

Yukon News Article

Courageous filmmaker lifts the veils

by Michele Genest

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One of the highlights of the Dawson City Third International Short Film Festival was a film called "Veils Uncovered," a world premiere and first-time effort by new filmmaker Nora Kevorkian.

As an Armenian-Lebanese Christian child growing up in Damascus, Syria, Kevorkian was fascinated by Muslim women who lived "behind the veil." She had been segregated from Muslim culture in her native Lebanon, "because the whole civil war was about Muslims and Christians," she said in an interview from her home in Toronto.

When her family fled the war and resettled in Damascus, her exposure to and fascination with veiled women began.

"I wanted to find out what they wear (under the burka), what they look like, and something has stayed with me since then. I paint, and I was finding that every time I was painting a woman, she was veiled, or hidden, and I realized that this was something I have to really take care of."

Now, years later, she has made a film about those women, examining their private lives, and more specifically, their sexual lives.

The film takes us into the bazaar in the old city of Damascus, where veiled women bargain over underwear sold by men and boys.

G-strings, thongs, crotchless panties or those made entirely of see-through plastic, or sporting blinking, beeping images of Warner Brothers' cartoon figures -- Tweetie Bird, or Sylvester. One pair, a "Christmas" pair, featured a tiny stuffed bird in a feathered nest, and played Santa Claus Is Coming To Town when you pressed a button.

There is a simple explanation behind the apparent incongruity of these women, their faces and bodies entirely concealed, shopping for such explicitly sexual undergarments.

In a culture where a man may take more than one wife, and where women are entirely dependent on their husbands for financial support, wives must go to extremes to keep a husband's sexual interest. Though by far the majority of Muslim men do not practise polygamy, the threat is always there.

The women in Kevorkian's film are uneducated housewives, who live in the old city, an impoverished part of town. There are areas in Damascus where women live lives nearly as independent as those of Western women.

But these were not the ones whose lives the filmmaker wanted to document.

Kevorkian pointed out that it is usually poorer men who have more than one wife, odd as that may seem, since Islamic law holds that a man must have a separate house for each wife.

In Damascus, men get around that rule by housing their wives in duplexes, with separate entrances. Families live collectively, in houses that have been in the family for generations.

In the summer of 2000, Kevorkian, who studied in Canada and has lived here for many years, working in the finance industry on Toronto's Bay Street, made a trip to Lebanon to visit her parents.

She had a four-hour stopover in Damascus, and took the opportunity to re-visit the marketplace where she had first seen veiled women as a child.

"When I was there, I saw all this lingerie that was everywhere in the marketplace." Her obsession with veiled women crystallized around the lingerie, and she went back to Damascus in August of 2001 to make the documentary she had been thinking about for years.

She went into the bazaar, alone with her camera, and began filming.

"There was a little bit of danger," she said. "But I didn't feel that I was in danger for my life, I felt that I was in uncomfortable situations, many times.

"Because I had a camera and was filming women in the market, the husbands didn't like that. Sometimes they would yell at me. A couple of times, men wanted to run after me, and I disappeared."

Over a period of six weeks, Kevorkian got to know a number of women, but very few wanted to be filmed, for fear of reprisal from their husbands. Those few who did allowed Kevorkian to come to their houses, which could also be quite tense.

"Everything that I filmed was done secretly. Because these women live collective lives, there's always people around the house, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, so I had to make sure they didn't know because I didn't want to put the women in danger."

And there were real risks for the women who talked to her. One young woman tells us her husband will beat her if he finds out she has participated. Nevertheless, she removes her veil, on film.

She is stunningly beautiful. "What jewels are hidden behind those veils," whispered one woman in the film festival audience.

In her interview, Kevorkian wanted to reassure viewers of that young woman's safety, and the safety of other women shown in the film.

"People ask me if I felt these women are going to be okay, especially the one who removes her veil. I think she is the one I really really like, because she's very courageous.

“She wanted to show us her face, because she knows she is beautiful, and she wanted to do something rebellious.” Kevorkian asked her several times if she was sure she wanted to do it.

