

Lifestyle

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A diver jumps during a high diving competition at the Mirusha waterfalls, near the village of Lapceve. — AFP

AFTER 'MARY SHELLEY', PIONEERING SAUDI FEMALE DIRECTOR KEEN TO FILM BACK HOME



Saudi writer-director Haifaa Al-Mansour poses during a photo session in Paris.

“ I think it's amazing to have Saudi Arabia becoming normal again ”

Fresh from shooting her first film in English, Haifaa Al-Mansour plans to return to her native Saudi Arabia next month for her new project—but this time, she won't be directing out of view by walkie-talkie from the back of a van. “When I started making films—I started in 2005, when my first short came out—people didn't believe in cinema in Saudi Arabia—films were illegal, the country was very segregated, so it was like ‘a woman making films, oh!’” the 43-year-old director told AFP in an interview. “But Saudi Arabia has changed,” Mansour said.

Late last year Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman lifted a decades-old ban on cinemas as part of his push to modernize the ultra-conservative country, which included in June allowing women to drive. Saudi Arabia this year made its first official appearance at the Cannes film festival with its submission of a series of short films. Mansour was the first woman to shoot a film in the country, the critically acclaimed “Wadjda” from 2012 about a girl who dreams of riding her own bike.

During the filming, she often had to direct her team via walkie-talkie while keeping out of sight in a van, since she could not be seen in public alongside male actors and crew members. “I don't think I will be in the van anymore,” she said. “Now we have a film fund and they are supporting my next project, which is called ‘The Perfect Candidate’, about a young Saudi female doctor who decides to run for an office in a municipal election,” she said. “It will be wonderful to be part of the evolution of film in the country,” she added. “I think it's amazing to have Saudi Arabia becoming normal again.”

‘Definitely a Haifaa film’

Mansour now lives in Los Angeles with her American husband and children. “Mary Shelley”, her biopic of the 19th-century author of the horror classic “Frankenstein”, is now hitting screens worldwide. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was just 18 when she travelled to Lake Geneva in 1816 with her future husband, the poet Percy Shelley, and their son to vacation alongside friends including Lord Byron. Kept inside for days by heavy rains, they challenged each other to write a ghost story, sparking the Gothic tale of “Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus”, which was eventually published in 1818, but without Mary Shelley's name on the cover.

“For her, to come and write something so original and not to have her name on it, I could not not tell that story. I felt just like, ‘this is definitely a Haifaa film’,” Mansour said. The offer to direct the film, starring Elle Fanning, came as a surprise—not least because Mansour had previously filmed mainly in Arabic. But having studied literature at the American University in Cairo and film at the University of Sydney, she was ready for the challenge of working in English. “We did a lot of rewriting on the script—it's not only a love story,” she said.

After filming the movie in Ireland, Luxembourg and France, Mansour said she was eager to work again in her native Saudi Arabia. “I think it is very important to make films there, especially with Saudi Arabia embracing films and allowing film theatres. It will be wonderful to be part of the evolution of film in the country,” she said. “I think it will have a great impact on young professional women.” — AFP



A picture shows the facade of the French restaurant L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon in London.

World's most-starred chef Joel Robuchon dead at 73

Joel Robuchon, the world's most-starred Michelin chef who tore down kitchen walls to give diners new insights into the art of haute cuisine, has died at 73, a French government spokesman said yesterday. Robuchon, who was hailed as one of four “chefs of the century” by the Gault Millau industry bible in 1990, founded a string of restaurants that revolutionised fine dining across three continents, ratcheting up a whopping 31 Michelin stars. From Tokyo to Paris and Macao, foodies queue up for seats in his L'Atelier restaurants, where they can watch chefs in action, perched on high stools at a U-shaped bar.

According to Le Figaro newspaper he died of cancer in the Swiss city of Geneva. His death was confirmed by government spokesman Benjamin Griveaux in a tweet. “Joel Robuchon, a visionary chef who was the most starred in the world, leaves us today. “From Paris to Shanghai, his savoir-faire was an art form that made French gastronomy shine and continues to inspire the next generation of chefs,” Griveaux wrote.

As a youngster Robuchon's first vocation was the priesthood but while cooking for other seminarians he discovered a passion for food and at 15 entered the restaurant trade. A perfectionist from the start, he quickly earned a name for himself in the rarefied world of Nouvelle Cuisine and by the age of 30 was running a 90-

strong kitchen at the Concorde Lafayette hotel in Paris. The accolades and Michelin stars came thick and fast and by the age of 50, after working himself to the bone, he decided to retire. But a few years later he was back in action with his Atelier concept, which was inspired by Japanese sushi counters and intended to be more affordable than traditional three-star eateries. — AFP



In this file photo Saudi writer and film director Haifaa Al-Mansour poses during a photo session in Paris, as part of the release of her new film “Mary Shelley”. — AFP photos