One Stop Doc Shop
Transcript
Episode 7 - Elhum Shakerifar

Introduction

(Intro music starts – cinema film reel whirring, and countdown beeps)

Hello and welcome to *One Stop Doc Shop*, a podcast that celebrates and encourages diversity in non-fiction filmmaking. In each episode, a guest filmmaker will share their secrets on how to make award-winning documentaries.

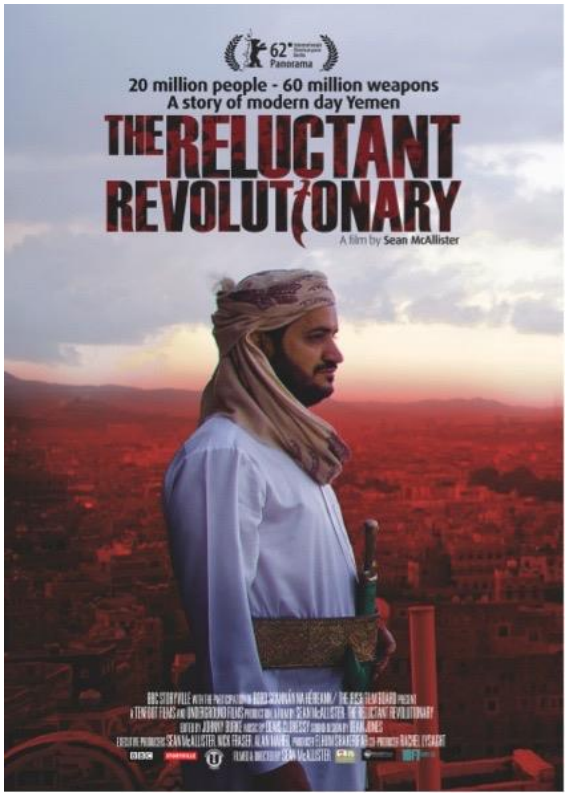
I'm your host Angela Clarke, and this series was made possible with support from Screen Alliance Wales.

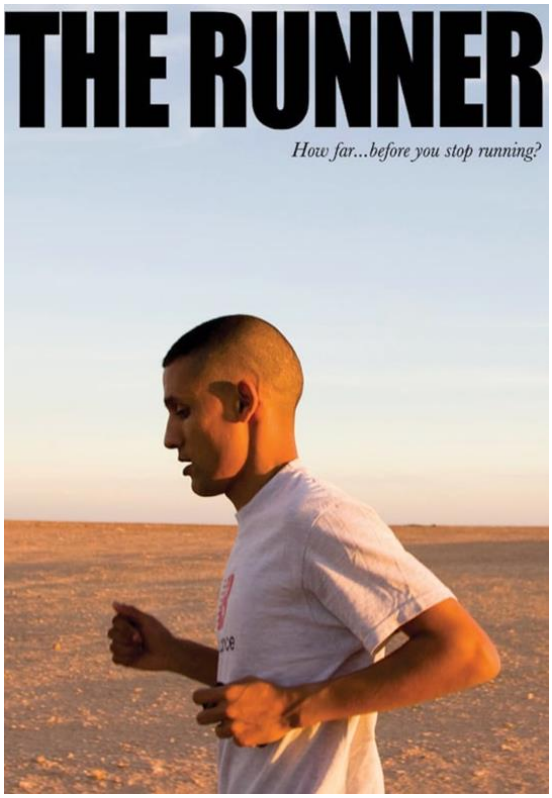
My guest today is BAFTA nominated producer Elhum Shakerifar. Her multi award winning credits include ***The Reluctant Revolutionary***, ***The Runner, A Syrian Love Story, Even When I Fall, Almost Heaven, Island, Of Love & Law, A Northern Soul*** and ***Ayouni.***

In addition, Elhum has received a multitude of accolades as a producer over the years and continues to work innovatively to bridge the gap between UK festival visibility and distribution.

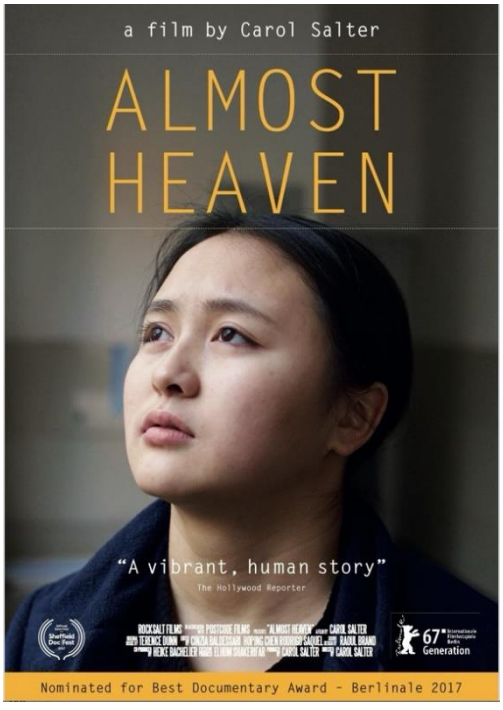
We talk about her unconventional route into the world of producing, the importance of inclusivity and visibility in storytelling, the myriad challenges facing producers when working in precarious situations, as well as the importance of defining what success means to you as a filmmaker.

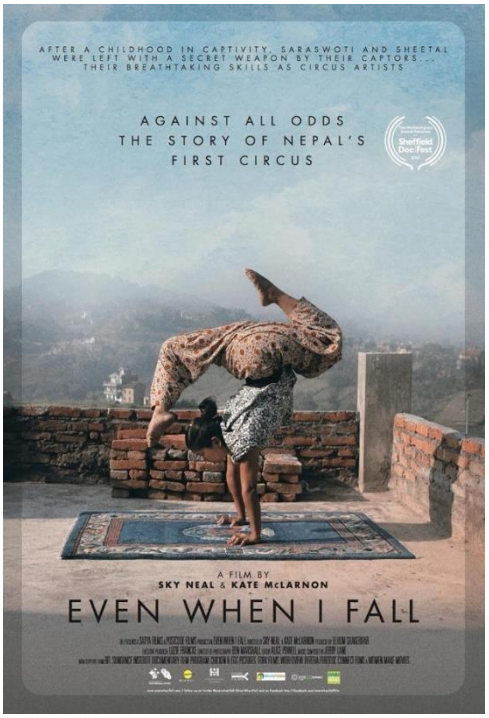
I hope you enjoy listening.....*(music ends)*

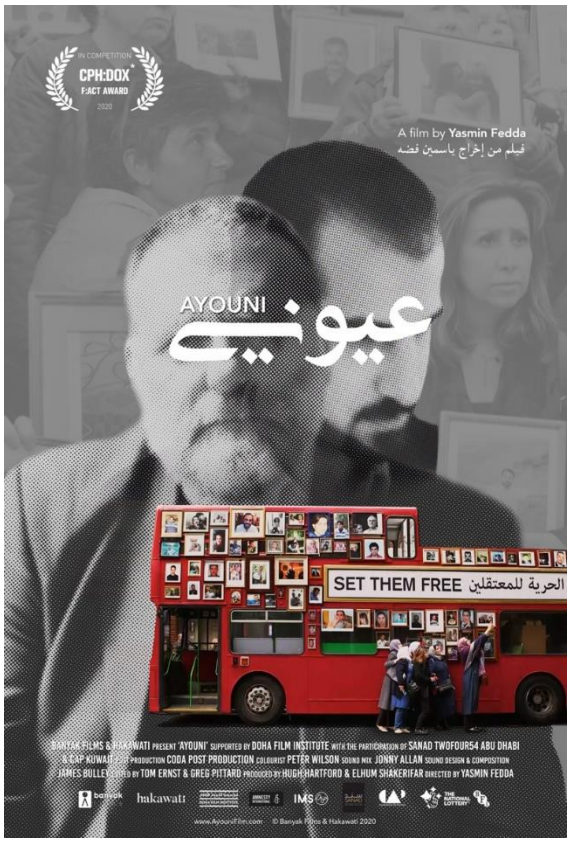

62 Panorama
20 million people - 60 million weapons
A story of modern day Yemen
THE RELUCTANT REVOLUTIONARY
A film by Sean McAllister


THE RUNNER
How far...before you stop running?

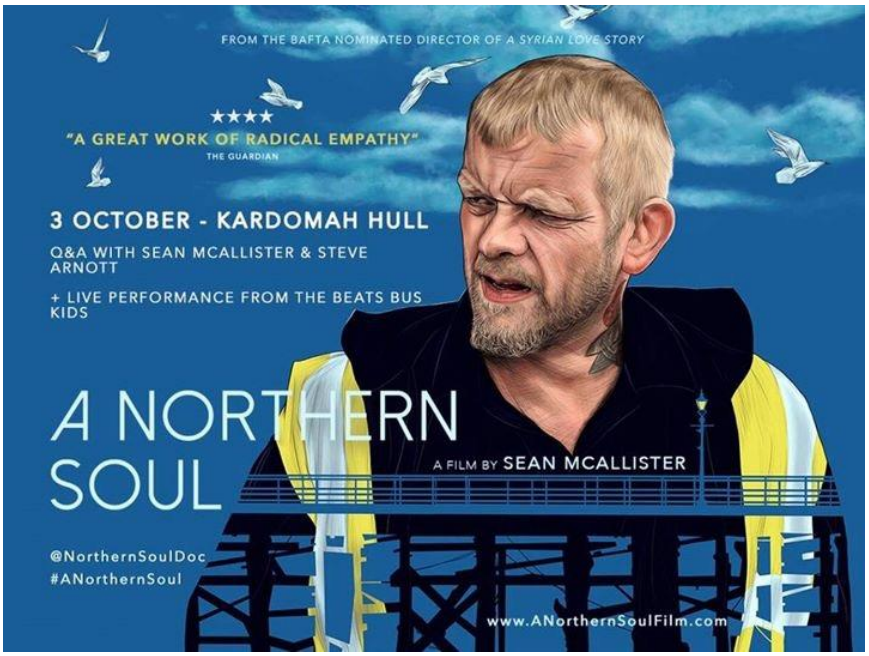

BFI LONDON FILM FESTIVAL
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL ROTTERDAM
"Probes uncharted territory with great intelligence and sensitivity"
Little White Lies
"Poetic and haunting"
Sight & Sound
ISLAND
A FILM BY STEVEN EASTWOOD
One year, four lives
PARADOGS FILMS AND HAKAWATI PRESENT "ISLAND" WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY STEVEN EASTWOOD PRODUCED BY ELHUM SHAKERIFAR AND STEVEN EASTWOOD EDITED BY SERGIO VEGA BORREGO
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY STEVEN EASTWOOD SOUND BY JAMES BULLEY MADE WITH THE SUPPORT OF ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND AND NATIONAL LOTTERY BIG LOTTERY FUND
hakawati ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND FABRICA Queen Mary Manhattan FF FREEFOLK
WWW.ISLANDFILM.CO.UK


a film by Carol Salter
ALMOST HEAVEN
"A vibrant, human story"
The Hollywood Reporter
67 Generation
Nominated for Best Documentary Award - Berlinale 2017


