

Culture

Tunisian film director revisits *Romeo and Juliet*

Roua Khlifi

Tunis

Tunisian film director Hinde Boujemaa has garnered critical acclaim for her short film entitled *...And Romeo Married Juliet* at a number of film festivals.

It was awarded the best short film prize in the Dubai International Film Festival and best short film in the International Arab Film Festival in Oran. Boujemaa's work was also awarded the jury prize for best short film in Alexandria Mediterranean Countries International Film Festival.

"The idea of *...And Romeo Married Juliet* started with my desire to re-examine the classical ideas of love. We have Romeo and Juliet, Antara and Abla and many other couples. Yet, not a single story of these last. They all die at the end and their love does end in a way," Boujemaa said. The same pattern continues in the iconic works of literature.

"Through the film, I wanted to question the durability of love as a feeling through the lens of society. The movie departs from the assumption that Romeo and Juliet got married and remained together for 60 years."

She added: "I wanted to explore the social ramifications of the expectation that love should last. It is one of the questions that I have always had when looking at our society. I have always wondered about what keeps a couple together for so long and why does society expect and pressure them to do so. The movie, in a way, takes a satirical

outlook at the traditional example of lasting marriage."

Boujemaa is no stranger to awards as her previous film, the documentary *It was Better Tomorrow*, won best documentary in Dubai film festival in 2012. Her first film depicted the life of a poor middle-aged woman and her son looking to keep a roof over their heads during the revolution. Her second work is a story about love in modern times.

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"I wrote the short film before the documentary. I never thought of making documentaries honestly. I wanted to work on fiction features but then the revolution happened. It was a coincidence. I was out January 11, 2014, [when riots broke out] with my camera like many other people and I met this woman who changed me and changed many of my conceptions of Tunisian society. I followed her for a year and a half to depict her story. Her story had to be told," Boujemaa said.

Having been critically acknowledged, Boujemaa is concerned about the Tunisian audience's reaction to her films. A movie is meant to be watched and appreciated by everyday people more than screened in festivals and awarded by juries, she said.

"I have never expected awards,

to be honest. Making movies was meant to be for people, the audience who comes to watch," Boujemaa said. "For me, my movies needed to be seen. What kind of questions can my movie stir in them? When they leave the movie theatre, I want them to keep wondering about the subjects of my films and maybe reconsider certain convictions they had. Maybe the film manages to change (their) misconceptions."

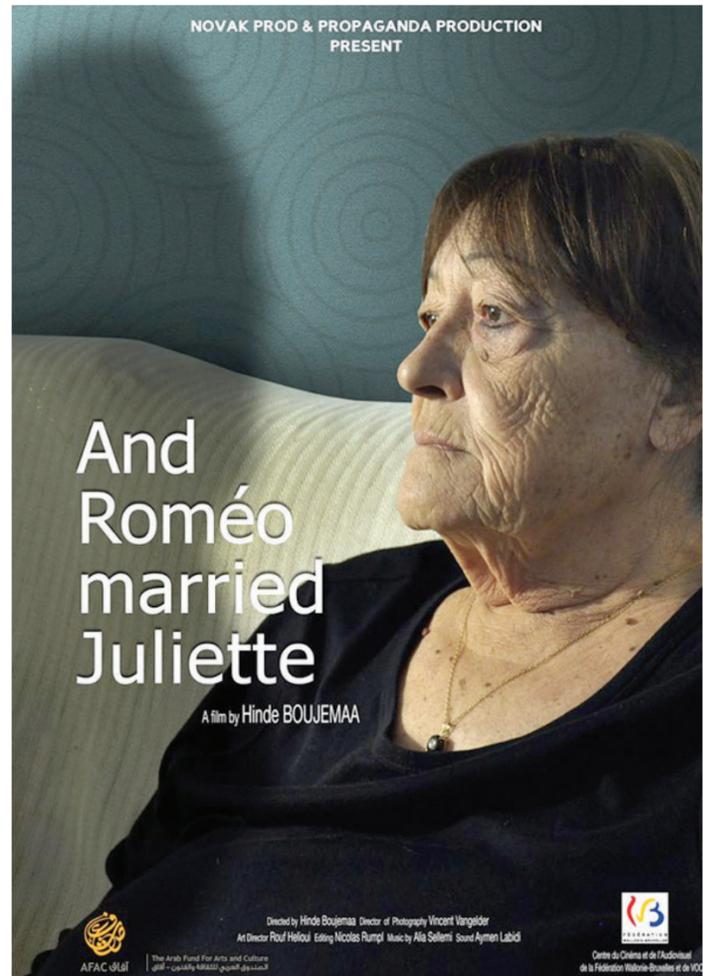
"A full movie theatre is more important than awards," she said. "Awards are given by a committee that evaluates your work technically and thematically in a professional way. We mostly have the same set of competences when dealing with the movie as a work of art."

"Yet, when you enter a movie theatre to only find four people, that is sad. A jury gives you credibility as a film director and evaluates your competences. The real objective of a movie, however, is the people who watch, not the awards that the director can win."

Boujemaa is well aware of certain difficulties that female directors and artists face in their work.

"I am concerned that the issue has become politicised," she said. "A woman is always creative in our country regardless of her profession, a teacher or a farmer. Whether she works at home or outside, she is creative in the sense she creates something. They were never in need of a day to celebrate that fact."

"The problem is that governments always use women to promote a positive image of the country. I think it is overused at this point. This does not mean we are not creative but we are independent. Tunisian women are inde-



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pendent in exercising their creativity."

