

GLORIA FILMS, IN COPRODUCTION WITH KATUH STUDIO, DUBLIN FILMS,
LES FILMS DE LA CAPITAINÉ, LIMAN FILM, ZDF/ARTE,
AND WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF SOPHIE DULAC DISTRIBUTION, PRESENT



OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

MY FAVORITE FABRIC

A FILM BY GAYA JIJI

SCHEDULED FOR RELEASE IN THE SUMMER OF 2018

GLORIA FILMS KATUH-studio dublinfilms Liman Film ZDF arte eurymedias GDF ALCA [IMPACT] ANGOA KERING HOMER IN MOTION Dubai Film Market Keshu Bridge Aurore german films

SOPHIE DULAC distribution URBAN DISTRIBUTION INTL SCHORTCUT FILMS

Design graphique: *Amel*

SYNOPSIS

Damascus, March 2011. In the midst of the rumblings of revolution, Nahla, a young woman of 25, is torn between her desire for freedom and her hopes of leaving the country through an arranged marriage with Samir, a Syrian who has emigrated to the United States. However, Samir prefers her younger and more docile sister, Myriam. Consequently, Nahla grows closer to her new neighbor, Madame Jiji, who has just moved into her building in order to open a brothel.



INTERVIEW WITH GAYA JIJI

Why the title *My Favorite Fabric*?

Because the film is about the senses. Fabric touches the body. *My Favorite Fabric* refers to the heroine Nahla's desire that her body be touched by a particular fabric, a desire that is a choice. Her choice. My story concerns this girl's relationship with her body. Everything stems from this. It is a sort of affirmation, a way for her to say to herself and others, "This touch is the one I truly desire!"

Would you say that the film has a specifically Eastern and feminist approach to sensuality?

As a woman filmmaker from the Middle East, the question of the feminine is key. It is obviously an intimate one. As far as that is concerned, *My Favorite Fabric* is a very personal film. I am Nahla!

What was the situation in Syria, in Damascus, at the time when your film takes place?

When I began to write the film in Damascus, at the end of 2010 through 2011, the civil war was beginning. Writing had become my only escape from the overwhelming fear that gripped us all. I participated in the very beginning of the revolts. It was clearly impossible to gloss over this context, to sweep it under the rug. Unconsciously the violence of the war, the oppression, the rebellion – all had a bearing with the inner violence which I chose to commit to paper. This film became my intensely personal interpretation of the beginnings of this terrible conflict. It's not about a documentary vision, but is well and truly my interpretation, my reflection upon this situation that we see, for example, through the character of the soldier. Personal history and political history cannot be separated. It was necessary to show that life went on, but at what price?

What was the genesis of the story in this film?

My personal experience, along with that of my girlfriends led to my thinking on this subject.

Is there a common point that links these experiences?

Yes. That of a search for identity, and I'm not just talking about sexual identity. We lived in a society that repressed our desires, all our desires. Consequently, living in a country like Syria was difficult for women. First there is the perception, or rather the "non-perception" of our sexuality, the obsession with female virginity, where one absolutely cannot have sexual relations before marriage, etc. These are things I lived with, and they are at the heart of the film. In it, I develop my relationship with my sexuality. How I discovered the questions of the flesh. What does it mean to have a sexual relation with a man? To take pleasure in it? But, in a broader perspective, and first and foremost, it is an affirmation of the place accorded to us, and consequently about who I am in a society where I'm deprived of everything. I have no freedom of expression. I don't have the physical freedom to do what I want. I don't even have the right to dream, because the most favorable dream that a woman of the Middle East can have is to get married and have children.

What were these forbidden or impossible dreams that led to *My Favorite Fabric*?

My dream was to make films, which is very complicated in Syria. I felt that I did not even have the right to dream these grand dreams, even less to express them, to proclaim what I felt like saying. Even on a political level, one does not have the right to an opinion. And I am extremely interested in politics! The same is true of religion. There is not much that can be said. This was really difficult for me to stomach within my family, with my mother – above all with my mother. That is what I've recreated in the film, this relationship which is demanding, and paradoxically tender as well, so quite complex. It's a love-hate relationship.

Is this self-censorship at the heart of Nahla's inner revolt (which moreover is represented in surprising ways) and her search for fulfillment (which passes through her sensual contact with fabric)?

This type of restrictive society forces you to question yourself: Who am I? What do I really possess? You realize that you possess nothing. You have nothing and, based on that awareness, one is pushed, like Nahla, to try everything because you have nothing to lose and one must remain alive! To follow through with things to the very end.

