

# Interview with Khaled El Hagar

**Sergi Doladé.** General Manager of the Association of Independent Mediterranean Producers (APIMED)

Multi award-winning film director Khaled El Hagar is one of the most significant Egyptian filmmakers of the past two decades and has earned a solid reputation as one of Egypt's most controversial and interesting movie makers of his generation. His graduation film *A Gulf Between Us*, about a relationship between an Egyptian man and a Jewish girl in London during the 1991 Gulf War, caused commotion in the Egyptian press when it was shown in Cairo in 1995. El Hagar, who not only directed but also starred in the film, was accused of promoting normalisation with Israel and could not return to Egypt until 2003. His first feature as writer/director, *Room To Rent*, starring Juliette Lewis and French actor Said Taghmaoui, brought him to international audiences, winning numerous awards, four of them for Best Film. The depth and range of his remarkable films embrace multiple cultures and genres, including comedy, dance, musicals and contemporary dramas. El Hagar has always been a director who highlights taboos in his native country. Regarding his films as part of the new realism, today he is showing the younger generations of Egyptian filmmakers what the future of the Egyptian film industry might look like.

**Sergi Doladé:** I am interested in knowing how you cope with living for so many years away from your home country, Egypt. How has this affected your creative path?

**Khaled El Hagar:** I think it works for me. I never imagined I would be living a different kind of life but it is great to exist between two homes, two cultures, two countries. If I get bored with one I can always move to the other! It's creative to live two lives, but confusing sometimes. Sometimes I want to just live in one country with my family and give it my all, but I always miss the other one. I suppose I have got used to it now, and it is a privilege to be able to make films in Egypt and England or Europe. I consider myself lucky.

**S.D:** In what way has it influenced your films?

**K.E.H:** I am very influenced by European films and old Egyptian films by Egyptian film masters like Youssef Chahine and Salah About Seif. In Egypt I learned my craft by working with our great director Youssef Chahine as an assistant on three of his films, and in England I studied on the Fiction Directors course at The National Film & Television School, one of the best schools in Europe, so I am influenced by the two cultures and I can work easily in any country. In Egypt, people always say my films are influenced by the West, and in England people say my films are influenced by Egypt. I am sure the two cultures are part of me and I cannot separate them. It makes me free when I am making films, because I am talking to the whole world, not only to one country or one culture.

**S.D:** Back in 1994 you filmed *A Gulf Between Us*, a love story about an Egyptian

Muslim and a Jewish Israeli woman during the first Gulf War. At that time, you made a lot of enemies both with the censorship authority and the Muslim Brotherhood. Could you film the same story nowadays?

**K.E.H:** It was a very difficult time as everyone in Egypt was upset with me. I was almost blacklisted in the Egyptian film industry. I went back to England after I showed the film and for four years I did not return to Egypt. But it felt good to break the waves. Movies and art should break the waves, and filmmakers should not feel afraid to express their political ideas and thoughts in their films. The good thing after this film was made was that, subsequently, there were two or three films from Lebanon and Palestine made on the same subject. I think now it is much easier to make a film like that because my film made it easier for young filmmakers not to be afraid. I remember Youssef Chahine telling me: “Now you are a filmmaker and you are responsible for all you do and say in your films and you must fight for your ideas.” I certainly think I have.

**S.D:** Your last film *El Shooq* was extraordinarily well received by Arab audiences and festivals. It was actually selected as the Egyptian entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 84th Academy Awards. Was this recognition the start of reconciliation with your country?

**K.E.H:** I was very happy with the feedback about the film internationally and in Egypt. People in Egypt really liked the film, especially young people and thought it reminded them of old Egyptian Realism cinema and it reflected the dark reality in Egypt before the revolution. The film was released a few days before the uprising and some critics thought it predicted the revolution in Egypt. When the film was selected to represent Egypt at the Oscars, yes I felt at last I belonged to the Egyptian film

industry. I had never felt that before, I always felt a misfit. But it took lots of years and struggle to reach that point.

**S.D:** *El Shooq* is a film about women in Cairo and how they manage to deal with the hardships of life. What inspired you to approach the feminine universe that is portrayed in the film?

