

Interview with the First Female Film Distributor in Lebanon

Dima Al-Jundi

By Myriam Sfeir



Dima Al-Jundi

She is the only female film distributor in the Arab world and has established her own distributing company "Crystal Film"; moreover, she is a film producer and has directed three films. In addition, she has organized three film festivals namely The European Film Festival, the Maghrebi Film Festival, and the Beirut International Film Festival (1999).

Myriam Sfeir: I have read a lot about you in the newspapers. Finally after meeting you I would like to know more about your life.

Dima Al-Jundi: I was born in Lebanon and lived there for around 18 years. In 1984 I left Lebanon and headed to Brussels where I attended the **Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle (INSAS)** a well reputed Institute from which many prominent Arab film directors have graduated. I spent the first four years studying film editing and script editing. After I graduated I worked as a film editor in several countries such as Brussels, Paris, Maghreb, etc.

I started off with film editing given that it is an art by itself and the real instrument of cinema. Through it I knew that I could learn the basics in film making because after you edit you manipulate the whole movie to fit the cuts (rewriting the scenario, changing the rhythm, manipulating the character, etc.). After working for several years in film editing I decided I had had enough. I had something to say and couldn't express it solely in film editing. Besides, I knew that an editor will always remain one and will never become a director. Even though he/she is the closest person to the director there are limits to what an editor can do.

I decided to embark on my first directoral debut after watching a Swiss documentary on Lebanon that bothered me. I wrote a letter to my sister asking her if it was safe and possible to return to Lebanon and

shoot a film about Beirut. At that time there were no direct phone lines to Beirut, and I used to spend sleepless nights trying to contact my family. *Bayni Wa Baynaki Bayrut* is about two very close sisters/artists one in war-torn Beirut and the other abroad.

I was very keen on shooting my film and did miracles to have it done on time. In 6 months I managed to accumulate the money needed for my film from the European Union, TV5, and the Belgian Ministry. I shot *Bayni Wa Baynaki Bayrut* on film; it took me a year to complete it and it cost \$ 200,000. I insisted on doing my own production because I believe the best person to promote a film is its director provided that he/she has a production and marketing background.

After directing I was drawn into production without being aware of it. Yet, at a certain point I got very tired of doing both because when you direct and produce it is a nightmare, so I decided to become a full-time producer. Now I know what a luxury it is for a director to have an efficient producer.

MS: Why did you finally decide to come back to Beirut and settle here?

DJ: It took me 5 years of hesitation and endless debate before taking my decision to move back to Lebanon. I had a dilemma, one that is common among some people living abroad, because I knew that once I had taken the decision there was no turning back. Yet, the two basic reasons that compelled me to come back were the illness of my father and the fact that I felt like a total stranger in my own country whenever I visited. It used to kill me and I couldn't bear it because I am Lebanese and I love my country irrespective of its faults. Besides, I also felt this alienation within my own family - I was drifting apart and it felt very awkward.





To top it all, the Far East made me feel completely cut off from the Arab world. I felt exiled and lonely in Ceylon. Had I been living in Paris at that time I might have never come back. I also missed working in the film industry so I decided to move to Beirut and settle here permanently. It was a risky move for I had no work, no job offer, nothing. But it all worked out for the best and now I have my own distributing company and am currently producing three films.

MS: When did you found Crystal Films and what does the job of a film distributor entail?

DJ: I founded Crystal Film in 1999 and has been its director ever since. I have two European partners, a Belgian and a French along with my mother. My European partners helped me a lot and I relied on them tremendously during our first months at Crystal Films. Given that they are experienced and knowledgeable of the European market we were able to excel.

Crystal film is the first company that managed to get the label Europa Cinema to the Middle East (Beirut). With the help of Circuit Empire and Europa Cinema, Crystal film started a project called Cinema Six. Europa Cinema

is affiliated to the European Community, it supplies you with a label, a contract which you are obliged to stick to, and \$ 15,000 provided that your company screens 50% of European and Mediterranean films. Being linked to Europa Cinema grants you prestige and gives you more credibility in Europe.

Being a film distributor is a risky business because films are often bought while still on paper provided that the director and cast are well known. Each new film becomes a product as soon as its script is completed and shooting has commenced. Once you buy a film you have the exclusive (sole) rights to release that film in movie theaters in the area for which you are responsible. So for instance if you want to screen Abbas Kiarostami's film **The Wind will Carry us** whose rights I have bought, you are bound by law to obtain my permission before you can screen it or else I will sue you. Two years ago piracy of films was prevalent and cine clubs could screen any film they wanted; however, nowadays things have changed since piracy is punishable by law.

MS: What are the drawbacks about working in Lebanon?



Opening of Europa Cinema, May 99 at Circuit Empire Sodeco

DJ: I hate it when people who move to Lebanon start nagging and whining about living here. Each country has its positive and negative aspects and everything is double edged in this country. What bothers me the most in this country is that no one abides by the deadline. This is driving me crazy. We are a chaotic breed who lack discipline. Normally when you embark on a project all your energy is saved till you commence the project. In Lebanon the opposite happens: all ones energy is spent in preparation, way before the actual project commences so you start off very tired. Yet, the chaotic atmosphere prevalent enables one to do miracles for not everything is black and white and there is always a liberty zone.

MS: What sort of films will be screened in the Maghrebi Film Festival?

DJ: The Maghrebi Film Festival's opening is on

August 13th and I recently found out that it will coincide with the Tunisian Woman's Day. Isn't that a nice coincidence. Most films screened in the festival tackle women's issues for nowadays many Arab and North African films are taking up the problems of women in society. (for more information see p. 56)

MS: Do you believe in the existence of a Women's cinema that has distinguished characteristics?

DJ: Cinema, the seventh art, is the most complex and complete art. I believe that when it comes to art there is no differentiation between men and women. I am against this sexist division, yet, I believe men and women differ in their sensibilities. For instance, if two women film makers are working on the same subject, they will come out with two different films. However, if a male and female film maker are working on the same subject the difference is greatly felt and the way issues are exposed differ.

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