner and cannot return home empty-handed, Ziad makes a difficult choice in order to keep his promise: He kills a dog and brings the meat home without telling his family how he got it.

A scene from Shady Srour’s short film “Oslo.” Credit: Cinema Virgin / Film Five

“The movie ‘Oslo’ was inspired by Palestinian laborers I had met. One of them told me they don’t eat dog meat. This was a metaphorical statement describing the depth of despair in which the Palestinians find themselves – and that statement didn’t leave me. When I made the film, I had a feeling that an explosion would take place sooner or later. The movie’s last scene shows a lineup of Palestinians waiting at a checkpoint and is meant to raise the difficult question of the implications of the [Oslo Accords](#), which have not improved the Palestinians’ lot. The Palestinian laborer ate dog meat on Sunday. Who will he eat on Monday? It’s difficult for Israelis to see the situation and the oppression, but this has implications.”

Yet now you’re showing a series on a topic that is not directly connected to the Palestinian conflict. Instead, you ask viewers to look critically at Arab society.

“When they told me they would screen the series during [Ramadan](#), I asked them: ‘Why now, while they’re facing a war in Gaza?’ The series was filmed before the war and I want to hope that I can continue to live within my society – which is why it was important for me to place this mirror before it. Events in Gaza have no bearing on this series but I’m concerned about the reactions because,

really, this is not the time. But I have no control over the timing. On the other hand, we have to look forward, create and repair. I wish for a reformed society, and this series is very relevant to the incessant cycle of murder – which peaked last year with 244 victims.”

The end scene from “Oslo.” Credit: Cinema Virgin / Film Five

How do you view the situation in Gaza?

“I see my father being very affected by the situation there. He has experienced [the Nakba](#) all over again. He was a child in 1948, leaving his village Eilabun in the Galilee for Beirut. After a year, he managed to return to Israel with the rest of his family. The scenes of Gazans displaced from the northern Gaza Strip to the south brought back childhood experiences for him. History repeats itself in this place. He cries all day, wishing to talk about his pain, and I try to calm him down.

“We’re stuck in a region in which wars and conflicts have always existed, from the Canaanite period to this day. I can’t talk for the people in Gaza, since I’m not there. I can talk about the pain felt by my father, who was a refugee. But I also see and identify with the pain and stories of the kidnapped and victims of the shocking massacre that took place on October 7 in communities along the Gaza border.”

How do you see relations between Israelis and Palestinians after October 7?

“There’s a disconnect between Palestinians and Israelis, and even blindness and imperviousness to the pain of the other. Israelis don’t see the Palestinians, and vice versa. And we, the Arabs of 1948 who live here, see both sides and understand both, and are stuck between a rock and a hard place. What really consoles me is that after October 7, Jewish friends in Israel and the United States contacted me in order to ask how I was doing, as well as to express their solidarity and tell me they were seeing and feeling my pain.

“I also initiated conversations with Jewish friends in Tel Aviv, and it was important to me to tell them that they have an open house in Nazareth – my house. I understand how dangerous it is when rockets fall on Tel Aviv. I have a Jewish friend from the United States who is also a producer, and he calls me to this day, asking how I’m doing. He was at my home; he knows me and my parents. It really comforts me that I’m in a circle of friends and people who can understand the complexity of the situation we’re stuck in. That is very significant for me, leaving me with some hope and optimism.”

Sheren Falah Saab

P.S.

• Haaretz. Mar 28, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2024-03-28/ty-article-magazine/.premium/its-a-story-about-a-palestinian-woman-who-was-buried-alive-but-survived/0000018e-7fd3-d669-a9fe-7fff0cd10000>