AFTER A CHILDHOOD IN CAPTIVITY, SARASWOTI AND SHEETAL WERE LEFT WITH A SECRET WEAPON BY THEIR CAPTORS... THEIR BREATHTAKING SKILLS AS CIRCUS ARTISTS
AGAINST ALL ODDS
THE STORY OF NEPAL'S FIRST CIRCUS
A FILM BY
SKY NEAL & KATE McLARNON
EVEN WHEN I FALL


CPH:DOX
F:ACT AWARD
2020
A film by Yasmin Fedda
فيلم من إخراج ياسمين فضه
AYOUNI
عيوني
SET THEM FREE
الحرية للمعتقلين
hakawati


"ONE OF THE MOST BRAVE AND POWERFUL FILMMAKERS AROUND"
MICHAEL MOORE
"HEARTBREAKING"
RAMIN AFFAI
THE INDEPENDENT
"REMARKABLE"
DEBORAH YOUNG
THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER
Official Selection
IDFA 2015
A SYRIAN LOVE STORY
Sheffield Doc/Fest
2015
A FILM BY SEAN MCALLISTER


FROM THE BAFTA NOMINATED DIRECTOR OF A SYRIAN LOVE STORY
★★★★
"A GREAT WORK OF RADICAL EMPATHY"
THE GUARDIAN
3 OCTOBER - KARDOMAH HULL
Q&A WITH SEAN MCALLISTER & STEVE ARNOTT
+ LIVE PERFORMANCE FROM THE BEATS BUS KIDS
A NORTHERN SOUL
A FILM BY SEAN MCALLISTER
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www.ANorthernSoulFilm.com


★★★★
DIVA MAGAZINE
"IMPASSIONED & INSIGHTFUL"
SCREEN
愛と法
OF LOVE & LAW
Happy Pride
Love More!
ハッピープライド
A FILM BY
HIKARU TODA
"LOVE WILL WIN IN THE END"
THE JAPAN TIMES
IN CINEMAS & ON DEMAND 1 MARCH
OfLoveandLaw.com
hakawati

Angela Clarke
Well hello Elhum, thank you so much for joining me today, I'm really excited to speak to you.

Elhum Shakerifar
Thank you so much for having me, and for all the care you've put into preparing this conversation. I really am looking forward to it.

Angela Clarke
Me too. Well, it's been a challenging one to prepare for, in a good way, because you've produced such a remarkable body of work and you've talked to really eloquently about some of the bigger issues that we face when making films, so there's so much that I want to speak to you about, it was almost like gosh where do I start!

I suppose before we get rolling to talk about the films themselves, I'm always quite interested in how people got into film, especially when people don't take a necessarily typical path into it, which I didn't. There was a small piece in an interview that I found, where you discussed a philosophy teacher at school, and a film that the philosophy teacher made you watch. I wondered could you tell me a little bit more about that? I was kind of intrigued to hear more about it, because that seemed like quite an important moment for you in the journey of you moving into this world of visual filmmaking.

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, absolutely. Wow, I wasn't expecting you to say that, but yes, I went to school in a French school and most of my classmates were *'French French'*. In one philosophy class, the question posed to us was what is destiny, like what is a destiny? And the film that the teacher made us watch, Madame Kremp, was a film called **Memoires d'Immigres**, which translates as *Memory of Migrants* by an Algerian director called Yamina Benguigui.

It was a 3 three-part film in which she reflected on north African migration to France. So, it started with the men who came to France as manual laborers. And then the second part focused on the women who came to join their partners. And the third part was the children who were born from these marriages, and they were the first generation to be born in France and to consider themselves French.

It was a revelatory piece of work to me because it was the first time I'd really understood perhaps what it was to migrate. What it was to build your life in a country that isn't the country that you grew up in, and to recognize that perhaps that spoke to my parents' histories. You know there were many different reasons why I was always considered to be different to some of my peers or classmates. And it contextualized the fact that maybe for example, I had a nickname because people couldn't say my name properly. All these different things came to the fore with this film and watching it in class was another way of being isolated too, because I was isolated as the only person who had taken this piece of work seriously. But perhaps I was the only person who'd been moved by that film in a way and so maybe that did plant the seed of what it meant to make a film. What it meant to make something and reflect on stories and histories and how that can maybe reach audiences you don't expect.

There was something else that was incredible about this film, it was all straight testimony and it interwove all this amazing high music that I also loved at the time. And I think it underlined this question of sometimes in artistic work, you hear, or you feel something that you can't quite identify but you know is speaking to you on a much more visceral level, on a more kind of muscle memory level. I've carried that with me. And one of the first DVD's I bought was this film, so it's a very beautiful place for us to start actually.

Angela Clarke
Well, it just felt when I was reading and listening to things that you'd spoken about before, there was something there. That first moment that you maybe see a little bit of yourself reflected in a film, I think is something that probably people remember.

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, definitely. And I think recognising that there are different experiences that we will have that we see or don't see reflected around us. It's not just questions of migration, there are all sorts of realities that each one of us hold that aren't represented by dominant narratives or mainstream narratives. They shape the way that we look at the world, and they shape the way that we perceive the world looking at us, and they shape the way that we move through the world as a result.

And that's the power we have as documentarians or as creative people, is to make more multiplicitous reflections. To make reflections that are open enough to speak wider, to speak more broadly and to not still any narrative into a hard box. You know, to not imagine that there are such strict circles around each one of us, that realities are much more malleable and so are our identities and our relationships.

Angela Clarke
Absolutely. I'd seen a lot of your work over the years and when you'd mentioned it, I think it's only a small thing I saw in an interview, it just felt to me like the nugget that pulls together that first tranche of films that you made. I guess also when you get to that age, because I'm assuming it's around your late teens, so 17/18 years old, that you start to reflect on who you are and what your place is in the world. Also, how you see yourself and how other people react and see you as well. I'm sure Madame Cremp, did you say that was what her name was?

Elhum Shakerifar
Yes.

Angela Clarke
I'm sure she'd be delighted, especially when you do any sort of teaching later on in life as well, it's just quite nice to know that actually there was a pupil that you did make a difference to and maybe that helped take their trajectory in one particular direction which I always think is nice because let's be honest, teaching is sometimes a thankless job.

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, definitely. I mean I think that we were very difficult students also. *(Laughs)*

Angela Clarke
Well, I'm sure Madam Cremp will be glad that at least something penetrated in and shaped a body of work that in and of itself is important, so I thought kudos to the teacher, we should give her respect where it's due.

Elhum Shakerifar
Absolutely *(laughs)*.

Angela Clarke
So after you finish school, you go off to university, to Oxford and you study Persian Literature and Islamic studies. And then eventually, at some point, you go on to do a Masters in Visual Anthropology at Goldsmiths. Storytelling is obviously a huge part of where your interest lies but I wondered what prompted you to study Visual Anthropology after the degree, and not take a more literature-based route?

Elhum Shakerifar
Well storytelling is the heart of everything. I still carry the learnings from Persian poetry into everything that I do. When I left university, I found it really challenging to know what to do. I think I'd spent a lot of time with Medieval poetry, but I didn't want to go down an academic route per se. I didn't know how to apply what it was that I had learnt. But I was very fascinated by the space of photography, and it was mainly photography that drew me to Visual Anthropology, as a space of understanding culture and the relationship between visual cultures and the histories of representation. Visual Anthropology is a complicated space I think in many ways, because it has a colonial history, and is still in many spaces taught in that way, through a colonial historical perspective on image making.

And I think it was only much later that I really contended with that, maybe as I started to teach myself, to think about what it was that I was teaching in sharing these kinds of older, whether it's texts or first practices or photography, or first practices of film and thinking about what those things meant. I think as a producer it's interesting to reflect on this also because it underlines not just the kind of capitalist reality of filmmaking, but also that filmmaking and photography making, image making did also come from a very colonial project. This question of ownership of images and the question of owning a narrative and being able to have power over a narrative.

I think I have always had a kind of curiosity, and I moved towards spaces that enabled me to sit with the things that I was trying to understand, or that I was curious about. And Visual Anthropology had this kind of dual space of practical learning how to make, but also academic thinking space. So that was what drew me to that. But I think it's been a very unconventional route in a way because I still believe that literature is the thing that I carry the most strongly as my grounding. And even going back to Persian literature of course, but French literature as well, and thinking about the writers who move me and still give me grounding.

It's writers like Victor Hugo, said in the English accent because he was someone who had so many principles and he made work with intention. I still remember that on the text that

came up for my baccalaureate, my final examination, was the first passage of *Les Chatiments*, *The Punishments* I think. And this text, he wrote against Napoleon III, who he believed to be taking advantage of his name and doing something completely undemocratic. In protest, Hugo exiled himself to the island of Jersey, and he wrote this text which is entirely against one man. He writes in poetry, he writes in prose, he writes little theatre pieces, he writes comedic pieces, he writes satire. He writes all sorts of styles and forms, and all of it is motivated by this deep hatred, but it's a political hatred.

And this text is incredible, and it starts with *nuit*, it starts in the night, and it moves toward light with this idea that you can overcome darkness, you can overcome evil forces. And I carry that as much as I carry any of my other training in a sense. This idea that you can be motivated by something to do, to make and that making can last, and that making can also rewrite a historical understanding. For me, Napoleon III is only understood through Victor Hugo's pen, and I think that understanding helps you rethink all aspects of history and understand that history has been stilled into history books by certain people whose interests are also concurrent with those history books. But there are lots of other narratives and lots of other perspectives you could be bringing into the mix to understand truth, different truths.

