

INTERVIEW WITH SHAHRBANOO SADAT



Shahrbanoo Sadat

**DIRECTOR OF “WOLF AND SHEEP” AND
“THE ORPHANAGE”, FEATURE FILMS SUPPORTED
BY EURIMAGES
RECIPIENT OF THE 2017 NIPKOW SCHOLARSHIP
OFFERED BY EURIMAGES**

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BY KARIN SCHIEFER

**YOU ARE CERTAINLY ONE OF THE FEMALE PIONEERS
IN AFGHAN CINEMA. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR
ENCOUNTER WITH CINEMA AS AN ART AND HOW IT
BECAME YOUR CHOSEN PROFESSION?**

That happened completely by accident. I grew up in a village in central Afghanistan. After high school I went to Kabul to attend university and by mistake I took the wrong exam – so I ended up at Kabul University, but not to study physics, even though I very much loved mathematics and numbers. I learned about a French workshop programme called Atelier Varan which was aimed at cinema students from Asian or African countries. During this three-month course we learned the basics of documentary cinema, specifically of *cinéma vérité*. I was very lucky to get the opportunity to participate in this workshop – it was the last one. The following year my teacher was killed in a suicide attack and the programme closed down. Later I gave up my stud-

ies at Kabul university, even though it had always been my greatest dream to get a PhD. I was born a refugee in Iran. My parents experienced a lot of restrictions although they had been living there for 40 years, and even though I was born in Iran, I was not considered an Iranian citizen. During my last year in that country I was not even allowed to attend school. That's why my biggest dream was education. I didn't have time to dream about anything else. I moved to Afghanistan at the age of 11 and lived in a remote mountain village like the one in “Wolf and Sheep”. I was completely disconnected from the rest of the world. When I arrived in Kabul at the age of 18 it was the first moment of my life when I had time to think about other things. At the cinema workshop I saw “Les glaneurs et la glaneuse” by Agnès Varda. I had never heard of her before. The film made a deep impression on me. I started to dream about making films. My first thoughts about filmmaking certainly took shape during that workshop in Kabul.

YOUR SHORT FILM “VICE VERSA ONE” WAS INVITED TO THE DIRECTORS’ FORTNIGHT IN 2011 AND YOUR FIRST FEATURE LENGTH FILM FEATURED IN THE 2016 DIRECTORS’ FORTNIGHT, WINNING THE ART CINEMA AWARD. GIVEN THE FACT THAT THERE’S NO FILM INDUSTRY AND NO PUBLIC FUNDING FOR CINEMA IN AFGHANISTAN, HOW DID YOU ACHIEVE THAT IMPRESSIVE INTERNATIONAL VISIBILITY SO QUICKLY?

Before meeting the first producers, I made some no-budget short films on my own and with the help of friends. At the end of 2012 I met the Danish producer Katja Adomeit at the CPH:LAB during the CPH:DOX festival (Copenhagen International Documentary Festival). That’s a platform where they pair a non-European director and a European director in order to develop a common project. That’s how our collaboration began. As a first step we made a hybrid film together as co-directors and in 2013 we started to collaborate as a director/producer team on my first feature film. It would have been incredibly difficult to finance a film project in my position. I’m still living in Afghanistan and I only possess an Afghan passport. In Afghanistan I could never get a single cent for a film project. It’s difficult for my Danish producer to get money for me as a non-Danish citizen, since my films have nothing to do with Danish culture. We can only apply for a small amount of money. I needed to start my own production company – Wolf Pictures – in Kabul in order to be able to

do the paperwork, casting, etc. It’s one of my working principles to cast non-actors, ordinary Afghan people, even though it means that for the shoot I have to apply for national IDs, passports, visas, insurance, etc., and then move them to another country, as I can’t shoot a film with a European crew in Afghanistan for security reasons. We shot in Tajikistan, where the nature and the landscape are very similar to Afghanistan. That’s the only reason I have my own company – there’s no way of getting any funding for my film projects. I don’t think that it’s linked to the fact that I’m a woman. Afghanistan is a country at war and the focus is on secu-

rity and more important things. There’s also a powerful mafia-like system dominated by a very privileged group in the sphere of culture and it’s very difficult to get in. Since I shoot my films outside Afghanistan, I’m considered an outsider – so I don’t count.

