

SAMANTHA

Hello, everyone, and welcome to this Q&A for the Community programme of Breakthroughs Film Festival 2022. I am joined here by Rolla Tahir, who directed a'hwa, the beautiful film that we just saw. Um, not present with us, but of course also in that wonderful programme, are Marie-Kristine Petiquay's "Aniskenamakewin," Niya Abdullahi's "Tie your camel and trust in God," and Diana Ali Chire's "Still Life." So, Rolla, your film struck me as just such a love letter to your community and the community that is built around shisha lounges and shisha spaces in Toronto. And this is a tradition that is really being threatened, um, as explained in the film. These spaces are being closed down, and sort of pushed into the margins. So, what, what made you decide to focus on that tradition and the importance of it for this film?

ROLLA

Um, I don't know if it was much of a conscious decision rather than a, sort of, falling into making the film. Because I have been part of that community, and it has been part of my life for, honestly, not just since coming here to Canada as an international student, but even prior to that. That, you know, that shisha culture is very present in my family and my culture. So back home, even though I moved around countries a lot, it was always kind of there. Whether, in a microcosm, in our own kind of, immediate surrounding, or in a social setting. And so, it really just, to be honest, I don't know—there wasn't a single point in time that I was like, "Oh, I should make a film about this." It, if you've seen my other work, you'll notice that it has always been there, whether in the background—In this film it's kind of a highlight, but it's always been there.

SAMANTHA

Yeah, and I just have to ask, because I found all of—a number of people in the film commented on, you know, growing up around this, and you know, trying to convince their parents to let them try for the first time, or sneaking out because they didn't want them smoking it, that must—is that a very common experience? The sort of, kids trying to get into the space? This is where the grownups are?

ROLLA

Yeah. Um, yes. Simply put. Regardless of where you come from, as a teenager or a young adult, it's always—it's kind of like smoking or drinking. There's always this, you know, there's a certain feeling parents have around it even though they themselves partake in it. So, you know, the start of it might be quite rock in most families, but a lot of people simply just, again, become part of that—that community.

SAMANTHA

Yeah, I highlight those—those moments in the film just because they made me, they made me laugh. I was like, this is such a universal experience. Who hasn't, from something in their culture, had that moment of wanting to be a grownup like that, and finding their place? So, what do you hope your community and the communities that have shisha as part of their culture take away when they see this film, also just your films broadly?

ROLLA

Oh, that's a good question. To be honest, it's, it is such a big question, and it's not one that I think about, again consciously, as I'm making the film it's like this idea of what someone will take away from it from me. It's just a film is an opportunity to sit with something and experience it. As opposed to you know. intellectualize it. I mean that can happen, certainly after. And it's always been interesting to me how different people received, receive my films. But the most sort of heartening response that I always get is just that they feel seen, and they feel understood and, and connected. Which is such a beautiful thing really.

SAMANTHA

Yeah absolutely. That's, that's so important. So I'm curious, what moment during filming a production made you laugh the hardest?

ROLLA

Oh, I think part—it, it's actually in in the film. I was on screen with my scene partner, also my friend, Mezzan, who was talking about how his parents were like, "fine, you can smoke shisha, just don't smoke bungo, just or stay away from bungo." And bungo is just the word that I haven't heard in such a long time, and it just like brought back so many feelings and memories, because bungo is is just weed in Sudanese Arabic, and it's just, I haven't heard that word in decades, and it's just such a funny word, and it made me laugh a lot. I caught me by surprise, and made me laugh a lot.

SAMANTHA

it's funny how we can find these pockets of homecoming just in conversations and around the world, no matter where we are isn't it?

ROLLA

Absolutely. And there were so many more conversations that happened in between takes and after we wrapped filming that didn't make it on, on camera. And obviously a lot more conversations that I just had to cut, because, you know, I couldn't make the film longer than than 20 minutes. And they're just all fascinating you know they're just kind, and that's kind of—it mirrors what happens in these in these shisha cafes or shisha lounges. It's the spontaneity, the comfort with which people talk to each other, and the things that come up that, without these spaces we don't really have other areas to to talk about this. Like, these aren't conversations that necessarily happen in academia or happen in journalism, or happen, you know, in in just bars or clubs, or things like that and it's just it's I don't know it's it's a it's a space that I haven't found anywhere else, and I haven't been able to— it's, it's really un- ... You can't replicate it as far as I know as far as my experiences have, you know, informed me you can't replicate it anywhere else, not in coffee shops, not in bars not in again, like in, in universities. It just doesn't exist outside of this these shisha spots

SAMANTHA

That's so interesting. It really emphasizes and reinforces the importance of protecting them, of

making sure that they continue to exist and stay where they are and stay a center of community. So I appreciate you creating this film. I have 0 involvement with shisha culture. But, so for me, it was almost like I was there for the first time, sort of like being surrounded by these people, and this joy and and this community and that was absolutely a beautiful experience. And I appreciate you facilitating it.

ROLLA

Oh, thank you I'm glad that you took that away. For me, the point is to really situate whoever's watching the film in one of those spaces to get a sense of what it feels like.

SAMANTHA

Yeah, Well, mission accomplished, goal achieved. It's beautiful. So, final question. The standard question for all filmmaker Q&A's. What is next? What can we expect from Rolla Tahir in the future? I, I didn't mean to roll the "r" that hard. That "r" went off the rails.

ROLLA

No, I, I appreciate it/ It was nice to hear for sure. a few things I guess the most immediate is a film that I'm shooting in in July. It's called tentatively called "A Road Trip" and it's about—It takes place entirely in one car. It's about a group of women who end up in one car, and they don't know each other. they're just being driven to take their Canadian citizenship test and the film is just about sort of intergenerational, really Arab, relationships between Arab women. And sort of you know things that are you know looking out loud versus what doesn't get spoken and and it's also meant to to highlight kind of like that micro journey in the car is meant to highlight their sort of larger journey of resettlement in Canada, and how varied different experiences are. But anyway, yeah, I'm shooting that in July and I'm very excited about it.

SAMANTHA

That sounds amazing. I'm sure I speak for everyone when I say can't wait to see it. Because you obviously have such a beautiful and distinctive voice with, with your work, and I think there must just. There has to be lots of beautiful things to come for you, because because your work is just amazing. So, thank you for a'wa, thank you for being here, and for sharing your thoughts with us. I really appreciate it.

ROLLA

Thank you for programming it. It really does mean a lot. And I appreciate the work you all do behind the scenes, and I can't wait to see the other films.

SAMANTHA

Of course!