



Hollywood Masala

South Asian & Middle Eastern Media

Media Discussions

"The Islam I Know" A Look at Emerging Filmmaker Iram Parveen Bilal ★★★★★

"You never know why people like certain things...you keep chipping away and hope the stars align and people start responding."

Iram Parveen Bilal embraces a key essence of filmmaking that many young independent writers and directors miss - that delicate balance of integrity for her stories, humility for the art, respect for her audience and good old American hard work.

One of several projects growing in her silver screen garden, "*Forbidden Steps*" tells the story of a Muslim American father coming to terms with his daughter's passion for dance. A finalist for the 2010 Sundance Screenwriters Lab and Mumbai's Sankalan Screenwriting Lab in 2008, Bilal also works her story as a member of 2010 Film Independent Director's Lab where she lays her story in front of peers and mentors, chipping away. And already, people are responding.

The motif of dance in film is a sure bet. The possibilities for visual confection and a soundtrack to penetrate directly into the audience's veins is almost cinematic cheating, but "*Forbidden Steps*" is not the story of the dance, or even the dancer, for that matter. Rather, dance brings to a head the internal conflict faced by Majeed, father of an American teenager, son of a conservative Muslim, and a liberal Muslim in America today. For this, Bilal draws upon her experience with dance and her identity as a liberal Muslim woman.

"Within the Muslim community, if you are liberal, ... you get upset at people who hijack the name of your religion and culture and music toward extreme factions because that's not Islam. That's not how I was raised, that's not the Islam I know" says Bilal.

Portraying the counter to popular media's version of Islam is key to Bilal's vision in filmmaking.

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Other seedlings in Bilal's garden, "*Josh*" and "*Fadwa*" also challenge the image of Muslims in the eyes of the world. "*Josh*", is the story of youth in Pakistan today. Based on a true story of a soup-kitchen type canteen, and driven by its cosmopolitan setting, "*Josh*" is a first hand look into the ambitious artists and dreamers of Karachi, and city life for Muslim young adults. "*Fadwa*", honored in script form by IFP's *Emerging Narrative* and a semi-finalist for 2009 Nicholls Fellowship, explores a man forced to commit honor killings, and explores the universal theme of peer pressure in a context new to most of her audience. Again, Bilal brings Muslim culture closer to Western society, showing the parallels of human experience rather than the spectacle of extremists.

Bilal finds she's not only taking on the task of changing the Western portrayal of Muslim culture but faces resistance from more conservative Muslims. "You're not only defending your faith to people that are not Muslim but you're defending your faith to other Muslims who think in an extremist way. I feel this Protestant/ Catholic like [struggle] in Islam now. It's the age of the Protestant Muslim. "

While not overtly political, the basic nature of Bilal's vision dances around many political themes. "In a lot of little choices you make in filming, you are incorporating politics. I could have a tendency to be very preachy but I don't want to. I'll throw it on the page and then I'll pull it back. Let the audience decide what they want to, but in order to really get my feelings on the page I have to open all the doors of emotion and rationale."

Keeping multiple projects active keeps Bilal busy but keeps people talking. And in the independent film community, attention begets attention. "It's interesting how when one person stamps [approval] on your project, everyone else is willing to take a look at it. You can be screaming for years, saying 'this is worth your attention.' But there are so many people screaming how does your scream stand out?"

With projects still in development getting attention, awards and accolades, Bilal's screams are bound to become cheers as the credits roll.

These are films in progress. For more information see:

www.thefilmjosh.com

www.iramparveenbilal.com

interview by Anjali Belmann

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