In 2010, I was selected to be part of the Résidence by the Cinéfondation at Cannes Film Festival, together with five other young directors from different parts of the world. It was at this moment that I felt a door had been opened to me and I sneaked into the European cinema network. I met many people and I got to know some well.

In 2017, I was selected to attend a three-month residency by the Nipkow Programm in Berlin, where I wrote the final version of the script for “The Orphanage”.

This kind of residency programme helped me to live somewhere else for a while so that I could concentrate on the script and also meet some possible crew during the time I lived in Europe.



“Wolf and Sheep”

“WOLF AND SHEEP” AND “THE ORPHANAGE” ARE VERY DIFFERENT STORIES. THE FORMER IS SOMEHOW OUT OF TIME AND SET IN A RURAL ENVIRONMENT, WHEREAS THE OTHER FILM DEALS WITH THE POLITICAL CHANGES IN KABUL IN THE LATE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S. BUT THE FILMS DO HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON: YOUR VERY YOUNG PROTAGONISTS – CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE STORIES YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH US?

Before I start talking about my ideas of storytelling, I’d

like to say how very angry I am about the films made about Afghanistan and in that country. I'm not speaking as a filmmaker but as a person living in this country. I'm tired of watching and listening to all these clichés. International filmmakers are "so concerned" about Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or comparable countries. What they create concerning these countries is superficial and shallow. The worst thing about it is that Afghan filmmakers just copy these superficial patterns of storytelling and, by doing so, confirm them. It makes me feel very sad, since Afghanistan is of course a very rich country in terms of its culture and narrative potential. But there are no appropriate storytellers. One of the biggest problems we have in financing a film like "The Orphanage", which I consider an important story to tell, is the fact that there's no one who shares my point of view. It's a story about Afghanistan that doesn't refer to the violation of women's rights, extremists, war or terrorism – which means my stories disappoint people's expectations about a film from Afghanistan.

for someone who looks and talks exactly as I imagine the character. The first round of casting consists only of taking pictures. I go to schools, depending on the environment where my stories are set. For "Wolf and Sheep" I went to central Afghanistan, for "The Orphanage" I remained in Kabul, and I always choose very big schools so I can see a huge number of children. I establish a shortlist from the faces I have photographed and then in the second round I meet them in person and I record our conversations. I don't give them any tasks. I'm interested in their way of expressing themselves. I have the impression that Afghan people are not very expressive; they protect themselves and don't show their emotions. During our conversation I can see very quickly if they are able to open their heart. If I only get one sentence in answer to a question, I know that person wouldn't be right for the film. I shoot in sequences of shots that take 15 or 20, sometimes 30 minutes. Of course I talk in the middle, but the camera is rolling all the time. That requires children who are able to react

spontaneously and who are not afraid of opening themselves and sharing, children who add their own experience to the experience and enjoy doing so.



"The Orphanage"

"THE ORPHANAGE" IS SET IN THE LATE 1980S, IN A PERIOD OF PROFOUND POLITICAL CHANGE IN YOUR COUNTRY AND SLIGHTLY BEFORE YOU WERE BORN. WHAT WERE YOUR REASONS FOR CHOOSING THIS PERIOD AS THE SETTING FOR YOUR SECOND

HOW DO YOU PROCEED IN YOUR WORK WITH THE NON-PROFESSIONAL ACTORS?

Everything you see in the film was fully scripted beforehand. Since I work a lot with children, it doesn't really make sense to rehearse or practise before filming. I explain each scene maybe 15 minutes before we shoot. I only tell them the story little by little and I don't give them details of the scene, only what happens in it, like "You're going to fight because you don't like each other" or "You're sitting in the classroom, having a Russian lesson". The most important and most difficult phase in my filmmaking is the casting. I invest a lot of time in casting the right person. I look

FEATURE FILM?