Angela Clarke
Yeah, it was interesting me to me when I when I read about your academic background because I also studied Social Anthropology. I went to Manchester University which the department in and of itself was quite progressive in terms of its teaching of anthropology. In terms of it critiqued the let's be honest, the racist origins of anthropology as it were. I also studied a bit of Visual Anthropology as part of that and I think it's interesting to me when you talk about that because Visual Anthropology reminds you of that notion of the 'subject' and how people are othered and distanced and viewed in a particular light.

I was always interested in the fact that as you say, there's much more richer textures to storytelling sometimes in the written form more than there is in the visual form. I feel those threads are present all the way through all the films that you've engaged with which I suppose made sense to me when I watch your films and then what I've read about you. I can see why that thread has been carried through. So, you come through the other side of that but as you say I think also it's difficult when you study subjects like that which are so deep, it feels weird to figure out what your place is in the world when you come out the other side of that.

Elhum Shakerifar
Definitely. It's a constant search. *(laughs)*

Angela Clarke
Where does one go for a job? I think also if you've taken a deep dive into those worlds and really thought about things and thought about ownership and stories and how we tell them etc, it does become a challenge to find something that gives you that same intellectual stimulus at times.

Elhum Shakerifar
Mhmm.

Angela Clarke
Talk to me about how you go into your first job then in terms of the community centre. Tell me how did that came about, and what attracted you to that precinct, I guess?

Elhum Shakerifar
So, my first job, it was all quite serendipitous. I was volunteering for a photography agency who were running a workshop in a community centre in East London. I was doing very boring data entry in the office. One day, one of the facilitators of this workshop came in and was complaining about the work in the community centre and how difficult it was to communicate with the children because they all spoke different languages.

I just asked what languages they spoke, and she said, there are lots of kids that have recently arrived from Afghanistan, there are lots of kids from Iraq and I said I think maybe I'd be able to speak to them. I went in, and I'd never been anywhere like this in London. It was a kind of community space that was intergenerational. There were lots of different groups and the photography project was working with a project called *Dost* which supports unaccompanied minors, meaning children who migrate to this country alone, but separate from any family, so they have no adults with them.

I think the makeup of the children who use that service or who come to that centre is also reflective of the current political climate. At that time, there were lots of kids from Afghanistan, there were also lots of kids from Iraq, there were some kids from Iran and kids from DRC. I found that language wasn't perhaps the thing that was needed the most. Most kids were happy to play a game of ping-pong or, you learnt how many sugars one person wanted in their tea and that's all you needed, that was the language really. But I suppose maybe it was also going back to **Memoires d'Immigres**, the film that you referenced at the beginning, this kind of recognising that they're journey was something that I also understood. Maybe not in the same terms, but something that I had a little bit more patience with and for, and I just thought the energy of that space was incredible.

I went into that centre, and I don't think I left for about 10 years. I started working there and raised money to ensure its ongoing ability to provide education and youth work and casework to young people. I learned from that how important the space of play is, just when you're overwhelmed with different realities including this ongoing legal pressure, where children are forced to engage with a country as if they were adults within a very aggressive space, the space of just being.

But I started on the photography project, and I started facilitating photography work and teaching kids how to use cameras and teaching them how to take pictures that reflected how they felt or what they wanted to communicate, or what they wanted to say. How to find the words or to decide which words to share alongside their photographs and it remains one of those foundational realities, working in that space and working with those young people.

Angela Clarke
I think it's interesting how your colleague described that precinct and how you've then just described that precinct because you can see that connection and you had an empathy towards the fact that although your journey hadn't, I'm assuming, been as traumatic as some of the children that had come to that centre, but there's an empathy there to understand the fact that somebody's been removed from one location and they're now somewhere that's unfamiliar to them.

And by that very nature you're demarked as being different, and what does that mean to you and how does that change how you see yourself and how people respond to you. But I think as well that there's something lovely about those places that you remember that actually sometimes some of the kids, depending on what age they are as well, I think the world still carries own in the way that it does and that kids still play and they still argue and fight and fall in love and do all those things that is part of the regular human experience. But I think often gets overlooked in those in those precincts as well isn't it. Because you've got that odd juxtaposition of tiny children dealing with an adult world.

Elhum Shakerifar
Definitely.

Angela Clarke
In that precinct I would argue none of us would have the ability to grapple with that trauma at that time, in terms of fighting for a place of safety. All those big life things don't hit you ordinarily, if you have a life of privilege, they don't hit you until later in life when you've got the headspace and the capacity to process what's going on. I think it's important in those spaces to have somebody that can also remind those kids that there is still joy to be had, and that you can just live in the moment and be valued.

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, absolutely. But I think it's a very aggressive, I mean that was fifteen years ago, and the government was one way, and it's becoming more and more aggressive. This notion that any human could be illegal is horrific. It's a stain on all our human conscience and on our country. That this could be written into law in a sense or conceived of as a way of thinking of fellow humans. But I think the lessons were all for me to learn in a sense. I think those spaces are spaces of deep humility. I never understand why the perspective of someone who is a forced migrant, a refugee, an asylum seeker is never understood.

These are people who've experienced realities far beyond what I have experienced, and I only have to learn from them. I don't believe necessarily in putting people on pedestals. I think that gets us into problematic spaces and I think the film industry is very good at it. But I think there's so much that we can learn from the experiences of forced exile and even simple migration is never simple. It's not a simple thing, but how we've lost the ability to learn from those spaces, learn from those experiences is really to all our detriments.

Angela Clarke
I completely agree. I think also the narratives of those types of situations have become so bastardized and simplified in a way that the press presents them that it never bears any reality to what happens. When you speak directly to people, it bears no reality to their situation or their expectations or their lived experience of things. But I guess for me, what intrigues me about the first couple of films, which we'll come on to speak about now is that there is a place for film to allow you to take a dive into those situations, in those worlds or those moments and understand it in a wider way that I think enriches the people watching it, or thier understanding of the situation, and recognises the stories are often more complicated than the news presents, which is just a snapshot of something. It takes away all that other texture that helps humanize those stories.

So, you've been in the community centre for a while and then you meet a filmmaker Sayeed who takes you on, I guess this is a turning point for you and your career trajectory as it were. Could you tell us a little bit more about who Sayed is, how you came to meet him and what happens next?

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, so Saeed Taji Farouky is a photographer as well as a filmmaker and he was a photographer who was also working with that organization. He was making a film about a long-distance runner from the Western Sahara. I suppose a few different things happened in this meeting. I first learnt about the Western Sahara in a way that I hadn't understood that reality before, and I was really shocked by this lack of knowledge, basically my own ignorance around the reality of the occupation of the Western Sahara, and how that's also part of the image that's projected, the kind of dominant narrative and why that is. I had been working in the community centre for a while at that point, and I felt that perhaps there was something in filmmaking that was like a macro, where the community centre work was micro relationship level work which is extremely important.

But I felt that perhaps working on a film that engaged with the same topics, but in a macro space might have a different reach, might have a different impact. So, I became involved in ***The Runner*** because of that impulse, this kind of dual impulse. It's the first film that I started raising money for and I learnt many things. Everything was a first. But I learnt in starting to make the next film, ***The Reluctant Revolutionary*** with Sean McAllister that every film is always a first, because every film is different. Every context is different. Every reality is different. It's almost like every single time you're reinventing or rethinking or re-engaging. But yes, from one film to the next, slowly building the comfort of never fully knowing, maybe that's what I've done over the years.

Angela Clarke
And at that point then in terms of the formality of being a producer, what did you understand of that? Was it something that you just organically got into, when you started to raise money because that was something that had been a familiar process that you had done in the centre itself, to keep the longevity of the centre? How much did you understand of what that role as a producer entailed and where the boundaries of that role were? How did that unfold for you?

Elhum Shakerifar
I think like many people I first understood a producer to be mainly a financial reality. But then I started to see that no, there's also an element of engaging and managing a team, being responsible for various logistical things. But logistics and finances slowly become a strategic space but also a very creative space. I think I slowly started to understand and to learn. Also, I worked first with Saeed and then started working with Sean McAllister. They are two very different people and this also underlines how you shape the reality of what a producer is and how a producer works based on the relationships that you build with the filmmakers you're working with, and based on what a film needs or based on how a filmmaker works or hasn't worked yet or could work and I think I shaped slowly the position that I had.

And I'd say in working first with male directors, which just happened to be the way that things evolved, I learnt quite quickly after the first film that I produced with Sean that I wasn't being taken very seriously as someone who had a key role in the making of the film, because Sean himself was such an established director. It made me realize that I had to position myself and my work in a way with a kind of clarity to recognize that I also had things to say on stages. They might be different things, they might help steer the way that people understand those films, but they're as valid.

And I learned that in working in spaces where it was just assumed that I was just, I don't know, doing the administrative work and recognizing that it benefits the film if all of us are understood to be creatively involved. It benefits all of us if we can be in better human relationships also in the public spaces we are in, and the creative spaces which is a much more I'd say opaque. It's very difficult to articulate clearly how a film takes shape, especially when you get to the end of it and you're presenting it. You skim over all the complications of making that film to present its best face. But making films is collaborative and it's deeply vulnerable and I think you need to be able to have a level of human trust and confidence in one another. I don't see why producers aren't recognized more as creatively involved because they absolutely are always.

Angela Clarke
Both those films came into the public sphere around 2012/2013 so I think things are changing. I still don't think it's where it needs to be, but I think things are changing in terms of recognizing what a producer brings, and I think it takes a level of really thinking outside the box to get any film made these days far less films like ***The Runner*** and ***The Reluctant Revolutionary*** which you know you're in Western Sahara and France with ***The Runner***, and you're in Yemen with ***The Reluctant Revolutionary***. Both those situations have some levels of volatility because there's big important things unfurling. They're challenging films to make from the point of view of safety and dealing with people that are in vulnerable positions and vulnerable contributors and also for the filmmakers themselves when you're going into locations and spaces like that as well as managing everybody's expectations. Looking back at your work I just thought, like you've gone from 0 to 60! You didn't pick a gentile film to dip your toe into the water and see how that goes. You've gone full pelt into the middle of the Arab Spring.

