

Painting with light

Some people eat hundreds of roaches while others French kiss for days. The list of things people are willing to do in order to break a record goes on and on. To Muriel AboulRouss, all she had to do was to paint with the light. According to the first Arab woman cinematographer, this is her definition of cinematography: "...Cinematography literally means writing with the light"

As a child, AboulRouss dreamt about becoming the next Bruce Lee or Gandhi. Since there was no university major that would teach how to become a heroic and inspirational person, AboulRouss decided to major in either law or translation: "Law because, I wanted to protect my rights and the rights of others, and Translation, because I love languages. If I could learn a new language every year or so, I would..."

As AboulRouss was crossing from the faculty of law to the faculty of Translation, along with her mother, something else caught her eyes, "It had graffiti art all over it, everyone was dressed in a cool gipsy way, and it was calling my name". The more people told her that this was not the place for her; the more she felt like this is where she belonged. "I just fell in love with the building and the people". Years passed and one thing led to another, until AboulRouss was working as a cinematographer. "Since my first year in college, I would carry the equipment and the camera, and do everything with my hands, This was exactly what wanted to do, I found myself doing cinematography by chance."

Five years after her graduation, someone told AboulRouss that she was the first woman cinematographer in the Arab world. Breaking such a record didn't cross her mind before that, and till date AboulRouss doesn't care much about titles, "It doesn't matter to me if I was the first woman cinematographer or the 100th, what matters is my work and my passion" When I asked her if she had something to say to empower or inspire woman she bluntly replied: "No! Words don't matter; I prefer that my work and life inspires people rather than any words I would say."

While I was on my way to meet with AboulRouss, I had no idea what to expect. The interview lasted about two hours, in a café near her apartment, in Ashrafieh. I would check on my cup of green tea every now then, as if it was an hour glass. The less I had left in the cup the less time I had with her. My favorite answer she gave me, was when I asked her to describe the moment she felt most proud in her career: "It was the night of the Namur film festival closing ceremony, I was in Beirut at a local pub with some friends, and Georges Hachem (Director of Stray Bullet the feature film) was at the award show in Belgium. I had sent him a text to ask him if we had won an award, but he replied maybe next year. Shortly after, he texted me saying: "call me you just won best cinematographer." You can see AboulRouss' facial expressions change as if this moment happened now. "I remember that I started crying out of joy, I started hugging everyone I know or don't know. It was one of the most amazing moments of my life".

“Stray Bullet” was not the only award winning film AboulRouss worked on. The 39 year old cinematographer worked on many award winning projects like the movie “Falafel” with Michel Kammoun, “Mercedes” by Hady Zaccak, “Gramma a thousand times” by Mahmoud Kaabour and the Emmy award winning web series “Shankaboot” by Amin Dora.

“Today I can tell you that the climax of my career was “stray bullet”. Not because the movie won best cinematography among many other awards, but because I evolved and learned a lot from Georges Hashem (the director) and the whole experience of executing the film. I was mature enough to understand this experience and execute the work like I did... I personally matured and evolved from this project and from my relationship with Georges Hashem that will hopefully continue in more future projects.”

Even though AboulRouss, is a great cinematographer she doesn't consider it her identity. “I am a teacher, and I work as a cinematographer”. Teaching is a way of life to AboulRouss, “For me teaching is not about teaching a technique, its bringing out the passion inside people.” While cinematography is AboulRouss' hobby, and favorite thing to do in the whole world, she would give it up for teaching if she had to. “...Maybe sitting together would remind you of your dream, maybe I can give you exercises to help you realize that you have a talent. For me it is a reason to live for...”

AboulRouss is the perfect combination between cinema and teaching, and so is her project “Cine-Jam”. “Cine-Jam” is workshop designed, organized, and conducted by Muriel AboulRouss. The one month workshop, takes the participating students into a self-discovery journey, “... This workshop is my definition of what teaching should be like. That is, a relation with 8 individuals, that allows us to trust each other and dig deep into our thoughts. It's the chance to be creative without judgment, limitation, or rules. I don't ask anyone to be a genius, I ask people to believe in themselves. During the workshop you will know for sure what your talent is and what you want to with it; or you will discover that none of this intrigues you and you are not talented in this domain and maybe go to a different direction. Both ways it works, you will be allowed to rediscover yourself. The only rule is to be yourself and use images and sounds to express who you are, with no judgment whatsoever; there is no right or wrong...”

At the end of the interview, AboulRouss explicitly announced that she is available for free consultancies, “...Anyone from anywhere can contact me, we agree on a time and meet to talk for a while.”

I certainly felt privileged to get a backstage pass, into AboulRouss' soul. The props where practical, the theme was hilarious, and the message was inspiring.

Suzanne El Wattar

Bullet Q&As:

Favorite Movie: Cinema Paradiso

Favorite Actor/Actress: I don't have one but I wouldn't miss a movie with Meryl Streep or Sean Penn in it.

Favorite Soundtrack: Jacqueline du Pré - Bach, Suites for Solo Cello No. 1 & 2

Person to dine with: Bruce Lee

Favorite Meal: Breakfast, I love mornings, my favorite moment of the day is sunrise.

Favorite Place in the world: Beirut

Color: Olive Green