

FILM REVIEW

Egyptian-American director sets out to determine Al-Jazeera's fairness

Control Room probes the people behind the station

Nana Asfour
Special to The Daily Star

NEW YORK: "The first casualty when war comes is truth," US Senator Hiram Johnson said in 1917. With that notion in mind, a few days before the war on Iraq was started last Spring, Egyptian-American director Jehane Noujaim gathered her filming equipment and headed to Doha, Qatar. Her mission? To get as close to the truth as possible.

"I didn't want to watch the war on my living room screen because I knew that I'd be throwing things at the television," says the Harvard graduate. "In Doha, you had Al-Jazeera, which was broadcasting to the entire Arab world, and then, a few kilometers away, you had Central Command, which was broadcasting to the Western world. So if there was any way to try and understand what's really going on, it had to be in that place."

The dissonance between the reporting in the Arab media and that in the American media struck Noujaim as a subject worthy of study. So, armed with a microphone and a camera, she set out to investigate whether Al-Jazeera practices "fair and balanced" journalism, as it claims, or it is trying to inject anti-American propaganda under the guise of "fair and balanced" journalism as the Bush administration has repeatedly claimed—just this past week, US officials have accused the station of jeopardizing American

lives in Iraq with its "vicious, inaccurate and inexcusable" reports that US soldiers were terrorizing Iraqi citizens during the recent fighting in Fallujah. "Al-Jazeera has been criticized by the US government and also by every Arab government—it was kicked out of Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, you name it," says Noujaim. "So you have to think, if they're making people upset across the world, then they must be doing something right."

Noujaim's primary goal was to bring a human face to Al-Jazeera by introducing the people behind the channel. The result of her efforts, a documentary titled *Control Room*, was recently selected as part of the prestigious New Directors/New Films festival in New York, and is set to open in the city in late May.

In the opening scenes of *Control Room*, Sameer Khader, Al-Jazeera's caustic and chain-smoking senior producer says that his station's main objective is to "shake up these rigid societies, to tell them wake up, wake up." He is referring, no doubt, to the neighboring Arab countries and perhaps even to Qatar itself (though overt criticism of Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the financier of Al-Jazeera, or of any of his entourage remains a no-go zone).

Over the past decade, Al-Jazeera has done much shaking and stirring, amassing along the way a loyal following to the tune of 40 million Arab viewers worldwide. "I used to work in a garbage collecting village in Egypt, as a volunteer, and peo-

ple would pool their money together to get a satellite dish to watch Al-Jazeera," Noujaim says. "They would crowd around this tiny, broken television and watch the debates."

The news channel's sway over Arab public opinion—undeniably today's most important constituency in terms of global politics—has turned it into a powerful entity. "The role that it plays is becoming more important than any other Arab leader," Noujaim says.

Al-Jazeera's most controversial aspect is its unremitting broadcast of civilian casualties during the war. Night after night, it airs graphic images of Iraqis caught in the crossfire—with the death and injuries of children taking central stage (many of these shots are replayed in *Control Room*). As the film shows, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has bemoaned the use of these images which he believes are accentuating resentment toward the US presence in Iraq. "Truth," he says at one point as a rebuke to Al-Jazeera's editorial choices, "ultimately finds its way to people's eyes and ears and hearts." Ironically, that is the exact sentiment of Al-Jazeera's editors.

Khader says that truth is, in fact, his station's motivating factor; since the "hijacked" American media has shied away from exposing the reality, it has fallen on Al-Jazeera to demonstrate how ugly and destructive war is. The human cost must be televised, Khader asserts. (Khader's fair-mindedness is effec-

tively portrayed in a scene where he scolds a junior producer for inviting an anti-US American academic to be interviewed on Al-Jazeera.) As he aptly points out, the Americans and the Arabs are now locked in a propaganda war, with each side engaged in its own interpretative dance.

As a child who has spent much of her youth shuttling back and forth between the United States and the Middle East, Noujaim grew up all too aware of this now long-existing polarization. Her film is an attempt at opening up the channels of communication between the two sides. "I really felt that if I could show some of the conflicts and some of the thinking behind what is happening in the Arab world, and if I could bring that to the US in some way that was understandable, then that would mean something," she says, who has also worked as a producer for MTV's documentary series, *Unfiltered*, and co-directed the award-winning 2001 documentary *Startup.com*.