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, it was a baptism of fire I'd say. I think also because both films contend with a certain level of erasure. So Western Sahara it's something that's very difficult to, I mean it's not very difficult to talk about, but it's very much suppressed. It's a reality that remains suppressed and that many people don't know about. I was surprised by the levels of suppression around the realities of the Western Sahara and continue to be. With ***The Reluctant Revolutionary*** Sean was intending to make a film to some extent, but I think he also was witness to a massacre and at the point where this happens, the Friday of Dignity Massacre in Sanaa in 2011, we felt he had been a witness to something. Now we were sharing this material with news media, and it wasn't getting any interest. And we became conscious that there were other things happening in the world. Gaddafi had just fallen, the tsunami had just happened in Japan, and these were taking the main space of news.

But we understood that we also had a responsibility to make this into a story to ensure that what Sean had witnessed, what his camera had been witnessed to was seen. We had this responsibility to the people he'd been making a film with over several months and just so happens to be present at that time, when something very dark happened. I think those two films very quickly gave me this baptism of fire but also the realization that making a good film isn't enough, or making a film isn't enough. Being seen, being heard is the real challenge, and those two films were a real challenge.

Very quickly after making those films I started working with festivals. I worked with Bird's Eye View, at the time, it was a film festival that had a focus on Arab women directors, and this gave me an understanding of another side of the industry, of how things get seen, and how venues work in the UK, how things get written about, and how films are selected. Although this was the first festival I'd ever programmed and so all of it was gut feeling, I didn't read anything I only watched. You know we had discussions amongst the team, but it was very much a gut feeling programming. I think it remains my most successful festival to date.

But it taught me something about trusting your gut. It taught me something about the power of visibility and how different spaces work. I took that into the next films I made this notion of being prepared not just to make sure the film is made, but also to take it out to a bigger audience once it's finished because you can't necessarily trust that will happen just because you have a finished film.

Angela Clarke
I think that's an important lesson as for all parties who engage in the act of documentary especially when you're doing stories where those people are deciding to come along with you on a journey and there's a lot of personal sacrifice. To speak to ***The Reluctant Revolutionary,*** your character there is putting himself on the frontline by the very act of having Sean still with him in an area where outside influences are being removed from the situation. Probably so that it can't be documented in a way and seep out into the wider world. You've got a real onus of responsibility when you make a film. It's about thinking about the legacy of the footprint that that film leaves as well. You have those very intense relationships that you have with contributors at that time. But it's about remembering

what happens to them when I leave that zone and go on to make another film. The legacy of that film, especially now when films have a life of their own in the ether. Gone are the days that maybe 10/15 years ago, if a film was shown on TV here, it was a Storyville or it was on the BBC it would maybe get one or two repeats, but it wouldn't always have a life on a platform beyond that. I think nowadays there's an even bigger responsibility for filmmakers to make sure there's a duty of care. What are your thoughts on duty of care to the people that take part in films?

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, duty of care is a big question and it's a challenging one with documentary because there is a power dynamic that's never fully resolved, I think in terms of how films are made and how films exist. And nowadays also just the sheer weight of making a film, the financial weight which also becomes a weight in terms of time and how can you know that somebody who starts a process with you is going to be happy five years down the line, is going to be happy ten years down the line with a film that they once loved, to still have their reality out there in that way.

I don't think we can fully answer that question. I think we need to be aware as documentary filmmakers that it's a responsibility. It's a weight. It's one that you need to think through with care, that you need to share as much of the reality of what you know is possible. But you also can't predict how a film is going to travel, where it's going to go, how it will be received. All these things you have a responsibility to protect or to prepare as much as possible.

But I think an openness and sharing what you do know and understanding that you're on a journey together is something that's important and perhaps as much as you can do. I think there's often a discussion in documentary about whether to pay contributors and historically this has been understood as something that might alter their truth or their reality. I think for me, that it's a very problematic way of thinking about the time that you spend with someone especially where perhaps you are paid for your time and they are not, what does that mean? How does that position you differently? For you this becomes then a job, for them it's their life and they are the reason, the thing that enables you to do your job.

It's a very murky space and I don't know that there's a simple answer. I think there are case-by-case realities that you can identify. Case by case solutions or suggestions to contend with. With something that, as we said at the beginning, is set up in such a Capitalist framework and whether or not your film has been set up according to those models it will in any case, take place in that framework. It will live within that world. It's a real challenge and I don't think that there's a magic solution or a simple answer and that everything changes. What becomes difficult is I think on one level filmmakers bear this burden alone. Institutions need you to indemnify them or ensure them against all eventualities. This means that you're basically taking all risks forever and ever and this is an unrealistic, unfair and deeply problematic practice that ultimately makes most films a little bit dangerous in a sense because you can't fully ensure anything really when you're talking about life and people's lives or the reality of how a film moves.

I really would love to see more institutions bear some of that burden in a sense. A burden becomes a responsibility if it's shared, it becomes less of a burden if it's shared. You're also talking about the difference between an individual filmmaker or a small independent team shouldering the realities and challenges on their own but then if the film is successful and visible then suddenly everybody wants a piece of it. But if there's a problem that arises suddenly, you're on your own.

I mean I've experienced that so many times that I don't have any illusion that your partners are going to be 100% on board when there are problems. I think you can ensure that there's a real communication with the people that you work with to have at least the possibility to discuss and try and find solutions together. But that's in no way a given. Every contract is set up to make the filmmaker or the producer, actually more than the filmmaker, the producer responsible for anything that might happen with a film and that can be a deeply stressful place to be.

Angela Clarke
I completely agree and I think also it comes back to something that I've seen you mention before in conversation about that notion of you're the person on the front line that has a direct relationship with the people who appear in the films. I think you feel, if you're a decent human being, responsible for the journey that you take them on. Like the next film that you go to make ***A Syrian Love Story,*** where you almost want to tell the world about what's happening to hopefully allow people to see something like the process of fleeing a place where trouble unfurls, and the complexities of that and what happens along that way.

And you always feel as a filmmaker that your word is your bond for me in a way, in the same way that you say you trust your gut. I think you can only ever assure people that you'll do the level best that you can do to treat them as a human being. But you are in that tricky space of not wanting to over promise because sometimes people are also putting their hopes within you as well about where this film might take them and hopefully the film will have impact because that's your intentionality of what you want to do with the film. But as you say, you can't control how an audience receives it. Sometimes it feels like even if you pick a team of other people who align with your beliefs and your values, it can be difficult at times, especially when things are precarious in terms of trying to get money to move things on. How do you deal with those kinds of challenges?

Elhum Shakerifar
I think we do have more control than we think and sometimes just in a very simple way in that we can refuse things. It is possible to say no, and it is possible to negotiate even contracts. Everything is negotiable and I think that's something that I have carried through my learning as a producer. Even from the very first films that I produced, knowing that you can reject things that don't align with your values or what you think is right. It's important as teams to identify what your red lines are and why you're making a film and what your notion of success is. Because the market, the industry will tell you that success is a great review, or success is a big audience.

But success for you might be a review by a specific person or success might be an audience in a specific place. It might be that your audience, your first audience is the very people you made the film with, and that success is them feeling that the film means something and that obviously will change the dynamic of the decisions you make. But it also enables you and it also empowers you to say no, and I think that's probably one of our greatest powers as storytellers now.

It becomes complicated when you're making a film over a long time and in a complex reality. Maybe you haven't raised much money, but you must keep going. Maybe it's complicated because, for example in ***A Syrian Love Story*** there's several different factors and realities, whether it's that you're filming with a whole family or there's a forced exile that takes place. There's a political reality that impacts on everybody involved and all these things are things that you need to negotiate along the way. But it can feel difficult to make clear decisions as everything's happening at the same time. I think with that film maybe one of our greatest strengths was being able to say no because along the way we kept being told that we should deliver the film, because the film's relevance was now. It was always now and if you don't deliver the film now, it'll be too late.

For us the film was in conversation with the wider realities of the world or the situation in Syria but more importantly, the film was a relationship between Sean and this family between Amer and Raghda and their kids and Sean and that was the heart of the film. That relationship was what makes the film. It's what the film is and so that was our guide. We knew that, and we were being driven by that relationship and the responsibility that we had to it, but also just the ties that had been woven over so many years were deep, and they were complicated. They weren't as simple, I mean simple as if it's ever as simple in terms of who's being filmed and who's behind the camera, it was multifaceted in all sorts of directions.

Every time we were told you need to deliver this film, it needs to be broadcast now, we knew that we couldn't do that because it wasn't the film. It wasn't right. It wasn't the right film. It wasn't ready. It wasn't ready to be told because that story was still unfolding, and we had the responsibility to keep filming with it.

Angela Clarke
You can see it reflected in the news at the moment, what narratives are important, what conflicts do we pick up, where do we shine a spotlight on and how we define, and by 'we' I mean the Western press, define what stories are important to us at what moments and let's be honest, that's usually guided by what territories or people are important to us and our economic functioning. In the same ways, you could argue things like Sudan now very rarely makes our press and there's some awful things unfurling there but there's a horrible pecking order in a way sometimes of stories and where that importance lies.

A Syrian Love Story by that point is your second film with Sean, and it focuses on this couple, and their personal drama is playing out within the bigger drama of what's going on in Syria. Also, it has possibly one of my favourite children ever that I've watched on film, Bob, who stole my heart. He seems so wise beyond his years but also to speak to what you talked about in the centre that you worked in earlier, there was moments of real

pain and understanding in Bob's journey, but equally moments of him switching to back being a kid and playing outside with his friends and just being bossy and funny.

Those subtilties of things captured in that film was what made that film ultimately, you could describe it as really upsetting, but it is also powerful. There was a real beauty in that film for me in some of those moments as well. This seems to be for you as a producer the first film where you take slightly more control of the reins in terms of its delivery and the life that it will have. I wanted to see if you would maybe expand a little bit more in terms of what issues you were facing that made you think right, I'm going to take hold of these distribution reigns in this way. Why was that so important for you?

Elhum Shakerifar
I mean we could have and a whole podcast on ***A Syrian Love Story***. It was a roller coaster film to make. When we got to the end of the editing process, what *we* knew to be the end of the editing process, we didn't find the interest in the film that we were expecting. We had in essence made a film about a kind of forced exile and this was territory that I knew very well. I'd also worked in festivals a little bit, and I knew there was an audience for this film.