Each time, the young woman was adamant. The possibility of being slapped or hit was a small price to pay for the chance to uncover her face and be seen publicly, for the one time in her life.

“I couldn’t say no,” said Kevorkian. “That’s why I took that chance. Because I felt like I was her messenger.” But Kevorkian will not distribute the film in the Middle East, to protect the young woman’s safety.

Despite the atmosphere of danger, or at least tension, Kevorkian managed to have a wonderful time with her subjects. Her respect and indeed, love for them is apparent throughout the film.

Her attitude of respect, her fluency in Arabic, and her familiarity with life in Damascus helped Kevorkian win the trust of the women she filmed.

Eventually, she was invited to a beautification party, where women helped each other remove bodily hair, even from the most intimate places. On film, the scene is treated with delicacy and discretion. We are never made to feel like voyeurs.

There is another scene, where Kevorkian interviews a woman who neither speaks nor looks at the camera, keeping her face turned away and her shoulders hunched. But, remarkably, she opens her underwear drawer and shows various garments to Kevorkian.

“This was not something that was planned, or rehearsed,” said the filmmaker.

As the scene progresses, with Kevorkian’s gentle encouragement, the young woman puts on a spangled skirt and dances a shy belly dance. “Bravo, bravo,” says Kevorkian.

It’s an endearing moment in a moving scene, a scene that affects us as much because of the connection between the two women, as for the glimpse it gives of the young woman’s life.

Many times, Kevorkian had to very carefully cut any interior scenes that would identify a particular house. This saddened her, for the interiors were particularly beautiful, with rugs and hangings in rich colours and textures.

And, too, the clothing the women wore under their veils was jewel-like, she said. Against this backdrop of physical beauty was a sense of support and physical intimacy between the women that was wonderful to be a part of, she continued.

“It’s a very happy atmosphere. Just being there with the women feels like paradise.” This might seem incomprehensible, to a Western audience. But Kevorkian goes on to explain.

“These women are not necessarily sad. Because they have the support mechanism that I talked about in the film. It’s so wonderful.

“They get together in one room, one woman brings coffee, and there is always music, and one dances, another one reads coffee cups. If someone’s husband had a fight with her the night before, she talks to her friend about it, the old woman comes in to read her palm, and says ‘Don’t worry sweetie, it’s going to be okay,’ they hug each other...

“So the isolation that you and I and all the women in North America have, they don’t have. We have friends, we have family, but we don’t wake up in the morning and have someone bring us coffee, and say ‘Come on, let’s read your cup, and dance...’”

“These women don’t need psychiatrists the way that we might, here. For them, the support mechanism is there. That is something that keeps them going. If they were living the way we do, in separate houses, then (their situation) would have been unbearable.”

Kevorkian was in Damascus, filming in somebody’s house, on September 11, when the two passenger planes crashed into the towers of the World Trade Centre. In the atmosphere of panic and uncertainty, she cancelled further meetings, collected her film and took a cab from Damascus to Beirut.

When she passed through security on way out of Lebanon, and again at Heathrow, all of her film was x-rayed and therefore ruined, though she pleaded with officials not to do it.

Only the video tapes survived, because she had them shipped later. She deeply regrets the loss of the film, and also an interview that never happened, scheduled for September 13, when she was going to get together with a group of women talk with them about sex.

But even without those scenes, Kevorkian has made an intimate and revealing documentary, whose narrative is utterly compelling. She chose to premiere it at Dawson, she said, because when she visited the festival website, she learned that people drove for hours through the snow to watch films.

“If people there love films that much, then this is the festival where I want to show my documentary,” she laughed. *Veils Uncovered* will show at a festival in Toronto this coming weekend, and, Kevorkian hopes, on TV Ontario in late April.

In the meantime, she is at work on her next movie, about 6,000 Armenians who survived the 1915 genocide in Turkey, and fled to Lebanon, where they flourish.

“This is a very important story to me,” said Kevorkian. “That’s my heritage. One and a half million Armenians were massacred, but my story is a happy story, of survival.”

Now that she has one documentary behind her and another one in the making, Kevorkian says that her career change, from finance to film, is complete. Bay Street’s loss is our gain.