Al-Ahram Weekly On-line

Published in Cairo by AL-AHRAM established in 1875

Al-Ahram Weekly On-line
14 - 20 May 1998
Issue No.377
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Rashida Abdel-Salam:

Real to real

She creates what we see at the cinema. As the rushes stream by, a film forms in her mind. The spool slows, stops, and a mark is made

Profile by **Pascale Ghazaleh**

"Don't take my picture," orders Rashida Abdel-Salam. "What do you want my picture for?" She has barely paused to draw breath after greeting us, and is expressing surprise. Why, she wonders, would anyone want to write an article about her? "The directors are known: they're the bosses. The scriptwriter: well, he's a writer. The actors are known, even the set designer and the make-up artist are known. Their jobs

are easy to understand. But film editing? No one knows about editing. You would have to write a book about it. Especially now, with computers, editing is not an easy thing to understand."

But Rashida knows this is not quite true -- or at least, she's the exception to the rule. Not a star, maybe. But she has worked with the greats, from Shadi Abdel-Salam to Youssef Chahine: "my brother, my father, my teacher, my darling..."

She sits in her tiny room at Studio Al-Ahram, striking in a splendid burgundy coat, waving a cigarette as she deplores the demise of cinema.

Her voice is gravelly, and would be intimidating if she did not roll her Rs like a Parisian. Her words tumble on, over the edge of her breath, and every now and then she gasps in a word, and continues. In an even smaller room, just off this one, sits her love, her pride and joy: the Maviola, her editing machine.

The cinema industry is going through a crisis that has given rise to much soul-searching among the intelligentsia, and, more importantly, has left cinemas almost empty. Rashida Abdel-Salam leans forward, her spectacles slipping down her nose to reveal eyes of surprising intensity. "Where are the premieres?" she demands. "They don't make opening nights any more." Fewer and fewer films are made each year. For the woman who believes that editing is a process of creation in and of itself -- the woman who made such landmarks of Egyptian cinema as Shay' Min Al-Khawf (Something to Fear) and Al-Haram (Shame), there are few opportunities for fulfilment. Everyone knows the closing line from Something to Fear. It gripped audiences at the throat. Thirty years later, the hair still rises on the back of your neck as the flames rise, licking at the corners of the screen. Rashida's editing turned Hussein Kamal's powerfully-shot tale of the wealthy and corrupt landowner who insists on marrying a peasant girl against her will into a classic.

Today, such classics-in-the-making are few and far between. The exceptions, however, are notable. The most recent, for Rashida: Al-Masir (Destiny).

Madame Shoushou, as she is affectionately called by anyone who knows her, fell in love as a child. She used to play

hooky to go to the cinema. But she had no idea, back then, that her involvement in movie-making would be so direct and hands-on. She wanted to be an actress at the time. For a girl "from Shubra -- you know, around", married off at fifteen, a mother at sixteen, this must not have seemed an obvious choice. But the marriage fell apart after barely three years; an old life ended, and a new one began.

She was mother and father to her daughter, and she started work as an extra: bit roles that she hoped would eventually net a bigger fish. Her plans soon changed. "I couldn't be an actress because I can't roll my Rs properly," she explains. "So I found out about editing." Her apprenticeship marked the beginning of a life-long passion. Was it difficult? She is adamant that it was not.

It is a little disconcerting, her resolute refusal to see anything she has done as exceptional. Then again, she had been accustomed to adversity. Her father taught in community schools; he had a wife and child in every town. He left soon after she was born. In bringing up her own daughter single-handedly when her marriage ended, she was only following in her mother's footsteps, after all. Strong women, both of them. And characteristically, Rashida does not see herself as a woman who has made it in a field traditionally dominated by men, although she is one of the few Egyptian women who has worked in editing film negatives. "That's where the creation is," she adds. Ultimately, Rashida just loves her job -- passionately.

"It's a question of a path you follow -- your destiny," she explains. "I never studied. I was no good at school, and there was no Cinema Institute when I was growing up. I learned my job through experience, in practice, from the generation at Studio Misr in Talaat Harb's days: Salah Abu Seif, Kamal El-Sheikh... It's all experience. I sat and practiced for five years as an assistant. I worked on Youssef Chahine's movies as an assistant. When I reached the Maviola, and sat down in front of it, that meant that I had received the seal of approval." Her success in earning that seal she puts down to "responsibility, and a feeling for the work".