We started filming in Syria before the revolution started, so it kind of charted a journey on such a long scale that it could only be understood in a way that was completely different to what was being seen in the news at the time. I coordinated a release strategy which I was able to do because we owned all the rights to the film, and so we weren't bound by any clauses or contractual things saying you can't show at this time or that time. There were no windows that we had to follow in short. So, we co-ordinated something that was a Q&A tour, that would end with the broadcast on BBC Four.

I timed it in September so that it was ahead of the awards season which is when cinemas get very busy. I thought it was also going to be the time that parliament would come back in after the summer and that Syria would be one of the topics on their agenda and that we could speak to that in some way. Then we did a very thorough mapping I guess of the different allies that we might have in expanding on our visibility or reach or audience development, all this know-how of how to work with cinemas, all of these different things, we'd just learnt as we went along.

We kind of learnt everything and we just contacted people directly whether it was cinemas or people in the press. We asked every single connection and contact that we knew, and we gathered our team quite organically. We tried all sorts of different things. But anyhow the day before the first press screening, the picture of a little boy called Alan Kurdie washed up on the shore and was published. Suddenly the media started talking about a refugee crisis and there's no doubt that image had an impact on the film and its visibility. Because suddenly the film became an answer to understanding why there's a refugee crisis.

Now I don't fully embrace that kind of flat understanding of cause and effect. But it did bolster the visibility of the film. It was a kind of a combination between the strategic, what you can plan, the access, what you know, but it's also the serendipity much like anything

in documentary. It's a combination of these things and that reality also gave visibility to the film.

And from there the film really developed its own life. But there are all sorts of things that happened with that film which were just down to us making suggestions of things. You know anything that people say is not possible, when you're the person who holds all the rights, you've got nothing to lose, so you might as well just try. The film was scheduled to go out on BBC4 at 10pm I think on the 15th of September. I can't remember exactly the date. Anyway, let's say on Monday night and just in passing we were having this conversation, Sean and I, and he said, wouldn't it be so amazing to have it on BBC One though and he decided to just write to the commissioner. He wrote to her and said what do you think? This is the film of the moment. What about it, and she said, yeah, I think you're right. And it went out on BBC 4 at 10pm on one day and the next day it went out on BBC One 9pm and this was unheard of as a way of broadcasting, but it happened, and it happened also because there are no rules in a way.

There are rules but there are no rules, and I think sometimes when you're working on your own film - we'd been working on that film for six years. We'd been through that journey all of us together, obviously with different proximities, but we had a commitment to ensuring that this film reached people. We had given so much of our lives to it and we owed it to Amar and Raghda and their kids to make sure that it reached people and spoke to the reality that they'd kind of given their lives to in Syria and since they'd left.

Angela Clarke
The ripple effect of that film I remember at the time was huge. I always think that people aren't always as careful about the language they use when you celebrate a film that is powerful. It's also sometimes people forget that ideally, we shouldn't have had to have made that film. I think it was probably one of the first films I remember where it took on a life its own. It made me realize the legacy and the footprint that a film can have and I think that in and of itself was maybe one of the first examples that I had witnessed unfurling in real time where you think god the power that it can have to take stories in a different direction, to change the narrative, to shift the perspective, to allow people into a world that maybe they haven't seen before and to take a deep dive into understanding another level of humanity. And you guys did that with nothing other than sheer will and determination.

Elhum Shakerifar
Oh my God only sheer will! *(laughs)* We were hand-carrying DCP's to the cinema. Honestly it was an overwhelming piece of work. But it's true. It was sheer will and I think one of the reasons why that film resonates so deeply is because at its heart is a relationship. At its heart is a breakup, it's a breakdown and even without having been in a relationship everybody knows that feeling, and I think that's what people connected to the most. It's that moment that gets you and there are so many different aspects to it because obviously you're with a family for such a long period of time but I think at its heart it has this undeniably...*(pauses)*

Angela Clarke
Well, there's a universality...

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, I was really trying to avoid using the word universal *(laughs)*

Angela Clarke
I know! *(laughs)*

Elhum Shakerifar
It's kind of it's a funny one isn't it because often there's all this conversation about documentaries should be more specific and that makes them more universal, like the universality in a documentary is what can make it relevant to people who have completely different experience. I don't love the word universal, but I think there is resonance in each other's stories and I kind of grapple with these the words that have been associated with documentary for so long because I think they've contributed to the downfall of this medium.

Angela Clarke
Yeh.

Elhum Shakerifar
I think the notion that to be able to empathize with someone else, you know that you need to be presented with a certain type of story to empathize with someone. The way that someone needs to be humanized for you to be able to acknowledge them, I think these are very violent actually and there's something in universality which also speaks to a kind of standardization of the ways that we are, and the ways that we live.

Maybe it's also to do with how much language is co-opted these days. You know the way that some words now, almost you don't feel like you can talk about decolonial spaces, because suddenly everything is a decolonial space. We've lost sight of what it means to decolonize something, which is a much longer, more complex, complicated and often painful situation because you're actually uprooting and rerouting and there's all sorts of things to consider and it's not simple.

I think this question of universality also speaks to that to some extent. But it also speaks to something that maybe ties in with audience and how audience is conceived of. As if audiences are a monolith that we need to engage with, as if it's a great thing to have the largest audience in the world. I don't know whether it's great to make films with that perspective, with that kind of ambition in a sense. I think we should be happy with a film that's watched by one person and that moves one person.

It doesn't make sense to us because we make films within an ultra-capitalist system but ultimately, if you're able to change someone's life, that's a huge thing. That's the measure of a life in many ways. To kind of have this notion that large audience's matter, or immediate audiences' matter is also losing sight of the value of something over time or its meaning over time. So yes, I think there's all sorts of vocabulary that's now associated

with documentary filmmaking that I think is doing the actual craft of documentary a disservice and there are limited spaces where we can talk in depth because we are struggling, I'd say more and more as an industry in the UK.

I think there are limited spaces where you can go to develop work. I'm not even talking about funding work, I'm talking about just the means to spend time thinking and researching and understanding what it is that you're trying to do, before you do it.

And to not feel tied to needing to then deliver something because I think it locks you into having to deliver, having to think in very material terms. The material reality of living in the UK is becoming heavier and heavier and so what does that mean in terms of the choices that you make, or the decisions you make, and the shortcuts you take in the work that you're making. All these things are difficult to contend with but they're absolutely part of where we're going to go next with documentary.

Angela Clarke
No, they are for sure and that in and of itself could also be another whole podcast conversation. But I think that leads me into talking about your next batch of films. You move slightly further east again in terms of geography, you're in one place for a period of time and then you slide slightly to the east and the next film you do ***Even When I Fall,*** focuses on the first circus in Nepal, set up by survivors of childhood trafficking.

I think this takes what you've built, and what you've created and what you've learned on ***A Syrian Love Story*** and amplifies it again. Reflecting on what you just said in terms of this time, it's two female directors, in fact, the next three films you do are with female directors. This is a story about survivors and to unpick some of the things that you've discussed, this is a story that again requires you to take that film by the hand and really try to change the trajectory of the narrative when it enters the bigger world for people to see.

And I thought could you maybe speak to some of the themes and some of the things that unfurled in that landscape and why that brought a new set of challenges? It's a beautiful, beautiful film that for me is filled with a lot of hope, and a lot of power, a lot of quiet power. So, tell us a bit more about how you came to be in it?

Elhum Shakerifar
Yes, well Sky Neal and Dara McLarnon are the directors. We all studied Visual Anthropology together. We'd known each other from there and I'd long known that they were making a film together about *Circus Kathmandu*. But I couldn't understand why it wasn't being funded because it just sounded like the most incredible story. I joined the team and quickly learnt that there is a real challenge around this question of victim story and survivor story and to an extent which that I could never have known.

When Sky first told me, every time we're asked to speak about the circus, people want to know how *bad* the circus was. I couldn't understand this, but I soon learnt my lesson and understood that this film is precious because it's taking its cue from the circus, and the circus was a space of incredible resilience and grounding in reframing their narrative.

Reframing the way they had been understood and to position themselves as survivors and that we took our cue from them, and it was important that the film spoke to that narrative. This was pre #MeToo which I think is significant because the reality of making that film and what was overcome in the making of that film, I think, would have been acknowledged differently after the #MeToo movement.

But we were committed to an incredible group of young people and when you work with an incredible group of young people, you're infused by this energy. and this responsibility to really represent them as they deserve to be represented, and to involve them in the making of the film in a way, that the film was also something that empowered them to take certain positions and to make decisions for their lives. There's a relationship that was built between Sky and Saraswoti and Sky and Sheetal around how it was that they wanted to live their lives and whether it was the witness that Skye and Dara provided, or it was the reality that they all brought into the mix by all being mothers or becoming mothers in the process of the film being made.

I think I understood that we had to be very clear about how we spoke about the film. That that language would be the language that was taken and replicated, and we were extremely strict about this and managed all the press ourselves in-house. It's also recognizing that to some extent the reason why there's so much superficial reality out there is that there's a lot of laziness in a world that moves fast, and that doesn't want to spend time. What's considered to be the most salient point of a story is often the kind of point of tension or the point of drama. But we can make the choice to displace that understanding, we can make the choice to recentre around what we understand to be the drama. We can make the decision to do that. We just need to tell it in the strongest possible terms so that the other perspective is not understood to be central anymore.

This is what we do as storytellers. It also kind of speaks to why around that same time I set up a company Hakawati, which I work through now, which is recognizing that. Hakawati means storyteller in Arabic, and so it recognizes that there is storytelling in the filmmaking. But there's also storytelling in the distribution, and in a strategy, and in the way that you talk about something. There's storytelling in the curation of something, in the meta-narrative between three films that are sitting alongside each other. They're also saying something bigger or different by their very conversation or just being alongside.

