



Jean Brehat (left) and Dima Al Joundi.

# Interview with Dima Al Joundi

**Sergi Doladé.** Director of the International Association of Independent Producers of the Mediterranean (APIMED)

Dima Al Joundi (Beirut, 1966) is a charismatic filmmaker and producer, who graduated from the Cinema Institute in Brussels (INSAS). In 1994, she directed and produced her first medium documentary *Between Us Two... Beirut*, a title that perfectly embodies her passions in life. Dima moved to Paris in 1995 where she continued directing documentaries for a while before leaving for Sri Lanka, where she worked as a producer-director for Young Asia TV. During her stay, she directed the documentary *The Mask of the Night* and got involved in training youngsters and street children. Back in Beirut in 1998, she created her own production and distribution company: Crystal Films. *Khalass*, a feature film by Borhane Alaouié, was the first of many productions. The company was the pioneer of the first Europa Cinemas theatre in the MEA region, Salle SIX, and has distributed more than 25 Euro-Mediterranean films. More recently, Dima has been dedicated to producing and directing remarkable films for the Al-Jazeera Doc Channel, such as *Strangers*, *Cemetery* and *Play Time*, among others. Like the smell of jasmine, Dima's charm and extraordinary force are simply exceptional.

**Sergi Doladé:** This issue of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* is entitled "The Mediterranean: Between Myth and Conflict". What does this suggest to you?

**Dima Al Joundi:** It is very true for our current situation. Our myths hold all our differences along with our common traits; our myths are the embodiment of the oldest civilisations gathered around one sea. Terror and conflict are what is happening to our nations being expatriated, being destroyed by wars, separating the Mediterranean countries. We have turned our back to the sea.

**S.D:** How has being away from home affected your creative path as a filmmaker?

**D.A.J:** I have been away from home for 13 years. It started when I went to Brussels for my cinema studies, then I worked between Belgium and France, and then I went to Sri Lanka till 1998, which was when I returned to Lebanon. The fact that I lived in different cultures, mixing with various nations (Asian, European and African) has made me more international, more open and understanding of our differences. I myself became a mix of races and cultures, capable of adapting to any other film production arena. When I returned home, I was more efficient in collaborating with European producers as I knew their working methods and mentality in depth.

**S.D:** The subject matter of your documentary film *Maid For Sale*, about the plight of

Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon, is still in the news now. Could you film the same story today?

**D.A.J:** Of course I could film the same subject matter today, as modern slavery is increasing in our societies. Sri Lankan women are still leaving their country for the MEA, where most of them do not know what awaits them. They are not well informed or well prepared for the critical situation they will have to endure.

**S.D:** This film explores the exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Beirut. What facts inspired you to approach this reality?

**D.A.J:** The source of inspiration of my film *Maid For Sale* was the fact that in 1995 I was among the few Arab women living and working in Sri Lanka. Through my daily life there I have approached the category of Sri Lankan women who work as domestic labourers in the Arab world and specifically in Lebanon. I managed to enter their mentality, the reasons behind their departure due to their misery. When I used to visit my family in Lebanon, I had a different approach to those women working in my country. It pushed me to the decision of making this film as I couldn't keep my mouth or my eyes shut anymore. I wanted to give those women the possibility to express themselves in front of my camera and to show the world the injustice they were experiencing.

**S.D:** You are known as one of Lebanon's most influential movie makers. How do you feel about that?

**D.A.J:** I believe in modesty wherever your career may lead you. And I believe I keep on learning everyday from my successes and failures.

**S.D:** You have produced many films and you now also write and direct them. Do you need to have absolute control over your work?

**D.A.J:** Indeed, I cannot let it go. I need to have control of all aspects of my production as I am a very meticulous producer, who cares for and watches over all the tiny details of my set. I am very close to my crew when I produce a film, especially the hard working ones in the shadow – the crew such as gaffers and sparks, etc. I trust my crew because I recruit them, but I prefer to keep an eye on everything.

**S.D:** What is your source of inspiration at present?

**D.A.J:** Human beings! I am inspired by their emotions, their fears, their way of living, caring, breathing; I am inspired by their passions, and their relationship with life and death at the same time.

**S.D:** I am sure you are working on a new project. What can you tell us about it?

**D.A.J:** I have a new feature film in development called *Visa*. It's about a Syrian refugee in Lebanon. I am also working on another documentary about the famous African singer Cesaria Evora *Dona Cesaria*, and a new documentary about a Syrian refugee camp in North Lebanon where only widows live, separate from other camps. And I just finished production of a documentary called *A Long Breath* by Remi Itani, as well as my own documentary about Syrian artists in Lebanon who survive by dubbing soaps.

**S.D:** How has gender influenced your films and your career?

**D.A.J:** I believe that a filmmaker is before anything else a filmmaker, before being a



Dima Al Joundi.

woman or a man. Cinema language is an art in itself. The only difference I feel as a woman is in my sensibility in approaching certain subjects and societies.

