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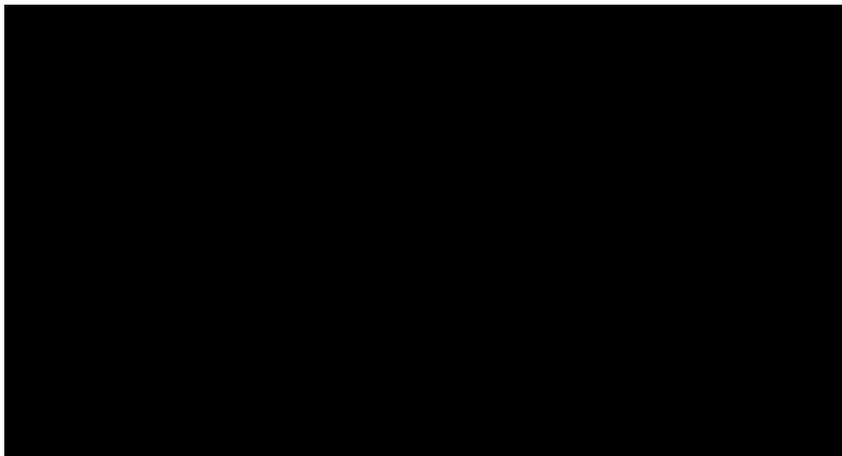
On Location: Behind "Three Veils"

Posted by [Rolla Selbak](#) on April 8, 2011

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As the writer and director of *Three Veils*, a few common questions I get about the film are "Is this movie based on a true story?" or "How was it working with the lovely and (insert your favorite saucy term) **Sheetal Sheth**?" However, the first question I inevitably get is "Excuse me, are you crazy?"

I suppose one must be crazy to attempt to make a film in this day and age about young Arab women — who are Muslim — who go through controversial subject matters such as arranged marriage, forbidden love. And for creating one of the first narrative films to ever feature the struggles of an Arab, Muslim Lesbian.



When I first started writing the script, I admit I was anxious. I didn't want to offend any particular group, or make unwelcome enemies, especially of the threatening kind. Of course, that goal proved to be mostly hopeless as you'll find out later on. But I'm still here, writing all you magnificent AfterEllen.com-ers, and am ready to tell the tale of how this little-film-that-could made it to the big screen. Sheetal will be along for the ride. I'll be having a Q&A with her and ask questions I've never actually asked her before, even though we spent a lot of time together on-set, so I'll be excited to see her responses (as are you, I'm sure). OK, lez do this!

Why this film?

Growing up in the Middle East with a Muslim family and social structure, I found it extremely difficult to voice the injustices I felt towards women in the region. Back then there were no women's rights discussions, and even the mention of the word "lesbian" would be enough to get you suspended or even expelled from school.

This was my answer to that question. In the end, this is a film I made for that "me," for the me who needed help figuring it all out. I always make films I would want to watch, and hope there are others like me who feel the same.

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Writing in German bars

As the title suggests, I did most of my writing in German bars. It took me a year to complete the script in its entirety. It was 2006; I was living in Nuremberg at the time on a work assignment. I was alone, and was quickly becoming stir-crazy writing in my one-bedroom apartment. So every night I would walk a mile to the German bar down the street in the *alt Stadt*, order a tea (much to the bartenders' horror), and write my heart out. Of course they got used to me patronizing their establishment night after night, writing furiously and ordering enough black tea to give an elephant the jitters.

After a year, I wrote the sweetest and most pleasurable two words a screenwriter could possibly write: "FADE OUT," indicating the end of the script. I cried. I cried for three days. First in front of the good people at the bar, then the next two days in my bed. This was the beginning of something big. How big was yet to be determined.

Raising the roof, or not

In 2007, I returned home to the U.S. with my script in-hand, and started knocking on the doors and pockets of anyone who would listen. This wasn't a project for the faint of heart. It was mired by the controversy that surrounded the topics of the film, and in the end, I was not able to raise any funds. The economy was at a standstill, and my friends and family were struggling. Investors looked the other way as soon as they heard the film was about three brown, Muslim women and their stories, one of which was a lesbian struggling with her deep repressions. I was left with 125-pages, each becoming heavier the more I carried the script from door to door.