But it was also a lot of fun releasing ***Even When I Fall*** because it was working with a film that you knew had such a strong potential to inspire and to enable, that really could capture a kind of imagination around what it is possible to do and how it is possible to overcome even the most challenging of realities. And I was bolstered with every single public screening we had from people who'd say things that were why you make films. People saying things such as I feel this after watching, or that I could do anything. Or you know it's so wonderful to see an elder from this part of the world speaking with power and being listened to, it's so powerful to hear women expressing themselves around the issues that they face, but not painted as victims of their realities, but as people who've managed to overcome them. I think it's one of the films, and the release strategy, that I'm the proudest of in a sense because we managed to galvanize and weave together all sorts

of things from working with Circus communities, working with Nepali communities in the UK.

Recognizing that both directors had young children, and they went on the road with them, and took them to Q&A's, and people at Q&A's would say that they'd never seen a director with their child at a Q&A's. This was important to us because it was very much part of the ethos of how this film had been made. The reality at the heart of this film which for me, the film is about many things, but it's a film about motherhood. It's a conversation and an understanding and a kind of frequency that runs through the film, that I think enabled it to it to be made in this way. I think there's a lot of conversation now about who's entitled to make which films and Skye and Dara, neither of them is from Nepal. Neither of them speak Nepali, but there was something that they brought into the mix, that was on a different level. You know over the years, that frequency that was strengthened and that was developed around motherhood, and it was around understanding your place in the world as a mother or in relation to motherhood.

I think that's a very subtle thing, but I think that's the thread that runs through the whole film and that was what enabled it. Sometimes those threads are visible, sometimes they're not. I Think for ***Even When I Fall,*** it's a visible thread to some people, not to everyone but that doesn't matter because it's a good story and so you can engage with it as it is anyway. To go back to Persian poetry, that's a very Sufi way of looking at storytelling, where there's the visible part of things that everybody can enjoy and appreciate. But the less visible part is maybe something for the initiated. It's something for those who have maybe spent a deeper reflection and you don't have to have grasped that to enjoy the beauty of the film or the beauty of the poem. But if you spend time with it, if you do grasp that deeper layer, maybe it gives you something more.

Angela Clarke
There were so many moments in that film that I really loved that I just thought were beautiful. For me as well, some of the other things that I took away from it was that notion of what is family? The cohort of people that had been trafficked initially coming into an environment, had almost rebuilt themselves as a family, so it's about those ties that you have that aren't blood ties but that are created. And for your two main protagonists as they're on their journey of trying to figure it out, they've been made to do things they don't want to do. And there's a sadness that you see in both girls where actually although there is a truth in that, they also got huge satisfaction out of the act of performing and what that meant to them and how that made them feel and the power and the freedom that they got when they were engaged in those moments of doing what they were doing as part of their circus performance.

It's a subtlety of understanding that sometimes it's easy to think that we've closed that door on that bad world and now you'll be 'good'. But for me, the richness and the texture of that film is about unpacking that. For me, the most powerful sequence in that film is when those two girls come to meet the other lady that they go and talk to in a village. They're both reconciled where they've been, and they've built this strength and they're now doing these performances that give them a sense of meaning and empowerment and they're sharing that with another lady. For me, it's those small moments that are the

things that are probably more significant for them in their life. Those moments with that woman, she will probably remember the conversation she had with those two girls, and it's those lovely moments that you can only get when you spend time with people.

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, and leaning into that possibility of ambivalence. Not everything is clear-cut. I think that's the most important part of this film in its storytelling in a sense. We didn't settle for a simple way of telling this story. Like ***A Syrian Love Story***, we were being encouraged along the way to finish the film because it was felt that we had the story or the ways that we were being encouraged to think about the dramatic tension was very much tied to big events. Whereas we felt that really the emotional arc of the film is an internal arc and it's one that's much more subtle. And we had to be driven by that. And that the film couldn't end when there was a big performance at Glastonbury because what does that say, does that just say everything has a Disney ending and everyone's fine. That wasn't what we wanted to say. *(laughs)*

You know the film ends in a place of ambivalence. It ends with this kind of incredible journey you've been on. But also, with this reminder that trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal activity in the world. We must recognize that and contend with it and contend with its reality so that we might be able to alter and change it. But ambivalence I think is so important to storytelling, to not have clear answers necessarily because that's our experience as humans. You shift emotions all through the course of the day. Why is it that you feel that a film needs to take you on a straight trajectory towards feeling good. That's a problematic way of engaging with life, and how documentary should reflect life, that's not what documentary should be doing.

I don't think that because it's ambivalent it's no less inspiring. I think it's incredibly inspiring and specifically because it's ambivalent. That was one of the main pieces of feedback that we'd get from people saying it's so rare to see a film that's so complicated and I love that. As someone who is complicated and I suppose maybe slightly cerebral in the way that I engage with things, I think that's fine and there's a place for everything, but it's lovely to hear that because it's recognizing that it's complicated because the emotions are complex and they need to be untangled or maybe some of them can never be untangled. But it doesn't mean that you can't follow that story. You can still follow that story and engage with its complicatedness.

Angela Clarke
Of course, of course. One of the things I was going to ask you, that I was mulling over as I was watching things and reading how things are reviewed and referred to, and it leads back to that point that you've just made that about this notion of '*Disney-fying'* our stories. One of the things that I remember when studying anthropology, we had a visiting lecturer came for a period, and this particular chap studied stories from the circumpolar north. And I remember him telling us one of the stories and I don't remember all the details of the story, but I remember that the end of the story was about a child that had done something, and they realized that the thing that we're doing was bad but the child went back and did the action again and the story ended with the child dying.

And at the time I remember all of us in that class that day responding to that story saying oh God, that wasn't what I'd thought was going to happen. And then we unpacked that notion of how we live with this Disney perspective that everything will come good and it'll be magical at the end which is obviously nonsense and bears no relation to real life and its messiness. But the stories that you and the filmmakers that you've been involved with make are the stories that I'm interested in because to me, there's a reality there. There's a rawness there. There's a truth there and all those things are important markers for me to learn about other people in the world and their situations and the journeys that they go on.

Sometimes films, like the films that you make, I think incorrectly are referred to as difficult or challenging and that really grates me slightly. Do you think that comes back to our sense of what we perceive and by 'we', I mean the bigger powers at be in society, that a story must have a happy ending? Is that a very western thing? I wondered when you were talking about all the Persian literature and things that you've studied is that just something that's a western ethos or is that something that in other forms of storytelling plays out.

Elhum Shakerifar
I wonder whether this notion of being satisfied is a very capitalist ethos. Essentially this notion that something can satisfy you. Something can solve your issues and it's generally 'a thing' and it's generally 'a thing' that you can purchase. So, the fact that films also at this point must be purchased, it speaks to that very notion that this can help you solve something. This will entertain you. This will make you happy for a short period of time. I'd say it's capitalist first and foremost and we have the burden of existing within that system.

But storytelling has served so many different purposes and it's often a kind of knowledge sharing. It can be entertainment. It can be a question of survival, like the story of this child that you shared from your memory of anthropology classes. I think these different facets are important to remember as we tell stories. They help us identify why we're telling a story in the first place. Also to remember that we have to be true to, I suppose if there is ever a truth of why you are telling a story, it's probably in the why. It's in what's driving you to tell a story, and I think that's a very important thing to identify and recognize, and to be true to. I think that's the guide in a sense. And that's the thing that also speaks to other people who come to your film and will get something from it, that doesn't enter that capitalist notion of satisfaction, but enters this other space of maybe you need to see your reality reflected in a completely different form to recognize it.

Maybe you need to understand something of a world that you don't understand anymore. Maybe a film helps you contend with a reality that you've struggled with whether it's something in your past or something relating to a parent or a friend. Maybe it relates to death. Maybe it relates to loss. Maybe it relates to friendship. Maybe it relates to a relationship that you can't quite work out. Films can have all sorts of keys it depends on what you go to it with, they're not necessarily oracles. But I think they often can be and sometimes a film captures you in a moment and makes you think about something that you didn't think you needed to think about and that's I think the pleasure and the joy of documentary is in those spaces.

This kind of space of satisfaction or even sometimes this slight wonder in looking at the world or looking at the 'other' supposedly is also very much the 'other' is this colonial frame, it kind of suggests that there are separations between us which are convenient for certain countries to maintain because they maintain a distance and they enable a country like the UK to continue to export arms to X country. It's important for them to maintain these narratives for these reasons. And it's important for us to keep making films that complicate those narratives and make it possible to ask more questions about narratives and to look at a narrative and challenge it. Because I think it enriches our world to be able to do that and I think there can be as much satisfaction in that as there is in you know, having an ice cream *(laughs)*.

Angela Clarke
Yeah and also for me I think that it feels a much richer experience when you go into cinema and you sit in the dark for an hour or two hours or however long it is and you become absorbed in another world and you see other things and I suppose the expectation of a film isn't to entertain for me. It's to make you think about things in a different way or challenge the things that I think about or what I perceive to be my norm. It's never been about escapism. I think that there are other things that you enjoy within that space and that's what attracts you to those particular stories. I suppose the next couple of films that you're juggling around the same time touch on death, and that's between ***Almost Heaven***, Carol Salter's film set in a in a Chinese mortuary, which I absolutely love, and ***Island*** set on the Isle of Wight. Do you want to tell us a little bit about both those films and I guess the challenges that came with entering that kind of territory as part of a storytelling narrative?

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, definitely it was my death phase.. *(laughing)*

Angela Clarke
You're like Picasso, you're going through your different phases!

Elhum Shakerifar
Yes I had different phases. These two came together somehow. They're very different films - ***Almost Heaven***, I mean Carol is an incredibly quiet and patient and astute filmmaker. She was searching for a film to enable her to engage with the question of death, which is such a huge reality to contend with and she tells the story through a young Mortician who's very afraid of death. It's a film with a wonderful sense of humour and has such a lovely sense of our place in the world and how it is that we contend with our fears.

I think what's beautiful about the film is that it really recognizes that fear and curiosity sit on a very delicate line alongside each other. And you can feel this both in Ying Ling who's the young woman that the film follows and in Carol in her perspective and the relationship she builds with Ying Ling. I can't say that I had a huge amount to do, I was an executive producer on that film as just a kind of sounding board of encouragement along the way because it's a complicated thing to make a film that challenges so many things. Death

sits in the space of great fear for many people and Carol managed that one entirely on her own and was very deserving of the BIFA that year.