Nahla certainly has a strong personality. Is she dissatisfied?

She has a rather tiresome job. Things are complicated with her family, the rapport between these women. The father is dead. It's a very closed, very feminine world. Then she is "presented" to a potential husband. She thinks to herself, "Fine, perhaps this will be a way out." But, deep inside, she knows that it makes no sense, that it's not by participating in an "arranged" marriage that she will find freedom. So she seeks another way. Once again, she feels she has nothing to lose, so she should follow through on her wild ideas, face herself, her demons, her fears. The heroine is trying to find her place within her family, and, by extension, within her country. She is a woman who wants freedom, and, even more, she wants power! And this manifests by having sex for the first time, without any romantic overtones. Furthermore, there is even a certain malaise during this scene. In this case, this young woman is also manipulative, but this is necessary.

Why did you choose to have your story take place in a world of women?

I come from a milieu where women have a great deal of authority. They are a major presence. In fact, this is part of the schizophrenia of Eastern society – within the family, women have a lot of power, they make decisions, and yet, at the same time, they are deprived of many things, namely sexual freedom.

Consequently, I was always surrounded by strong women. Men were present, but on the periphery, in the background. Everything was based upon decisions made by the women. In the film, each character in this family is defending something. The mother defends tradition. The little sister is the revolutionary of the family, a tomboy who articulates a very overtly determined discourse, whereas the heroine, Nahla, seeks to define herself in a more intimate manner. In the end, all of these characters are representative of Syrian society at the time, victims who rebelled on various levels against the totalitarian regime, but also against a suffocating family structure. Each one is persuaded that they are making one of the others happy. The three male characters in the film merely gravitate around this maelstrom of feminine desires and power.

There is also Madame Jiji, the upstairs neighbor, who also manifests a certain authority but is a free woman. What is her role?

I created a personality completely opposite to the mother. This is a woman who has created a space where everything is permitted, everything is possible. I wanted her to be a neighbor in order to create a link between the two worlds, a world above and a world below. When Nahla goes upstairs to Jiji's, she crosses a threshold in terms of who she is, her being, her sexuality. As she mounts the stairs, it is like she is crossing a border. It is also a crossing over on a psychological level. She says to herself, "This is the moment where my true and inner personality, of which I as yet know nothing, will come to the surface and express itself. I am in search of adventure and the discovery of myself." She is trying to liberate herself from her family, her country, her fears, in order to be reborn as her true self.

In opposition to Madame Jiji, a symbol of freedom, you created the character of the suitor. What is his significance?

He is a character that I know all too well! This character again comes from my reality. I have experienced this situation – several times even! I have found myself before a potential suitor, a Syrian from America, who had come over to find himself a "good" wife in his country of origin. Each time, I'm struck by the fact by how much these men, who have left very young to live in freer countries, with more liberal mores, have remained so narrow and confined in their little worlds. Also, even though things have evolved somewhat in Syria since they emigrated, they always arrive thinking that things have remained the same for the last twenty years.

Did you wish to show that this character is also not free?

Yes! These men are prisoners of tradition. They come to Syria looking for a wife that they imagine will be virginal and docile, because they have no desire for a liberated woman. In the film, this somewhat young man is also oppressed without realizing it. He is trapped in the past, he is also a victim of sorts. What I mean to say is that Middle Eastern men are victims of how they think their virility should manifest itself, based upon the image that

our society imposes upon them. They are no freer than the women. The suitor in my film, with his mind full of archaic principles, despite his youth, develops a fascination with Nahla. She does not correspond at all to his expectations, and he is afraid of her. He is also taken aback by her, and tempted by her way of being, to the point of entering her world, even if only temporarily, because he does not possess the same courage as she. In this aspect, I find that women as a rule are more courageous than men.



More than a women's film, wouldn't *My Favorite Fabric* be considered more of a film with a feminine bent?

Yes, in the sense that it's a film that cannot exist without men. They are very important. Also, in the way that these women's rapport with their bodies is shown, one might perhaps say that it's from a feminine perspective. Then the sentiments – once again Nahla's relationship with her skin, the way she explores it with fabric, then with a man, but also with the rejection of this man, that she does not know how to love, and who, in the end, does not choose her. Finally, there are the relations between the women themselves, touched with rivalries, deep love, and a tinge of hatred. I think that a woman would describe this paradox and this particular brand of violence without any filter, without embarrassment, but rather with a direct approach.