Boujemaa says women have always held a remarkable presence in the artistic field and she highlights the necessity of a fair representation of women artists and artisans who are equally creative but less represented.

"I would love, for instance, to have a yearly festival celebrating the artwork of women – films,

books, paintings," she said. "Let's have a women's film festival for instance. Let's have TV shows for Tunisian female intellectuals and writers who also lack the exposure in the media. In the field, women are there and present on a great level but we rarely hear of them."

Roua Khlifi is a regular Travel and Culture contributor for The Arab Weekly. She is based in Tunis.

Art events turn Beirut's centre into open gallery

Samar Kadi

Beirut

After being a hub for violent protests against a garbage crisis and a dysfunctional government for several weeks, Beirut's central district was turned into an open art space in September, attracting thousands of art lovers.

The annual Beirut Art Week and Beirut Art Fair provided residents and visitors of the Lebanese capital with an "artistic break", turning the streets and luxury boutiques of the city centre into a public museum of contemporary art, including sculptures, installations and paintings.

While the Art Fair was inside an exhibition centre, Art Week displays included sculptures in the streets, alleyways and window shops.

Entangled Love, a sculpture by Lebanese artist Nayla Romanos Iliya, occupied a central spot of Beirut's renovated old souks. Inspired by the Phoenician alphabet, the artwork depicts four letters that are united in a warm embrace.

"I have used the four letters – L, O, V, E – which are inspired by symbols of the Phoenician alphabet and have become universal somehow," Romanos explained during an interview with The Arab Weekly.

"The most important aspect of this piece is the relationship and interaction between those four letters. It is only together that they have a meaning; only when they are combined together that they try to convey the feeling of love and the different emotions that love could trigger, like supporting each other, holding each other, embracing each other," she said.

The sculptor used brass with patina for the letters and mirrored



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stainless steel for the base. "The mirror stainless steel is part of the concept because it symbolises the water element, a reference to the fact that the Phoenicians had spread the alphabet through their maritime journey," she said. "It reflects shades just like water."

Romanos' piece was among 24 works featured as part of the third installment of Beirut Art Week, which included an intricate face sculpture by Korean metal-smith Seo Young-Deok at well-known Lebanese fashion designer Elie Saab's flagship store and a one-off Hermès scarf by Argentinian artist Julio Le Parc at the brand's boutique in Beirut Souks.

Lebanese artist Nabil Helou's large sculpture – a bench made from fiberglass – greeted visitors at the entrance of the souks. The piece is part of a larger project on public art.

"The concept is to make ordinary people who don't go to galleries or museums interact more with the public art and sculptures," Helou said. "Whatever you put in public or in the street, even if it is ugly, people get used to it and it becomes part of their daily life. So my idea is that why not have sculptured benches in public places, which people can sit on and at the same time their eyes would become acquainted with art and beauty."

"The Arab region these days is being associated with lots of ugly images and this is not true. We have beauty and art as well, which we should shed light on and expose," he added.

Beirut Art Week Event Manager Rania Halawi stressed the importance of educating the public on art. "By exposing art pieces in pub-

lic spaces, we are aiming at initiating the average person and the people at large on the love of art," she said.

"It is also a way of diverting the public attention from problems of politics and violence and have them look at the beauty of art for a change."

In parallel with Beirut Art Week, the Beirut Art Fair brought together 51 galleries from 19 countries where artists represented all the trends of modern and contemporary art and expressed themselves through painting, drawing, sculpture, video, design or performance.

Mamia Bretesche's Gallery of contemporary art in Paris participated for the first time in Beirut Art Fair, representing painters from the Maghreb.

"We give these artists, who have no chance to expose their work abroad, the opportunity to be known globally through participating in international fairs in New York, Singapore, Beirut," Bretesche said.

For Beirut Fair, the gallery focused on writing and reading. "When I was young all my books and dictionaries carried the sentence, 'Edited in Beirut or published in Beirut', so I wanted to pay tribute to this country which inundated the Arab world with books and knowledge," Bretesche said.

Samer Kozah Gallery from Syria is a veteran of the Beirut Art Fair. Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, now in its fifth year, the gallery has opened an outlet in Beirut where the works of young Syrian artists who still live in the war-torn country, are exposed.

"When the war started, I had to focus my efforts abroad because the Syrian market has just ceased to exist," Kozah said.

"Syrian art, which was spread by 30% outside Syria prior to the war,

has become spread by 99% and has a growing market. It is now much more in demand and better known."

Although many Syrians artists have relocated to Lebanon, Kozah's support goes mainly to those still inside Syria. "I make sure that they get the exposure they deserve," he said.

In Kozah's stand, oil paintings by three Syrian artists were displayed, including the artworks of 22-year-old Mohamad Dabajo, a first-timer in the fair.

"Within the past five months, Mr Samer gave me two opportunities to expose my work. He is an outlet, a vent for me, because I am staying in Syria, away from the galleries," Dabajo said.

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Commenting on the stress of working under the war situation in Syria, the young artist said his art is an escape from violence and a means "to evacuate all the negative energy one absorbs from the street".

"I can take it out on the canvas," he said. "It is a good way to release the stress, a way to breathe."

Since it was launched in 2010, the Beirut Art Fair has significantly boosted art activities in Lebanon. "Many galleries have since opened in Beirut and several artists have relocated in the city," noted Rania Tabbara, the fair's public relations representative.

"We are happy to say that Beirut Art Fair has become a landmark in the international cultural agenda and is considered as one of the most prestigious art manifestations in the Middle East," Tabbara said.