**K.E.H:** As a director I like to work with women more than men. I like to talk about women’s issues. I tend to understand women more than men. My first short film, *You Are My Life*, was about my mother; I am fascinated by women, by their strength, their pain, their power. I do love and appreciate women, and, without them, there is no life or humanity. Egyptian women are very strong and control all aspects of the household. Many people think my films are directed by women. For me the woman in *El Shooq* (Lust) was a metaphor for Egypt, that is why I liked the script: it was a great script by Sayed Ragab.

**S.D:** You are known as one of Egypt’s most controversial movie makers. How do you feel about this?

**K.E.H:** I feel good. I am making people talk and think and get angry and I believe that is what films should do. I am a director who expresses his ideas in his work, and if these ideas upset some people, I really do not care. I still have a lot to say in my new films. Being controversial is good but sometimes financiers get afraid. I have two scripts I have been trying to make in the UK but most of the financiers were afraid to support them. They thought they were either too sexual or too political. But I am sure I will make them one day.

**S.D:** Why have you highlighted the taboos of your native country in your films?



Portrait of Khaled El Hagar.

**K.E.H:** Because taboos are hidden realities, and they are there to be broken; films should do that. When there was a trend in Egyptian cinema called Clean Cinema (cinema without kissing), I made my film *Stolen Kisses* which had 120 kisses in it, because young people in Egypt cannot afford to marry or have a real relationship, so all they can do is kiss under the bridges in the dark. It is important to tackle issues like forbidden love within different religions, women's rights, gay issues, violence, corruption and fanaticism. We have all these elements in our societies, and they should be shown in films and start a debate. Exposing the truth is important. I hate taboos, because we all do them but behind closed doors.

**S.D:** You have produced, directed and even acted in your films. Do you need to have absolute control over your work?

**K.E.H:** Sometimes. I do respect the role of the producers and financiers; you need people that you trust around you to not make a fool of yourself, but I also respect the inner voice

inside me. Sometimes I feel I understand my work better than anyone. I think it is good to control your work and listen to other people as well. Making a film is a collaborative effort; you cannot just do it alone.

**S.D:** What is your source of inspiration at present?

**K.E.H:** Humanity, I am always looking at humanity; how we function as individuals with each other. Humanity takes a lot of my thoughts. I feel bad that the media is dividing us, spending lots of money to make people hate each other. I feel the media now has become so racist, Islamophobic and biased and it concerns me a great deal.

**S.D:** I am sure you are working on a new project. What can you tell us about it?

**K.E.H:** I have too many film projects in my head, but at the moment I am developing two film projects in Egypt, mainly political, about what is happening now and what happened

before and after the revolution, and a film project in the UK. I am trying to adapt to film a powerful novel I read a long time ago.

**S.D:** *Dawaran Shubra*, your series co-produced by the BBC, tells the story of an Egyptian Christian who is burdened with debt and falls in love with the wrong girl. I read that it highlights the very problems that ultimately led to the revolution: corruption, religious conflicts, police violence. Could your work/vision open the path for Egyptian filmmakers to a new form of new realism in Egyptian cinema and TV?

**K.E.H:** After *Dawaran Shubra*, I made another three TV drama series, each one with 30 episodes, every episode 45 minutes, so I made 120 episodes in 4 years! This was a lot of work, but I discovered that TV can really affect people's lives and I discovered as a filmmaker I could pass on my political thoughts and ideas to millions of Arab viewers. TV is a very powerful force in Arab countries, much stronger than cinema now. I am sure TV drama has added a new way of shooting, new ideas. Critics were saying my TV dramas seemed like long films, not TV series. Two of them were political and the other two were mainly about contemporary Egyptian women, the young generation and the underground art after the revolution. My TV drama *Farah Laila* (Laila's Wedding) was the first TV series to show modern dance, underground music and the art of graffiti in Egypt after the revolution.