Tell us about your choice of Manal Issa for the role of Nahla, a Franco-Lebanese actress, rather than a Syrian actress?

It was very difficult to find a Middle Eastern actress for this role, notably because there were scenes of nudity. Even at the writing stage, I had asked myself, "What Middle

Eastern actress would accept this?" Moreover, the film really doesn't stand up without those scenes, it has no meaning. Subsequently, all my attempts at casting Syrian actresses fell through. No one wanted to perform those sex scenes. However I do live in France and I met Manal Issa. I had seen her in Danielle Arbid's *Peur de Rien* and Bertrand Bonello's *Nocturama*, two films where I felt her performance was as natural as it was full of life. She is a true actress and a real professional who gives her all. Manal completely owns her work. She possesses a true understanding of her métier and she was ready to jump in, and not only regarding the question of nudity.

What particular methods did you make use of as a director?

One of my choices was to film the "in camera" scenes in closed environments. The camera thus acts as Nahla's internal voice. When she is in her family apartment downstairs, I use still shots to convey the sense of straitlaced tension between the characters. As soon as we head upstairs to Jiji's, the camera is freer and there is more movement. This conveys the heroine's state of mind as she begins to free herself, and develop.

And your use of color?

In terms of colors, the family apartment is consciously done in dull colors to reflect the dullness of this family life, the sense of holding one's breath in a permanent state of hold. At Madame Jiji's, the colors are more varied, joyous, stronger.

The sound is also quite particular – such as the rubbing of the fabric, which gives the sensation that we too are touching it.

From the moment I began writing the screenplay, the sound took on a life of its own, it is a character in and of itself. I needed to convey to the audience the illusion of senses that are not generally cinematographic, such as touch and smell. In this case, the touch of the fabric as it's caressed. Sound was an ideal tool to accomplish

this. As was the use of silences to underline the difficulty of living in a family apartment where no one expresses themselves. We also did a lot of work to create ambiance.

The external ambiance of the conflict that is approaching?

All the external context of the war, with the exception of the end, is recounted through the soundtrack. We don't see much of what is going on outside. The sound tells that story.

Do you miss Syria?

Terribly. It's like my heroine when someone tells her "you never loved this country!" – she does, in fact, think of leaving it. This is what I did, because a part of me always hated that place. I always knew that my life would be lived in a country where women had more scope, but this was also with the knowledge that I could return when I wished to. Now, this is impossible. I can no longer return to Syria, I cannot revisit the places of my childhood, and since I'm someone who is very nostalgic, my memories, my Syrian recollections give me pain, because, in a sense, the civil war has laid waste to my past. This is a very disturbing feeling.

GAYA JIJI



Photo © Olivier Julien

Gaya Jiji is a Syrian filmmaker who has been based in Paris since 2012. She has made several short films, including *Matin, Midi, Soir...et Matin* (19', 2011), which has garnered nominations at several festivals throughout the world. During the 2016 Festival de Cannes, she received the Young Talent *Women in Motion* Award, as part of Kering's program. *My Favorite Fabric* is her first feature-length film. This year it has been selected for Un Certain Regard and the film is also in the running for the 2018 Camera d'Or.

MANAL ISSA (NAHLA)

Manal Issa is a Franco-Lebanese actress who works in French, English and Arabic. Born in France, she left to live in Lebanon at the age of three. After the 2006 war, she returned to France and followed a course of study in industrial engineering at the ISTIA School of Engineering in Angers, where she was spotted by director Danielle Arbid and selected to play the lead in her film *Peur de Rien* with Vincent Lacoste, Paul Hamy and Dominique Blanc. Her work in that film won her a best actress award at the Festival des Arcs, as well as an Angela Award at the Subtitle Spotlight European Film Festival. She was also nominated for the 2017 César Awards in the category Most Promising Actress. A few months later, Bertrand Bonello approached her for his film *Nocturama* with Finnegan Oldfield, Vincent Rottiers and Adèle Haenel. The film was presented in several festivals, including Toronto and San Sebastián. Issa lives between Paris and Lebanon and has been working on several projects: in 2017, she appeared in Nadim Tabet's film *One of These Days*, then, in 2018, she has been featured in no less than five films: Veit Helmer's *The Bra*, Sébastien Betbeder's *Ulysse et Mona*, Félix Moati's *Deux Fils*, Eva Ionesco's *Une Jeunesse Dorée*, and finally Gaya Jiji's *My Favorite Fabric*, part of the official selection of Un Certain Regard at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival.