And then ***Island***, I also joined after the film had been shot. I started working with Stephen Eastward as he returned from the Isle of Wight with this incredible material and the experience of having tried to place a frame around death which is kind of outside of everything that it might mean and an interesting artistic conundrum, because death is also the thing that reminds us that our lives are linear, just like films are, and that they have an endpoint. Plus, it gives meaning to all the other things that we do in our lives. The conceit of trying to place a frame around something that kind of defies temporality was an interesting one. But also, I felt from having experienced multiple deaths which were sudden and tragic in my life and seeing how little people felt equipped to speak directly about death, to have words, to be able to communicate that, it was something that could perhaps open a space of conversation.

What was interesting about both films as they were released into the world, was to see the space of conversation that those films opened. Being in a cinema and watching those films with other people, generally the audiences just didn't want to leave the cinema after the end of the film or after the end of the Q&A's. And we started working with end-of-life doulas to create spaces to discuss and to talk and to find words that maybe there hadn't been spaces to find words beforehand. So those were interesting experiences of recognizing the power of cinema, the power of communal viewing, the difference that comes from watching something in a communal space.

You're always on your own with the blank screen. But being on your own with a group of strangers in a sense has this grounding reality to it somehow. And there was so much exchange that happened around both films. So much space opened. So much feedback we got from people thanking us for enabling them to sit with something that they had otherwise struggled to sit with. In some cases, to prepare for things that they felt were going to happen. Deaths of loved ones or making decisions about how someone should be buried, all these really unexpected and wonderful conversations to know the way that a film might impact on somebody's life or the way that they think about things, the way that they might live more fully as a result of having spent some time with something that you've spent time making.

It's interesting, you talked about spending time in a cinema, and I think film is also this space of time compression in a sense. The work that we do to make a film is compressed into the film, but at the same time it's an absolute privilege for people to spend 90 minutes watching something. It should be something that's always understood as a privilege. And coming back to this kind of capitalist perspective that drives everything in the world. Our attention is the thing that is the most sought after these days. Access to our attention, whether it's social media or the news, governments, they need our attention because our attention will help them monetize essentially, will help them drive things into various directions.

The attention that you have from someone in 90 minutes at the cinema is something that's incredibly precious and I think it must be matched in a way with the intention that

you place in the making of a film. And the attention that you pay sometimes it can feel overwhelming. The films that you produce over years and years, they're made sometimes, most of these films have been made longitudinally upwards of three, four years, and maybe ***Ayouni*** we made in maybe 7 years. ***A Syrian Love Story*** was 5 years. ***Even When I Fall*** was 7 years. These are long, long periods of our lives that are woven into these films. But in a way that's also recognizing the value of time. They hold time within them, but they also have so many pieces of our lives and they recognize the value of time.

Angela Clarke
Especially with something like ***Islands*** where, usually when people experience death it's personal isn't it? It's the passing of a relative that's close to you or a friend or whoever it may be, but it's somebody that has inhabited that space in your life and therefore as well as processing their own end, you're processing feelings about how you're going to feel with them not being present in your life anymore. I think what was really beautiful about that film was being in the space of the hospice, when you're surrounded by all these wonderful carers that work to bring joy into that space, in those very small moments that you have in those days as the clock is ticking and you're counting down to those last moments when you take your last breath like you see quite literally with one of the characters in the film.

I think as a society we don't talk about death. We don't think about death. We avoid it or sold a million one things to keep ourselves looking young, and we do this, and we do that and it's that great pretence isn't it. We're told to think it's not going to happen to us when it's one of the only as they say, one of the only things that you can guarantee in life. We're all born, and we all die.

So there was something intriguing to me about watching something like that in a cinema space as well. Because I think there's something protected about that space. It really annoys me you know, people watch television in a different way now where they have their phones and they're constantly, you're watching something and they're on their phone. And in a way you don't do that, or I don't do that in the cinema. I have been known to do a lot of shhh, turn your phone off...

Elhum Shakerifar
Ah you're one of those... *(laughs)* The sacred space.

Angela Clarke
Yeah, well because I just feel it's disrespectful. Somebody's gone to the bother of making a film but also its disrespectful to the other people that are there for that experience of sitting in a dark room to watch something. I think as you say, not having your focus detracted gives a power to those films in that space as well. You can be in the moment, and I think again there was some beautifully subtle moments in the film. Where you're just watching people as they're reconciling that the end is near. I wondered how challenging that film was put out into the world. And from a producer's point of view, it feels like you dial up the notch on this because the kind of impact producing element of

this seems greater again, than what maybe you've had to do or what you what was required to do on this particular film.

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, well, it's interesting I think the impact side of things and working with end-of-life doulas and we worked with Katherine Mannox to actually develop a toolkit for junior doctors and nurses to work with the film as a kind of death education. Something that they don't get, or they weren't getting as part of their curriculum. This came from the feedback that we got when we released the film. It wasn't something that we imagined beforehand.

So in terms of ***Island*** I think it was really fascinating to me to learn the extent to which death was a taboo subject. But I think again having worked with cinemas was a real blessing in a sense. Cinemas know their audiences. There are like community centre's. They have a very direct relationship with the people who come in so they're probably a lot less worried about putting on a film like ***Island*** for example, than a distributor that has to sell to cinemas and so it was also working with those kind of relationships and thinking, okay we need to be more direct with this.

We were pleasantly surprised that the film was certified a 15. I believe the film could have been certified at 12, but you know maybe we're not there yet socially. *(laughs)* I think our first screening of the film was at London Film Festival and obviously I also worked at London Film Festival. Obviously, I didn't program my own film, but I was privy to some notes in which I saw that there was a trigger warning that was going to be made at the beginning of the screening. I was really shocked to see this. There is nothing violent in the film. There's no violence. You see pain managed death, you see pain and those things are certainly upsetting, or they can be difficult to see. But I really questioned, and we as a team really questioned this, like does it need to be so managed I guess in the engagement with a very pain managed, peaceful death.

A death that's probably closer to what many of us in this country will experience and yet at the same time we see things in the news every day that are extremely violent, and we have no trigger warning for those. We absorb them almost without question and problematically with this notion that some things happen in some places, as if they can, which is deeply problematic.

The other thing that was really happening at that time was the #MeToo movement and so I remember going into that screening and I remember that the first page of the paper that's freely available in the Tube was depicting in detail, this kind of detailed rape scene that was on the front page of the newspaper. I wished I hadn't read that. It was something I wished I hadn't read and absorbed, and I couldn't understand how the dynamic between certain things are freely shared, certain things are warned against and certain things are kind of taboo. This was also part of why we thought carefully about how we were going to release ***Islands*** but also this film, is a film that works with time in a very particular way. It works with this assumption that you come in knowing that it's a film about death and maybe one of the first frames of film you see features a dead body. It's the dead body of Alan who is the person that you later see breathing until he doesn't breathe anymore. He's

there at the beginning of the film to tell you that this is the end point, and we're going to come back to it. But if you are worried about seeing a dead body. You get that over and done with within the first few frames and the rest of the film is like a meditation on time.

It's allowing you to slow down and to engage with that reality because that reality exists in its own temporality, and we can't enter from the busy and hectic worlds that we live in and expect that we can just engage with this. So, it's a film that understands its place I think, but at the same time I'd describe sitting with someone as they're dying as a similar kind of recalibrating your tempo as it is, to hold a new-born. You know holding a child, you shift the way that your body's moving. Suddenly you start to focus on the way that you are responsible for this small being. If you were rushed, if you had stuff to do, if you were hungry, you kind of forget all those things because there's something much more important that's attracting the centre of your focus.

And I'd say the film is kind of operating with a similar understanding of what it is to behold the image of somebody as they die and to think about the agency we give that person. To question this idea of why it is that we feel it's better to look away from death than it is to behold it. We learned a lot in the making of that film. It is a film that I'm also deeply moved to have been involved with and deeply moved by the families at the heart of the film who also trusted Stephen, trusted us to make this film in the way that we did.

It's also testament really to the hospice on the Isle of Wight and the incredible staff. The team that works there who could see that we were trying to do something that celebrated their work but also their ethos of understanding that we can lead better lives if we can have better deaths. There are better deaths that you can have, and they enable you also to live better lives.

Angela Clarke
I think as well when you're in that sphere of being inside a hospice, it has a very different feel to it than the atmosphere you can sometimes have in a hospital. Because in a hospital, I think sometimes there's a disconnect between the body and the process and the procedure and maybe dehumanizing is a bit too strong an expression to apply to it, but in a hospice it feels like you're in a medical setting, but we're treating people as if they are people again, and not as if they are just bodies or processes or procedures. The essence of the person and who they are is still very much front and centre.

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah I mean hospices are incredible places and they're incredible also because they understand the kind of 360 of a life and of a human and of their family and of all of the things that you need to really care. Hospitals are under a different kind of pressure and both hospices and hospitals are under incredible pressure from this government, and part of the reason why the quality of care that we might receive is changing is to do with government cuts and the ways the NHS is under so much pressure and this constant drive to privatize something that's so precious.

Its strength is in it being a public service and this understanding that every person in this country, just as every person on this planet should have access to health care on the

same terms is such a beautiful notion. The idea of how it could be possible that we've reached a point where parts of those services are privatised, and they're being privatised just for profits. They're being driven by different metrics than care or quality of life or dignity. These are things that should be central in our understanding of how we should all live and what we should all have access to.

Angela Clarke
Yeah, be afforded that at the end of life.

Elhum Shakerifar
Absolutely.

Angela Clarke
Taking that back to your producer role, so ***Island*** is shot, you get on board at that point to that film on its next journey as it were. But also the extent of the impact producing that you do and the documentation that you produce that supports that film for future medical professionals, doesn't really start to become something that you're aware of a merit in doing that, or there is a need or a requirement or a benefit to do that until you're at the stage of showing things by the sounds of it until it's in cinemas. So again, to hark back to the role of the producer and the kind of elasticity that comes with that role, how do you manage that?

Because I guess from all the work that you've done, you're constantly juggling to at least two if not three films at any one time. It feels in my head, it's a bit like you know when you see in airports where you've got those escalators that run along next to each other. It's like you're jumping on this one for a little bit, and then back on to this one and they're all running at slightly different paces, how do you manage that? Because if you've committed to a film and the film is beautiful and you can see the merit or the benefit of what you could do with that, but sometimes is it a struggle for you to do that personally? Just the time that is needed to commit to it because you are having to let it unfurl and adjust your life around it I guess, is that a fair assessment?