In *Control Room*, young, thoughtful and sincere Lieutenant Josh Rushing, the press officer at Central Command (nicknamed CentCom) in charge of dealing with the Arab media, finds himself repeatedly face to face with Hassan Ibrahim, the sardonic Sudanese Al-Jazeera journalist, as the two of them hash out the latest developments. The meeting between the American representative and the Arab journalist often plays out in the same way: Ibrahim urging Rushing to take



A wounded baby is evacuated from Basra during the US-led campaign to oust Saddam Hussein

into account the Arabs' point of view; Rushing fumbling to provide justification—sometimes, it seems, even to himself—of the Americans' actions.

Despite Rushing's seeming openness and honesty, Noujaim says she remains "curious" about him. "He's actually quite well read and I do think he honestly believes that Saddam Hussein is a brutal dictator and by removing him they're doing a positive thing for the Arab world. But, at the same time, he works in Hollywood and his job is to do script negotiations for big budget studios. He reads over the scripts and makes sure that the military is represented well. So this is not the naive job of a soldier; he is somebody who has obviously thought a lot about these issues of representation."

During the recent war, Al-Jazeera lost one of its own, journalist Tareq Ayoub, who

was on the roof when a US air strike and tank artillery hit the network's Baghdad headquarters on April 8, 2003 (the Palestine Hotel, where many of the foreign journalists were staying, and the Abu Dhabi TV offices also received fire that day). In the beginning of *Control Room*, Al-Jazeera's executive editor is shown asking his colleagues to send a letter to the Pentagon giving the station's coordinates in Iraq.

Noujaim says that there were some important additional information regarding this event that, due to space constraint, she was unable to include in the film. "In the press conference they showed a letter that the Pentagon had sent acknowledging that they have the coordinates of the office and they would treat it like any other civilian building. Another thing that the American audiences

are not aware of is that the same exact thing happened before liberation day in Kabul; the Al-Jazeera offices were bombed. Many people felt it too coincidental that three journalist offices were bombed in the space of five hours the morning that they're entering Baghdad. And many of the Western journalists felt that way."

That day, and the ones directly following, were the saddest for Noujaim. "Sameer and the others at Al-Jazeera felt totally helpless," she says. "Their offices were bombed, they weren't able to report the next day when the statue was coming down. It was just depressing. All these young Arab journalists went to Al-Jazeera because they were sick of the state-run media institutions that they came from. Then to see their reaction of 'Oh well, if we ever get to the place in the

Middle East where we do have freedom of speech, where we do have democracy, is there really such a thing as that if the US is willing to bomb us and shut us up?"

And yet, for all of their criticism of American policy in the Middle East, many of the Al-Jazeera journalists still believe in the American ideals. Sameer admits that if he were offered a job at FOX News, "I'll take it," and that he would like to send his children to the United States to study and live, "to exchange the Arab nightmare for the American dream."

Ibrahim himself is convinced that the American people will eventually rise up and stop the American "Empire." As such, *Control Room* presents a side of Al-Jazeera—and by extension of the Arab psyche—that is rarely seen and yet desperately needs to be heard.

Treasure under a bridge: Cairo's 1st private cultural center remains a family legacy

Al-Sakia founder: 'We try to make sure that whatever is presented is of some value—even if the play's stars are not very experienced'

Ursula Lindsey
Special to The Daily Star

CAIRO: On a recent night in Cairo, the local band Anupise was rocking out. The 500-seat theater in which they were performing is so perfectly sound-proofed that members of the enthusiastic audience couldn't hear the heavy traffic passing directly above their heads, along the July 26 Bridge. The show was at the Al-Sakia Cultural Center—also known as Al-Sakia. Cairo's first, private and hugely successful cultural center has been built in the empty space under the bridge, its small adjoining garden circumscribed by multiple Zamalek traffic arteries.

In an office whose sloping ceiling is a reminder of the road rising above, founder and director Mohammed al-Sawi explains how Sakia was created "by coincidence." Alameya, the advertising company he owns, was buying the advertising rights to the walls on both sides of Abul Fedat Street, over which the bridge passes.

"So the governorate of Cairo requested we lay the wall with marble. I'm an architect... when I came here, I thought what could be inside (the walled-in

area under the bridge)? I couldn't believe it would be empty. I found a hole and looked inside," he says, and saw a vast empty space full of garbage and left-over construction material.

"When I went to the governor and talked to him, it didn't take more than 10 seconds. I told him do you mind if we clean this place up. And he said: 'go ahead,'" Sawi says.