One thing I have learned over the years is to never, ever give up. In fact, a quick side-note, the first short film I ever made when I was 12 years old was called *Never Give Up*. Sounds childish, but I tell ya, it matters. Always be the last one standing, even if you are being pushed and shoved, even if you are being booed and bullied, even if everyone has long gone and left the room.



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Faerie Godmother

Enter the Faerie Godmother Fund. I was living in between Portland, Oregon and San Francisco at the time, and I was submitting to all kinds of film grants and fellowships. The Faerie Godmother fund had started an initiative called the Women's Vision Film Grant, helping women filmmakers get their projects off the ground. After some stiff competition, *Three Veils* was chosen as the inaugural recipient of the grant.

Another thing I've learned in life is everything comes in snowballs. You just have to be ready to run after your snowball when it rolls down the hill. And I was ready. Upon receiving the grant, I decided to take the money and shoot a trailer for the film. This is something that indie filmmakers sometimes do in order to show investors what the film might look like. They sketch out a trailer for the film based on the script, bring together a gang of actors and crew, and shoot a trailer in hopes that the investor is impressed and will throw money at the project. They are rarely ever impressed. As I found out later, this usually rubs the producers the wrong way, and it is better to leave room for their own imagination (and money).



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Zahra Pictures

Now, the ironic part is, if I had followed the advice I just relayed to you, I would have never gotten my film produced. It just so happened that I had sent out a casting-call to one of the many mailing lists in the web-o-sphere, looking for actors to star in the trailer for a film that hasn't been made yet. My project piqued the interest of **Ahmad Zahra** of Zahra Pictures, who just happened to read the email through the mailing list I had posted on.

In the middle of my trailer shoot, I received an email from Ahmad. He said the synopsis of the film sounded interesting, and was wondering if he could read the full script. He was looking to produce his next film after MGM successfully picked up his previous film *American East*. He was looking for something cutting edge, and something that would have an effect worldwide. I sent him the script immediately (after the allotted 24-hours so as not to seem too eager). The trailer never saw the light of day, and from there, it was a match. *Three Veils* had found its producer.

Kiss on the cheek

In the indie world, finding the producer doesn't mean that the filmmaker's work is done, and that you can recline in a hammock in Mediterranean for a few months while the money rolls in. On the contrary, the work had just begun. Even with Zahra Pictures behind the project, money was still not coming easy.

The bold subject matters were both a turn on, and a turn off to investors. Some loved the script, but suggested to shorten the intimate scene between the two Muslim women to a simple kiss on the cheek, and cut the rest out. I was disheartened. A kiss on the cheek? Seriously? Why don't we just show them playing patty-cake instead, but in the air, of course, so their hands don't touch.

I did not want to sell my soul to anyone, but was afraid that I would have to, just to get some bits of the narrative told, even at the expense of the full story. In the end, I put my foot down, and so did Ahmad. We were not selling out. Not with this project. I was glad he supported me in that decision. In retrospect, it could have been so easy for him to disagree with me. I am thankful for that.



House parties

So what do you do when you can't find big investors? Throw a house party of course! At the time, we called them "tea parties," before the term turned yucky (and after which we called them house parties, but I digress).

The concept was to invite a group of people who might be interested in the film, tell them about *Three Veils*, show some of our previous work, open up the floor to some good discussion and hope that people believe in the project enough to contribute. This took a lot of work, but turned out swimmingly. This, in fact, is how we raised most of the money. People opened up their homes all across the West Coast, inviting their circle of friends, and giving what they could to a project they believed in. It was like the low-fi version of Kickstarter without the dot-com.

You'll never eat kabob in this town again

Of course not all was rosy. There were gatherings that turned sour really quickly, especially amongst the more conservative crowds of the Arab or Muslim communities. One of the house parties had to end early because a group of women kicked us out, stating that they didn't know it was "that kind of film." And no, we couldn't take any of the kabob home with us.

Another discouraging time was during a fundraiser in Portland when it was boycotted by a group of Muslim conservatives. What was even worse was all the generous folks who had donated money that night were being asked to reconsider giving money to such an "evil" cause. Keep in mind all this was taking place even before the first frame of the film was shot. If this was the reaction we were getting now, we were holding our breath, anticipating what might happen after the film's release.

In the end, the positive response to the film was greater and more powerful than the negative, and *Three Veils* steadily gained a fan-base the more future audiences heard about it, and it even celebrated a burgeoning underground following throughout the Middle East.



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