Rashida works with the director throughout the filming process. "The cameraman films the movie, then goes on, to another set -- whatever. Everyone works on a part of the movie. But the editor is involved in the movie until the

moment it is released to the public." She does the work herself: this is the first stage. Then she and the director sit together to check the rushes. "I give my opinion. If the director doesn't agree, all right. But the director is usually convinced. It's a matter of confidence."

Director Radwan El-Kashef, who worked with Rashida for the first time on the soon-to-be-released Araq Al-Balah (Palm Wine), tells the other side of the story. The relationship between editor and director must be fraught with tension, surely? It must be traumatising to deliver one's newborn, one's pride and joy, into hands that will sift through kilometres of film, and, perhaps, snip and discard that very scene one shot with one's heart in one's mouth. It must be terrifying to contemplate those hands that will casually put this sequence there, cut and paste so the backbreaking hours are transformed into a final product that will keep audiences -- hopefully -- glued to their seats. "She attacks the film," he says. "She is a bold and courageous woman." But what is it like? "She immerses herself entirely in the film. She takes her work home, thinks about it constantly, comes in every morning with new suggestions, to make it better, tighter. She does justice to every second. She is an amazing, a grandiose person."

Back at the studio, Rashida breaks off to examine the photographer. "Are you going to sell those pictures on Fouad Street?" she demands. "What about taking off your glasses?" we suggest. "I am not taking off my glasses," Rashida exclaims indignantly. "The glasses stay on." She glares at us ominously, then turns her head away and a shy smile creeps around the corner of her mouth, and up toward her ear.

Only when she sits in front of the Maviola does she seem completely at ease. Come inside, says Rashida Abdel-Salam, as she moves carefully into the adjoining room. It is more of a cubbyhole, lined with metal shelves on which canisters of film sit quietly. Apart from these, it is given over entirely to the hulking beast at which she sits, contemplating it as one would an old and good enemy, one whose foibles and twitches one knows and loves. The machine spins and whirs into motion. She sits there, in front of it, threads a spool of film through the cogs, and begins to run it. Tiny images flow in rapid succession across a small screen. Slamming her hand down, she indicates the point where the scene changes. "I control it completely," she notes from within a thick cloud

of cigarette smoke. "I can do exactly what I want." She speaks of the importance of the relation between eye and hand, the reality of it: here, you see the film, here, you cut it... She is so attuned to this awkward contraption that nanoseconds elapse between her decision and the movement of her hand.

Everyone says something happens between her and that Maviola, something that transforms these long, unwieldy spools into packages of rhythm, a plot spun from the director's dreams. "Editing is a feeling," she says. "The editor and the director have to connect, to think as one person, from the moment the film reaches the editing stage until it's ready to go to the cinema."

Her gestures acquire a new fluidity as she rolls the spools of film onto the reels, examines the picture which appears on the screen before her, rewinds, speeds up the strip of celluloid. It is easy to understand her lack of affection for computer-assisted editing. "The computer pulls you," she says. "You don't control it, it controls you. Everything goes too fast with a computer. With the Maviola, I control every second. I plan the whole thing. I can work with computers; that's the future, after all. But one's vision does not show in the same way. You're just following instructions. It all shows in the end. I have to feel the machine in my stomach: it should not pull me in." She compares the editing process -- the blood and guts of it, the bits and pieces on the cutting-room floor -- to a writer's work: "Some people can't write unless they have a pen in their hand. They have cramps in their wrist, it's a painful thing, but they love it. When a writer breaks off to sharpen his pencil, there's a moment of thought: you dream for a second. It allows you to continue, to begin creation anew. It's the same for me: when I pause to mark the film for cutting, my mind keeps working; I am actually deciding what the next step will be."

Her trepidation when she first approached the computer (while working on Al-Masir) is still patent. "The first two days I just watched. Then, on the third day, I reached out -- like this -- and hit the key to mark the spot where the scene would be cut." She pulls her hand back as if from a flame. She is still sceptical. Computers, she feels, cancel the essential distance between the editor and the movie. Like a VCR, or a large TV screen in a small room, they create a false intimacy. "When I watch the movie for the first time

after the editing is done, I sit alone in the back of the theatre, with my ashtray next to me. I don't like to have anyone next to me. You need that distance, between you and the film. Otherwise, you don't feel it. The distance creates the emotions between me and the screen."

We leave Rashida Abdel-Salam and her small room, and stumble out into the grey sunlight of the studio's scruffy garden. She stands at the door, waving goodbye, her head lowered, looking out from beneath a thick lock of hair that has fallen forward over her eyes. She may be thinking this would be a good place to fade to a new scene. Behind her, in the darkness, the Maviola hums and purrs.

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