Sawi says that "the first moment I entered I could see a theater. I could really imagine a theatre in this space... the stage here, the seats there, and on the sides you could make use of the ramps of the bridge."

Al-Sakia has been open 14 months now, but recently it has really taken off, with over 10 events a week.

"Our program is getting tighter," says Sawi. In fact, both of its halls are booked through June, and demand is such that Al-Sawi is expanding as quickly as he can, building a pedestrian overpass to another patch of unused wasteland on the edge of the Nile where a third theater will be located.

Sponsors include Arab African Bank, Mobinil, and IBM—as well as Alameya, which still gives more than half of the

center's 1.2 million Egyptian pounds (some \$200,000) operating costs. Al-Sakia is looking for more sponsors.

"What I can promise is that we'll never make it a profitable place," says Sawi. "If we have some additional money, we'll spend it on the same targets. We will generate a prize for writing, a festival for any kind of art."

As the deep voice of Anupise's lead singer reverberates through the office's closed door, Sawi explains how the center includes a library, internet center, art and music workshops, and has held short film, theater, and photography competitions.

"We are open to ideas," for the programing says Sawi. "Lots of these ideas came from members, and the audience." Sawi was trained as an architect, but had a successful advertising career for the last 25 years. The design and construction of Al-Sakia allowed him to indulge in his first and abiding passion, but the center represents a familial as well as a profession return. The center is named in honor of Sawi's father, Abdel Mounim Sawi, who was a journalist, writer and the culture and information minister under Former Egyptian President An-

war Sadat. His main work is a four-book series, titled Al-Sakia (The Water Wheel), which chronicles village life.

"The more time passes, the more I appreciate and respect my father's mind," the soft-spoken Sawi remarks.

"He was a very honest man in terms of feeling the responsibility of serving the community and of trying to improve the level of awareness and freedom, and encourage free thinking," Sawi concludes.

His father did would organize a monthlong theater festival at the Balloon Theater, where the year's shows were performed for an entrance fee of 10 piastres.

This kind of nonexclusive approach is at the core of Al-Sakia. A yearly membership costs 20 Egyptian pounds, and there are almost 2000 members as well as a huge mailing list. Tickets to shows range between 5 pounds and 20 pounds.

"Someone who's cultured is better able to face his problems. You're better able to feel that you don't need things," Sawi says.

Sawi deprecates how "the ratio of books read a year (in Egypt) is very low. People are still fascinated by the television stations... It is very hard now to

find someone reading. The state is trying hard. Mrs. Mubarak is giving very big support to building libraries. The problem is that when it's governmental, people don't believe it, simply. They look at it, they pass by, but they don't touch the books."

Sawi believes that being a private organization has helped Al-Sakia. He remarks that "the culture minister, when he visited this place, was very frank, and told me: 'We have hundred of places that should be similar to this place, but as matter of fact they never produce 10 percent of your services.'"

To help support culture in Egypt, Sawi argues: "You have to create demand. You have to encourage people. If you think of the number of artists that never perform... if you ask them would you appear for free and get an audience, they would say yes, because there are so many that would love to appear."

"We've added two stages to a great city with seven or eight stages maximum."

Many of the theatres, he says, are "hosting plays of a level that is concerned only with making people laugh to sell tickets."

At Al-Sakia, "we try to make sure that whatever is presented

is of some value—even if the play's stars are not very experienced, at least they're serious, they believe in it."

Sawi believes that a cultured public is more likely to form its own opinions and make its own decisions. He applies this principles of self-determination to Al-Sakia. The center is non-smoking from door to door, including the garden, which Sawi says is probably "the only non-smoking garden in Egypt."

It also opens at the unusual early hour of 7am.

"There are very, very few places in Egypt that open this early in the morning," says Sawi.

He himself comes to Al-Sakia every morning at 7.30. He reads the papers, eats breakfast, answers questions from a flurry of assistants and builders and conducts Alameya business in an endless stream of phone calls on his Nokia.

To come to Al-Sakia in the morning, he says is "a tradition that I keep. And then I go to my office. I always tell them I have to go to my office to make some money to spend it here."

"At the beginning I really never thought I'd go so far," he explains, smiling ruefully, "But every week you go deeper."