**S.D:** Would you agree with the idea that the Egyptian Revolution plunged the country into the modern era?

**K.E.H:** The Revolution was a good thing and a bad thing. The good thing is that young people felt free to have a voice to change their country; the bad thing is some of them felt that the meaning of revolution was to destroy

the establishment, by which I mean the police, army and laws. Crime rose sharply after the revolution. The law of the jungle was prevalent for some time, and the worst thing was the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jihadi groups, which the majority of Egyptians despised, which is why another revolution happened on 30th June 2013. Sixty percent of Egyptians are young people under 30 years of age. Lots of these young people have been used by the former Mubarak regime or by the Muslim Brotherhood to cause chaos in the country. I do believe that the Revolution was necessary and should have happened after 30 years of oppression and I hope after a few years Egypt will be more stable and people can reap the fruit of the two revolutions.

**S.D:** Are there any new forms of censorship in Egypt? How have you adapted yourself creatively to the new situation in Egypt after Mubarak's rule?

**K.E.H:** I think there is more freedom now than before. The Revolution opened everything up; what was hidden is not anymore. Films and TV drama are more aggressive and open to talk about the real Egypt and real Egyptians. It is ugly sometimes but true most of the time and I now feel I can speak freely without fear. Something truly changed in the Egyptian soul after those very hard, disruptive four years. I think we are heading in the right direction.

**S.D:** What is your opinion about the present conditions that filmmakers face in most Arab countries?

**K.E.H:** Few films have been made in Egypt in the last four years. Producers are afraid to invest in films because people are not going to the cinema as before because of the violence. But the few films that have been made are really interesting and young filmmakers are

doing a great job. Regarding the Arab countries, it is sad to say that all our films are becoming political, gloomy and about the misery of our countries. Films should also give hope and create dreams. But most Arab filmmakers feel that the international funds and big international festivals will only be interested in their work if it is political, gloomy and reflect their country's current situation, and it is a huge pressure to feel as a filmmaker because sometimes you need to just be just a filmmaker, who wants to make entertainment – a comedy or a musical.

**S.D:** What interests you most about the current Arab cinema?

**K.E.H:** I think it is young, energetic, more arty, independent and true and wants to show the world the truth about our countries, but I feel when it talks about the Arab Spring or Revolution it is not mature enough. We are still trying to understand what is happening; there has been a lot of confusion surrounding the Arab Spring. I believe you need time to talk about the Revolution, and I feel annoyed when I see big international film festivals showing a weak under-developed film to just be on trend or try to celebrate the Arab Spring. It is misguided and makes the directors seem fashionable but not good filmmakers.

**S.D:** Are you going to take a more ideological or political approach in your cinema?

**K.E.H:** I have been doing that since my first film *Little Dreams (Ahlam Saghera)* and even my four TV drama series were mostly political. I love making comedies, and musicals and just everyday dramas – like *Hob El Banat (Women's Love)*, and I did, but now I feel I need to go back to my political roots. I am political by nature and it is hard not to look at the world with political eyes now, with all these wars, fanaticism and racism around us.

**S.D:** What subjects are dramatically essential for you?

**K.E.H:** People, injustice, humanity, women's rights, freedom of expression and sexuality.

**S.D:** On a more personal note, what is your relationship with Egypt today?

**K.E.H:** It is good. I think in the last 10 years, I have made a solid name for myself in the Egyptian industry and among the audience and I can work easily in Egypt, but there are still some people, some voices, who do not like artists who have connections with Europe and are always trying to make out you are the bad one or even a traitor. There are lots of people like that now since the Revolution.

**S.D:** Home is often a matter of heart and mind. Just as reality is subjective, so is home. Where is your home?

**K.E.H:** This is very difficult. When I am in Egypt I feel home but after a few months I miss my family in England, and when I am in England I miss Egypt. I think home is inside you. I can happily live in different countries but the desert, the pyramids, the smell of Egypt is my home. I grew up very near the pyramids, I could go there walking. As a child I used to go and sit on the pyramids and watch the sunset; it is magical and my home is there.

**S.D:** What is the ultimate goal of a movie maker?

**K.E.H:** To make films to make people happy, think, feel, to tell the truth, to provoke, to break the taboos, to try to change the world to a better place. I believe good filmmakers and artists are God's messengers on earth.