I'm actually working on a pentalogy which is inspired by the unpublished autobiography of my close friend Anwar Hashimi, a diary that consists of 800 pages. Anwar is now 48 years old and has had an eventful and chaotic life. He lived in central Afghanistan as a kid, was orphaned and ended up in a Russian orphanage in Kabul, went to Moscow then to Iran as a refugee, came back to Afghanistan, etc. Reading his diary is like reading the history of Afghanistan. By the way, he plays the supervisor in "The Orphanage".

APART FROM THE WOMAN IN THE BOLLYWOOD SEQUENCE AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF “THE ORPHANAGE”, I CAN’T REMEMBER ANY FEMALE CHARACTER THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE STORY. DID YOU SET YOURSELF THE CHALLENGE OF FILMING ONLY WITH MALE CHARACTERS?

Since it’s the story of my friend, I didn’t think about this: my friend was in a boys’ orphanage. But there was also an administrative reason. As I told you, we shot the film in Tajikistan: the speaking characters in my film had to have the right accent, which meant taking a considerable number of people to Tajikistan. At a certain point, since ISIS is increasing its influence in Central Asia, the authorities there refused our visa requests. So I had to cut down the number of actors and we ended up just with our main male cast. We used actors from Tajikistan for the non-speaking parts. But I also think it makes sense that this story only features male characters.

WITH YOUR NON-PROFESSIONAL ACTORS AND YOUR VERY SIMPLE SETTINGS YOU HAVE DEVELOPED A VERY DOWN-TO-EARTH STORYTELLING STYLE, BUT YOU ALSO CREATE MOMENTS WHERE YOU USE THE MEANS OF CINEMA TO GO FAR BEYOND REALITY. I’M THINKING PARTICULARLY OF “THE ORPHANAGE” AND ITS REFERENCES TO BOLLYWOOD CINEMA. ARE YOU IN A WAY SEARCHING FOR YOUR OWN LANGUAGE WHICH IS DEEPLY ROOTED IN EVERYDAY LIFE BUT AT THE SAME TIME WANTS TO GO BEYOND BOLLYWOOD CLICHÉS BY DEVELOPING THIS VOCABULARY FURTHER, ALLOWING ITSELF TO ESCAPE INTO THE DREAM WORLD OF CINEMA?

Afghan people are crazy about Bollywood movies – they know all the songs and speak fluent Urdu simply due to the fact that they watch those movies. The golden time of this influence was in the 1980s and 1990s, but people still watch what comes out from India. This doesn’t only apply to Afghanistan but to all countries under “Bollywood rule”, such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka. On top of that, there was an industry of B-movies in Afghanistan which also built up big audiences by making bad copies of Bollywood movies without any respect for Afghan culture, for example having a girl dance in the streets of Kabul in a completely unimaginable way. The film pretends to tell something real and then all of a sudden breaks this reality. Bollywood cinema is full of stories about orphans becoming rich and powerful. Anwar was a street child before entering the orphan-

age and really made some money by selling cinema tickets. It’s a general rule of scriptwriting to involve the viewer and take him on an emotional journey. In my view that doesn’t fit with my way of talking about Afghanistan. I don’t want to get so close to my main character and generate compassion for the poor orphan boy. I wanted to tell the real story of a boy and also let that shadow of Bollywood appear.

THERE ARE THREE FILMS MORE TO COME TO CONCLUDE YOUR AFGHAN PENTALOGY PROJECT. WHAT ABOUT YOUR PLANS? WILL YOU KEEP GOING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN EUROPE AND AFGHANISTAN?

I’d love to continue to work with Katja Adomeit. It’s a wonderful collaboration since we have the same taste and we get along very well. What I appreciate very much is the fact that she never confronts me with comments such as “The market wants this” or “We should change that”, although she doesn’t just handle the financing. She is also involved in the creative part of the production. She accepts that what comes from me is organic. As for financing my project, I don’t have any alternative since I cannot find any funding in Afghanistan. My only hope is to carry on this way, even though it is sometimes very difficult. I’m still very grateful. I’m an artist who wishes to tell stories from a part of the world nobody knows about. And if my stories make it to the big screen, it means somebody cares about the stories from that region.