Sawi: "Someone who is cultured is better able to face his problems"

WEB WATCH

Discover Islam:

This website features a gallery of 25 posters, each masterfully integrating traditional Islamic art and calligraphy with modern computer graphics. This collection ranges from simple arabesque patterns to full-color photographs of Muslims and the Islamic world.

www.discoverislam.com

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ARAB HISTORY AND IDENTITY

The lessons in ruins and wonders

Tamim al-Barghouti

One of the most important books of Arab social history, architecture and art was written in the late 14th and early 15th century by Taqiyyuddin Ahmed Ibn Ali al-Maqrizi. Maqrizi was one of Ibn Khaldoun's best students; he believed in the circular movement of history, where the rise and fall of empires was driven by what we would call today the modes of production and their superstructure of ethics. All states were bound to fall after reaching certain levels of luxury. Like Ibn Khaldoun, Maqrizi was living in such a period.

In the 13th, 14th and early 15th centuries, the Mamlouk Empire in Egypt and the Levant was one of the region's most luxurious. Before the European geographical discoveries, the revenues of world trade had to pass by the lands of Arabs, and the Mamlouks collected the revenue. The Mamlouk state was also self sufficient in food, textiles and all raw materials needed for medieval life. Nevertheless, the state was morally corrupt. The Mamlouks, whose name, literally, means "the ones owned by others" were a clique of slave warriors brought into the Middle East from the Caucasus or Central Asia. They had overthrown the Ayyoubid dynasty in the second half of the 13th century.

Being a class of uprooted soldiers, the Mamlouks did not develop any form of the moral associations that result from settling down and stability. Their relations were strictly pragmatic. Making and breaking alliances, saving peoples' lives or killing them in cold blood, all depended on their calculation of what would bring them power.

To strengthen their positions, each of the Mamlouks, after having secured considerable fortunes from the spoils of war or from extracting the agricultural surplus of Egypt and the Levant, would use the best part of his money to buy more warrior slaves from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Supposedly, those newcomers would be loyal: An owner would teach the slave the arts of war and politics. In the first 10-15 years of their apprenticeship, the new Mamlouks would be economically dependent on the person who bought them. On the other hand, he would be greatly dependent on them as far as his military and political weight in the society was concerned. In essence, Mamlouk politics revolved around such units of old Mamlouks and their apprentices. Those gangs of slave warriors fought frequently, and the Mamlouk sultan had little power over the rest of the ruling elite.

All this created an atmosphere of insecurity, where every thing was temporary; the joys of the Mamlouks were

susceptible to random attacks by newcomers or old rivals. Even the sultan's powers were held hostage to the delicate balances of power between factions that supported him and those that didn't.

Moreover, the safety and well-being of the normal peasant, who had nothing to do with the ruling class, was subject to the random attacks of the Mamlouks plundering his land to feed their mini armies. The world was so random that it seemed to defy reason. A sense of fatalism developed and trickled down into people's understanding of religion. Islam, which had been a revolutionary force throughout its first three centuries, and a social doctrine of justice morality and fairness, became filled with beliefs in demons, possession, evil eyes and millions and millions of rituals. The religion was totally isolated from the sphere of politics and morality; it was also quarantined outside the realms of interpretation and philosophical debate.

Everything was heading toward disaster, yet the state was still extremely luxurious. This made people like Maqrizi believe in Ibn Khaldoun's analysis about the corrupting effects of luxury: Once people start buying others to defend them, their fortunes—politically or intellectually—start to decline. Obsessed with destruction, Maqrizi

decided to write a history of Cairo by describing the buildings of the city. His famous Book, *The Lessons in Ruins and Wonders*, is a great record of how Cairo looked in the 14th century.

Despite the fact that the book has been usually dealt with as a nonpolitical description of the buildings, I think there is much more to it. In telling the story behind each building, how it was built, who owned it, how it changed owners and what conspiracies took place in or around it, Maqrizi was delivering a subtle Khaldounian message that every building held the seeds of its own destruction—a concept his professor applied to whole societies.

In a sense Maqrizi was taking his professor's ideas one step further by stating that they were not only theoretical but rather were applicable to each and every palace in the city. In one of the very few incidents where he betrays his neutral mask, Maqrizi notes that a certain house built by the Fatimids was annexed by the Ayyoubids, and then by three different Mamlouk warlords. He then wrote about the consecutive owners of the house: "If you looked carefully, you'll see that they were but thieves robbing thieves. May God forgive us all!"

Tamim al-Barghouti is a Palestinian poet. He writes a regular feature for THE DAILY STAR