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## People in Film: Nayla Al Khaja



Nayla graduated from Dubai Women's College with a degree in Mass Communication in 1999, during which time she also hosted a very successful travel show on the Arabian Radio Network. However, Nayla soon realised that her true calling was film, so she made the break and attended Ryerson University in Canada, graduating in 2005 with a Bachelor in Image Studies and Filmmaking.

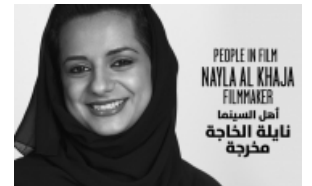
Back in Dubai she found the resources to direct and produce her first documentary film, 'Unveiling Dubai', in 2004. The film went on to premiere at the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF). In 2006, she produced and directed 'Arabana', a film that deals with child abuse, which received critical acclaim from the likes of Edward R. Pressman, the producer of 'The Crow' film series, 'Wall Street' and 'American Psycho', who described the film as "gorgeous and disturbing".

'Arabana' also premiered at DIFF, and in 2007 Nayla was awarded Best Emirati Filmmaker at the festival. That same year, she partnered up with DIFF to start a non-profit club called 'The Scene Club', which invited international directors to showcase their independent films in the UAE. The club now has over 3500 registered members.

In 2008, Nayla tackled the topic of local Emirati women dating in the film 'Once', which was shot guerilla style. In 2010, her script 'Malal' ('Boredom') won the Best Script Award in the Gulf International Film Festival (GIFF), and shortly thereafter it became the first Emirati-Indian film shot in Kerala. Soon after, the film won first place in the Muhr Emirati category.

Nayla is currently the CEO of D-SEVEN Motion Pictures and D-SEVEN FZ LLC, a marketing and design agency that offers full media campaign and corporate branding services.

## SPOTLIC



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People in Film

What does it take to work in 'the business'? DFI interviews professionals from all aspects of the film world on how they got their start, what they do, and...

DFI: You are the first Emirati female producer/director, and you have garnered lots of media attention because of this. How does that make you feel?

Nayla: I guess it just happened. When you are the first in any field, whether you're a pilot, a filmmaker or a doctor, you will receive media attention. In my case, it's because I am a woman. There's a whole notion about female empowerment going on, especially in the Middle East, where a lot of countries are being poked at because women are not getting much. The literacy rate is less than men, so therefore women get way more attention when they do these things, especially in film, which is a very sensitive topic. It can be a taboo at times, and therefore there aren't a lot of women in this field. But what it really means is that I have a bigger responsibility on my shoulders, and I have to take it seriously. We can use this attention in order to create beautiful films that can have an impact in our society, and in other people's as well.

DFI: I'm sure you've been asked about your inspiring journey as a filmmaker several times, but can you tell us about any challenges you faced as a female filmmaker?

Nayla: Actually, I don't think I've faced a lot of challenges as a woman. I think it was extremely beneficial because they sometimes feel sorry for you, which is horrible, but you get favours because of that, and they support you. This is because of the whole female empowerment thing that is going on. In a way, it works to my advantage, and with film, it's a benefit – a blessing!

DFI: What first brought you to filmmaking, and do you prefer producing or directing?

Nayla: This is a one million dollar question that I'm not sure I can answer now – maybe in ten years you can ask me again! I'm still going through a period of self-discovery because I enjoy both very much. There's an entrepreneur in me; I love closing deals, pitching for projects, and marketing for film. I also enjoy the creative aspect of directing and working with actors. What got me into this field is that film is the only medium that brings all the creative aspects and business together. You can be a writer, a fashion designer, a musician, a painter and an actress. Film has all these components that bring all the arts together. I think that's what makes it so dynamic and energetic, and I am hyper, so we get along very well together! I also love the impact of cinema in the world – I just enjoy it very much.

DFI: Of all your films, what is the one that's closest to your heart, and why?

Nayla: The first thing that would come to mind is 'Arabana', because it's my first film and the first one I shot on 35mm, which is a luxury for an independent filmmaker. I had the chance to work with really good people who provided me with support, like Kodak, but what matters to me in this film is the story. I think it's very personal: it has a point, but at the same time it's generic. Child abuse happens all around the world and I was able to capture it in a few minutes, but I think those few minutes had an impact in many places – for example, UNICEF took the film to use for their educational children's campaign, and that made us all feel very proud. I think my next project, which I can't discuss yet, is probably my favourite.