**S.D:** What are the difficulties that women filmmakers face in the Arab world today?

**D.A.J:** Again it depends on which Arab country. Not all Arab countries are similar in approaching or dealing with women. In Lebanon, for instance, women are treated on more equal grounds.

**S.D:** Has your career opened the path for other women filmmakers to a new form of cinema in the Arab world?

**D.A.J:** We all learn from each other. I can be the inspiration for others as I have been inspired by other filmmakers. The first thing I did upon returning to Lebanon was to establish a film distribution company with Belgium and France, and I opened the first Europa Cinemas theatre in the MEA. I have distributed more than 25 Euro-Mediterranean films. Those films are closer to our culture and were finally capable of reaching the Lebanese audience and artists, and hopefully those films inspired them as they've inspired me.

**S.D:** What is your opinion about the present conditions that filmmakers face in most Arab countries?

**D.A.J:** It depends on which Arab country we are talking about, though most of them have a lack of local funding, and most Arab countries do not have a cinema industry because of that, except for Morocco and Egypt. Distribution is also a major problem as Southern Mediterranean films do not circulate between countries.

**S.D:** Would you agree with the idea that the Arab Revolutions plunged some countries into complete chaos?

**D.A.J:** Yes I would, especially the fact that America is playing with us, creating war in order to sell more weapons and control the oil wealth. We only need look at what happened in Iraq, where the US government wanted to eliminate the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein but left the country in a worse situation. I have always defended democracy and the freedom of any nation, but unfortunately most of the revolutions in Arab countries took a different path and turned the countries into a big mess.

**S.D:** Are there any new forms of censorship in cinema in general?

**D.A.J:** I am against of all forms of censorship. Cinema and creativity can only be free. It's one of the rare things in life where we can express ourselves without restrictions. Major censorship in the Arab world hasn't changed in years, both political and "moral" censorship. Sexuality is still a taboo, which promotes a double standard as a leading force in our societies.

**S.D:** What interests you the most in current Arabic cinema?

**D.A.J:** Talent, creativity, and social and gender issues.

**S.D:** Are you going to move into a more ideological approach in your cinema, or would

you rather go into current affairs or character-driven stories?

**D.A.J:** No, I like to stay as close as possible to human beings and their daily life, with all that it brings: the joy and the sadness, the passions and the fears. The human condition.

**S.D:** What kind of subject matter is dramatically essential for you?

**D.A.J:** Humanitarian and social concerns, excommunication, democracy and human dignity...

**S.D:** Home is often a thing of the heart and mind. Where is your home?

**D.A.J:** My father used to tell me "Home is where the heart is"! As I am a gypsy in my way of being, home is really where I find the love of persons close to my heart, but I think I will always be an alien wherever I go.

**S.D:** What is the ultimate goal of a movie maker?

**D.A.J:** To make creative films that leave traces behind after our death, to not be afraid of shouting aloud our beliefs, to make audiences shiver and tremble, to bring emotions to the screen.

**S.D:** As you are Vice President of the Association of Independent Producers of the Mediterranean and organiser of the MEDIMED Documentary Market, how do you value its role in approaching both shores of the region in the audiovisual industry?

**D.A.J:** MEDIMED is one of my favourite documentary markets in the world. It is very professional, international, and at the same time very human in its approach towards



the films that are pitched or produced, not like other markets where films are treated as merchandise. The advantage of MEDIMED is that it is a unique market bringing together all Mediterranean countries, Arab and European.

**S.D:** What is your opinion of the international film market?

**D.A.J:** I regret that certain types of cinema have vanished, such as the Italian neo-realism cinema. Visual effects are killing emotions on screen, and sometimes technology is being taken for granted without justification. But of course I still find certain directors that I love and believe in their languages.

**S.D:** Could you name your favourite films made in the Arab region in 2016?

**D.A.J:** *Chouf* by Karim Dridi, which is set in Marseilles but deals with an Arab subject; and the Moroccan film *Much Loved* by Nabil Ayouch.

**S.D:** What is the role of a filmmaker today?

**D.A.J:** A filmmaker is a creative person who knows how to use the “seventh art” and is a skilled storyteller. He/she should commit and

make his/her audience commit to the magic of cinema.

**S.D:** On a more personal level, how do you see the world today?

**D.A.J:** The world is doing really badly. Everything is based on business, materialistic values, wars and racism. Borders are being closed, and fearing the Other is guiding humanity’s acts. We have to fight for tolerance and acceptance of differences.

**S.D:** What inner force makes you do what you do?

**D.A.J:** Believing in life, and humankind. Believing in love and passion. Integrity is my mastermind. Everything is possible when you do your best to make it happen! Fighting death by defending the memory inside of us, against fanatics and defending human rights and democracy. Believing in love whatever happens.

**S.D:** What is your ultimate source of inspiration?

**D.A.J:** Poetry in all its aspects. Life in all its complexity. Sensuality in all its forms.