ULA TABARI (MADAME JIJI)

Ula Tabari is a Palestinian actress and director who was born in Nazareth and lives in Paris. After training in the theater and at the Beaux-Arts, she began working in film as Elia Souleiman's assistant, then went on to direct the casting and play the lead in two of his films, *Le Rêve Arabe* and *Chronique d'Une Disparition*. In 2001, she made two documentaries: *Enquête Personnelle* and *Jinga 48* as well as the short film *Diaspora*, part of the Official Selection at the Venice Film Festival in 2005. She speaks Arabic, English, French and Hebrew and also collaborates on several feature films as a dialogue coach for a number of actors. Most recently she worked on Sameh Zoabi's second film, *Tel Aviv on Fire*, where she worked both as a dialogue coach for Lubna Azabal and as an actress, playing the role of Sara. In 2017, she was chosen to play Madame Jiji in *My Favorite Fabric*, selected for Un Certain Regard at the 2018 Cannes Films Festival.



CAST LIST

Manal Issa	Nahla
Ula Tabari	Madame Jiji
Souraya Baghdadi	Salwa
Mariah Tannoury	Myriam
Nathalie Issa	Line
Saad Lostan	Samir
Wissam Fares	Salem
Amani Ibrahim	Shirin
Metin Akdülger	The man of Nahla's dreams

TECHNICAL CREW

Director	Gaya Jiji
Screenplay	Gaya Jiji in collaboration with Eiji Yamazaki
Original Soundtrack	Peer Kleinschmidt
Image	Antoine Héberlé
Sound	Murat Şenürkmez
Sets	Nadide Argun
Costumes	Tuba Ataç
Makeup	Janina Kuhlmann
Montage	Jeanne Oberson
Mixing	Jocelyn Robert
Production Manager	Diane Thin, Aslı Erdem
1 ^{ere} assistant Director	Burcu Bilgiç
Script	Sandrine Cayron
Production	Laurent Lavolé - Gloria Films
Coproduction	Vanessa Ciszewski - Katuh Studio / David Hurst - Dublin Films
Eiji Yamazaki - Les Films de la Capitaine / Nadir Öperli - Liman Film / ZDF/Das kleine Fernsehspiel	
In collaboration with ARTE, with the support of Eurimages, Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée, Institut Français / German Federal Film Board, Région Nouvelle Aquitaine / ALCA, Fonds IMPACT, ANGOA, Women in Motion - Kering; Atelier Cinéfondation, Dubai Film Connection - DIFF 2015, Screenplay development grant from the Festival d'Amiens, Meeting on the bridge - Istanbul Film Festival, Fabrique Cinéma de l'Institut français 2014, Lab Méditants 2	

SCREENINGS AT CANNES

FRIDAY MAY 11

4:45PM - Salle Debussy

Length : 1h35

Nationalities : France, Germany, Turkey

SOPHIE DULAC
distributionURBAN
DISTRIBUTION INTLSCHORTCUT
FILMS

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

Rendez-Vous
Viviana Andriani & Aurélie Dard
+33 1 42 66 36 35 / +33 6 80 16 81 39
viviana@rv-press.com
aurelie@rv-press.com

INTERNATIONAL SALES

Urban Distribution Intl
Paris - Los Angeles
14, rue du 18 août
93100 Montreuil FRANCE
+33 1 48 70 46 56
sales@urbangroup.biz
www.urbandistrib.com
At Cannes: Riviera 12

FRENCH DISTRIBUTION

Sophie Dulac Distribution
Michel Zana
+33 1 44 43 46 00 / +33 6 10 81 18 48
mzana@sddistribution.fr
60, rue Pierre Charron
75008 Paris

PROMOTION

Vincent Marti
+33 1 44 43 46 03 / +33 6 62 02 77 36
vmarti@sddistribution.fr
Margot Aufranc
+33 1 75 44 65 18 / +33 6 21 01 61 38
maufranc@sddistribution.fr

PROGRAM PLANNING

PARIS : Arnaud Tignon
+33 1 44 43 46 04 / +33 6 64 23 83 66
atignon@sddistribution.fr
PROVINCE : Nina Kawakami
+33 1 44 43 46 05 / +33 6 84 44 30 88
nkawakami@sddistribution.fr