DFI: After the media recognition following your film career, do you see more Emirati women daring to follow in your steps?

Nayla: Definitely! I get a lot of emails from high school students, women specifically, asking me how and where to start. Right now, there are very few women in the industry. But yes, I believe that pioneering in this field will have an impact on younger generations and they will have someone to look up to, hopefully. It's nice to know that we can inspire!

DFI: You've partnered with the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) to start a non-profit club called 'The Scene Club', which shows indie films in the UAE. How was this initiative perceived, and what is the purpose of cine clubs in your opinion?

Nayla: 'The Scene Club' is a community outreach service where we bring people

that love films to one place. It's a monthly programme with consistency on film awareness. We introduce what cinema is, discuss the philosophy of cinema, and screen independent films that do not exist in commercial theatres. We could be celebrating a Mexican, Spanish or Moroccan film and bring the director for a Q&A. This way people get the chance to see beautiful films from around the world and experience new cultures. There's a lot of need for such an initiative, and the theatre is always packed. Yes, the Club does not generate an income but that's not the point – the idea is to spread consciousness and get people more excited about independent cinema.

DFI: Do you think cinema has an effect on the development of society? Do you try to achieve this goal?

Nayla: Absolutely! I think it's an integral part; a good example would be how Hollywood has affected millions of people around the world, because it's one huge marketing giant. Through Hollywood, we learn how to be cool and hip and eat McDonalds; you know it's a whole culture, a whole way of living. The impact of cinema is endless. It can change your mind on things. Maybe one film cannot have that impact but many films can perhaps change a specific negative stereotype that's not accurate. Yes, the language of film is very powerful and we should really take care of it and get people closer by using dialogue.

DFI: With the presence of many film festivals in the region that are supporting filmmakers, and the rise of global attention on the local cinema scene, how do you see the future of Arab cinema?

Nayla: I think we are at a certain golden era of Arab cinema where some stunning films are coming from the Arab world. The resolution has helped because people are frustrated and you get the creative juices flowing so there's a tension going on – there's a film fever spreading in the Arab world where you have a lot of strong artists coming onto the scene. I also noticed that the studio system is getting a bit weaker so that means more independent films are being taken care of, and I just think we are on a roll. We will see a lot of names in the region who will be your Scorsese in 10 to 20 years.

DFI: What stories do you want to tell?

Nayla: I want to tell stories that can impact the human heart and spirit. I'd like to tell stories from my people, from where I come from with an international feel so that anyone from around the world can relate to the story, learn something and enjoy a moment of beautiful aesthetics. It could also be just touching another side of humanity from a different perspective, especially coming from an Arab woman. I think it will be interesting to bring our own stories. On a more commercial side, I'm attracted to dark thrillers and psychological films. There will be a lot of those two genres in my feature films.

DFI: Which film or filmmaker influences you the most, and why?

Nayla: I love a lot of filmmakers but I would have to say my top-notch guy is Stanley Kubrick. I respect him a lot – he is extremely obsessed with his craft and used to spend years and years developing just one film, because he's a perfectionist. It just shows you how much heart and soul goes into his films: they're classic! He's a genius in my opinion, and I have learnt a lot from him. I also like Clint Eastwood – I think he's a fantastic filmmaker with so much experience. He's a minimalist and I think I belong to that school, where you let the actors do the action and not rely on the camera. I'm not into special effects, I'm just into telling a good story, and telling a good story is extremely difficult. That's my challenge.

DFI: What is your message to women from the region who want to follow your path?

Nayla: Get rid of your fears because if you are worried about upsetting your society or family then you'll never get ahead in film. You have to really believe in yourself and you have to fight your battles and face all your demons. It's so easy to say "what if...", "I can't..." or "I don't have this" – it's easy to come up with

excuses. But find a solution, stick to it and go for it! It takes guts so you really should be super passionate about filmmaking – there's no looking back, its 100 percent or nothing!

Nayla Al Khaja

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