

Thriving on the International Circuit

Contributed by with Ruba Nadda

Ruba Nadda is the poster child for how a Canadian filmmaker can thrive on the international film circuit, even after facing rejection at home.

Nadda, who has made 13 shorts and three feature films, including the internationally acclaimed 2005 feature *Sabah*, starring Arsinée Khanjian, has never had a premiere in Canada.

{josquote}I was rejected everywhere, everywhere{/josquote}

Originally, she wanted one. In fact, she turned to the international film festival market in 1997 only after a batch of three early shorts had been turned down at every single festival in Canada.

“I was rejected everywhere, everywhere,” she says.

Organizers of the Toronto International Film Festival told her that her films were not feminist enough.

It only stiffened her resolve. She thought: “I can’t let this happen.”

Ruba Nadda Director of *Sabah*

So she went to a bookstore and bought a guide to the film festivals of the world. As well, she did a spate of research on the internet, including on www.filmfestivals.com, and got accepted in September 1997 at the Rotterdam festival with the three shorts that had met with such misery in Canada.

Leaping at opportunityIn fact, the Rotterdam organizers were so thrilled with the three shorts they saw, that they asked Nadda if she had any others. She said she had ideas for three more. They pressed. She said she would have prints by Christmas.

She did. Again, Rotterdam organizers were thrilled. So thrilled, in fact, that they accepted all six for a single screening in January 1998 and called it a retrospective, billing Nadda as their “Canadian discovery.”

It was a triumph. The audience loved her. Festival-goers lobbied her for her autograph. Film-lovers in Switzerland made bootleg copies and sold them on the black market.

When Nadda got home to Toronto after the Rotterdam festival, she was met with 10 faxes, each of which invited her to another international festival, including those in Germany and Spain.

“The trick about international film festivals is that other festival directors go to them,” she says.

In all, *Do Nothing*, her favourite of that first batch of three shorts, has been screened more than 250 times.

Work the press angle {quote}between 300 and 350 came and the line of people waiting to buy tickets wound around the block{/quote}

Instantly, she grasped the spicy angle her story represented to Canadian news media: the Canadian filmmaker feted in Europe and rejected at home. She sent out a press release and calls from reporters flowed in. The stories that followed helped build her profile in Canada.

“Too many Canadian filmmakers are complacent,” Nadda says. “They think that if they don’t get into the Toronto International Film Festival, it’s over.”

In all, Nadda’s work has been featured in 30 retrospectives, including one at the Bloor Cinema in Toronto. The day of that screening, the person who had mounted Nadda’s retrospective was all aflutter. Did Nadda think as many as 20 people would show up so the screening could break even? he asked her.

In the end between 300 and 350 came and the line of people waiting to buy tickets wound around the block.

Reach for a world audienceNadda’s international reputation, and her work at maintaining the relationships she built at the festivals, helped again after she finished *Sabah*. The feature had its premiere at the Rotterdam festival in February 2005 and was released to the big screen in May, deliberately bypassing the Toronto International Film Festival. It ran in cinemas for 13 weeks.

Europeans remembered her. They were rooting for her and flocked to see the feature.

“All these people felt they had had a hand in the birth of a filmmaker,” says Nadda.

Now Nadda is working on *Cairo Time*, which she hopes will star Meryl Streep and which will start filming in November 2006 in Egypt. Its projected budget is about \$5 million (U.S.) at the moment.

“People say to me: ‘Why isn’t it enough to be a Canadian filmmaker?’” Nadda says. “But I want the whole world to see my films.”