Elhum Shakerifar
Oh yes, that's a very fair assessment. I mean I can't say that I've juggled particularly well over the years. It's a real challenge because you know where a film starts, but you never know where it's going to end. How and where and what it will need, and this is where documentary is such a kind of leap of faith. But it's also a risk in so many different senses. Sometimes I've juggled it better than others, but it's difficult. It's also difficult when...you know I think it's important to always know why you're making a certain film. I'm proud of all the films that I've produced, and I think that's because outside of what they've done or achieved which might be what other people see or judge them by, for me, it's that I know what it is that drew me to that in the first place.

What it was that drew me to it, the kernel, the why, the gut feeling, that thing and so even where I've certainly not been paid, or enough, or you know found it overwhelming enough to feel like maybe I'll never make another film again, I have not regretted any of the choices that I have made. But I think it's really challenging for producers to know how to

juggle. I don't see that there's a simple way of doing it. There are some producers who do it brilliantly and I think often there's a balance between things that you do. Like there's a project that is maybe more lucrative that enables you to have stability and so it enables you to do things that are slightly bigger risks, that maybe you don't know exactly how long they'll take or what they'll need. I've generally kind of juggled my time between teaching and sometimes it was more curating and distributing work with producing. But it's a challenging dynamic and I'd say you can't be on three escalators at once, which is why your analogy is excellent. *(laughing)*

I think it's challenging to find a balance and nowadays I only really want to produce one film at a time. I don't think I can go back to this kind of high prolific production space also because of the way that I like to produce films which is really engaging with the depth of time, with a real journey that we might all go on. It's not easy to enable that. It's not easy to enable that in a way that centres a sense of care for everyone involved. I don't know that I've always been successful with that. I've tried but it's a really hard thing to do especially in this landscape and especially in this country these days.

Angela Clarke
What's always intriguing me is the notion of you've taken these films that in and of themself are complicated stories, sometimes in really challenging locations that are perceived to be difficult to support sometimes because of that unknown end or where it's going to take you on that journey. I think also as you alluded to earlier that notion of what we mean when we talk about consent and care and accountability has grown. Budgets have got smaller. Timelines have got tighter. Everything has become much more pressured in a way now.

I think it always feels like you must slightly give a part of yourself. Like there doesn't seem a way that you can do it without having to make a lot of sacrifice, and as you always say, that lovely turn of phrase about finding your north star and knowing where your where your line is I think it's hard when you're making films that are really important stories to tell that you feel a real burden of responsibility and sometimes sacrifice your own sanity at moments, for the story because you're trapped in a place where you think that person's circumstance is much worse than mine, so therefore I have to just give that little bit more. And I wondered have you had moments like that where you've really pushed yourself. And how do you pull yourself back to the place that you need to be?

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, it's a complicated question in a sense and I learned this working in the community centre that in the third sector there are quite a lot of people who seem to be there for the wrong reasons. You know, working in like charitable spaces, third sector spaces because they want to help somehow to make themselves feel better and that's maybe not the place to be working in a space like that from. Because you start over promising, and you start thinking that you individually can solve somebody's reality. In working with children for example, this kind of letting a certain type of feeling overcome the professional relationship that you're in, that's a dangerous space to be.

I think in those spaces I understood, or I learned that being a responsible consistent adult presence was the best thing that I could do. It's more important to do that and to provide consistency than it is to promise things that you can never fulfil. You might think one day that I'll always be able to commit every Monday to doing extra homework with this child. But the one Monday you skip it because you must go to the doctors or because you're too tired or whatever it is, that has an impact that you will struggle to overcome. It's recognizing those things that's so important to those kinds of roles in frontline work with vulnerable young people, vulnerable people.

And there's something of that I transpose to documentary and it's understanding the real limitations of what you can do as a human and so the consistency that you need to bring into the mix when you're working with a team. Sometimes your team is vulnerable, as well as the people that you're making a film with, whose lives you're representing. Sometimes you're made vulnerable by the film that you're making, there are all of these different dynamics to consider. I think the only thing you can do is to have a kind of an honesty, maybe a transparency around how it is that you're engaging with each other, to clarify those things at the outset as much as possible.

I don't know that there's anything more than that you can do. I think I've learned that within the film space in a slightly harder way because I've been juggling many things at the same time, I've not recognized that it's impacting me in a way to not have a fee on this. Or to think that I can get this fee later down the line. If down the line is seven years down the line, that's a long time to wait and it has an impact. If it's seven years down the line, that's a good thing maybe because sometimes it never comes!

I suppose I've learned a little bit over the years, but maybe my best learning is that I can't produce so many films at once. It's just not possible for me. It might be possible for other people who have different setups, but I work in a certain way. I have a certain type of sensibility. It's not to comment on anyone else's, but just to say that I'm that person. Maybe my best protection of myself is in recognizing this. It's like the first rule of first aid which I also believe everybody should learn. I feel like there are all sorts of things we should engage with at school whether it's you know, thinking about death or thinking about learning about first aid and the first rule of first aid is you don't help anyone else unless you're in a safe place yourself.

And the documentary space is fraught when it comes to mental health. There are newly created budget lines, suggested to engage with mental health to enable people to have support. But it's not enough really to have a kind of one-off engagement with a space. Sometimes what you're dealing with is coming from a much deeper place and it's engaging with something that's much bigger than simply the fact of the film. Maybe what's driving you towards a film is something that needs kind of a bigger space of support and engagement and so yeah, this big question of helping others only if you're safe yourself is something that I think would change the face of documentary if we really engaged with it. And maybe again, I come back to this question of help or support and I draw a question mark around it because I also don't think it's the right word to take into documentary just like I don't think it's quite the right word to take into the third sector spaces either and but

that's a roundabout way of saying I don't have an answer for that I'm still working that out *(laughs)*.

Angela Clarke
As ever you made your point beautifully and I think that as you say all you can do is recognize how you function as a person, as a producer and you must find what's best for you to work to give your best as well isn't it. I think sometimes it can be a space that the bigger structures around us can make you feel guilty because it comes back to if it's a financial or capitalistic transaction where you have to do that because we've got a film to deliver and you have to do that because we've put money in it and I think that's always one of the things that is really hard I think in this industry sometimes just to be able to stand up for your beliefs.

I think that that's one of the things when you're starting off as a producer, especially if you aspire to work in the same kinds of territories that you've been working in, where there are a lot of complexities already at play within those spaces, I think it is hard to do sometimes.

I suppose in a way we should round up otherwise you will be on this podcast forever and you'll never get anything made again! *(laughing)* What lessons did you take from the last two films that you put out into the ether? You returned to working with Sean, so that was on ***A Northern Soul*** and then ***Ayuni***, am I pronouncing that properly?

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeh.

Angela Clarke
Okay by Yasmine which was about the forcible disappearance of people in Syria and Sean's film was based in Hull during the Year of Culture and followed a lovely character who was trying I guess to give people a voice and make them included in the creative world as it were. How were those films for you, and what did you learn or what did you add to your repertoire of knowledge and experience?

Elhum Shakerifar
Well, it was great to work with Sean on home turf, that was lovely. Sean always makes his films thinking of his friends in Hull. So the conundrum of then making a film in Hull suddenly it was like oh my God who's the audience for this then was an interesting one! He'd been invited to be director of the opening ceremonies of the City Of Culture and so he had this question mark I suppose around what does culture mean in a city that's been so decimated and economically what does it mean when people are working multiple jobs and they can't make ends meet, but there's this multimillion pound show in town that's going to put a spotlight on the city, but then move on.

I think the film grew out of this question and this desire to reflect on the state of the nation, this kind of the reality of in work poverty. It's only been exacerbated since we made that film and to think about the ordinary lives of people in a city that's suddenly in the spotlight

in a cultural space, but what does that mean for them and what does culture mean when you can't afford to put food on the table?

There are lots of things to say about that film and it's beating heart Steve, is still really active in his community with the beats bus and beats bus record doing loads of incredible work with young people, enabling kids and young people to find their voice to make music and to develop their creative aspirations and that's an incredible legacy. Maybe the film was part of planting the seed but it's absolutely his testament, his drive and ambition and integrity and just what a wonderful person he is. There are some interesting things to reflect on which, coming back to questions of the certification of that film. We expected it to be certified 12A because it was a film made largely with young people, but we were very surprised to get certification back which certified it at 15. This it transpired was because of the swearing in the film or the language which we hadn't even noticed that much.

Angela Clarke
Yeh.

Elhum Shakerifar
It started a conversation I guess around class and language about who's allowed to speak in certain ways. There were some swear words in the film but none of them were ever directed at someone else. They were all kind of within speech, spoken in a way that none of us making the film had picked up on this being particularly problematic. And we challenged the BBFC, the British Board of Film Certification because we had the example of ***The King's Speech*** in which there had been a scene where there was a lot of swearing as a way of untying the king's tongue and that had been given a 12A. So, we brought this question of why is it that film is okay and this film isn't, is this a bias basically!

And the certification was never changed, but the film was debated in parliament twice. The Hull MP's took to it and really kept bringing it up because it was felt to be something that represented the local area and something that was important to discuss which was a question of class representation. It was also named in the UN Poverty Reports which I think says a lot. I think we so often think about other parts of the world when we think about issues and problems. But this country is full of problems and in work poverty is something that urgently needs to be kind of recentred and understood.

It's unacceptable that in a country like ours that is so wealthy in so many ways, and in which so many people are becoming wealthy every day on the back of ordinary people's work, that there are people working two or three jobs and still can't eat every day or pay their electricity bill. So that was interesting. We started working with local councils, contacting them directly or contacting the local councils tied to cinemas to ask them to view the film and give their individuals certification, which they can do for their local area. So, this became a kind of campaign for councils to become involved in how it was that they wanted to engage with this question of class representation and this question of language. And to think about also the power of local councils to make certain decisions where the centralized decision is coming from a place and from a perspective that's not necessarily representative of local areas.

So that was an interesting one and we did a lot of work with the Joseph Rowntree foundation, who also gave seed funding to the film and that was the first time that we'd worked in that way. That the funding, or some funding, came first from a think tank, a charitable organization. But it gave us a lot of freedom in exploring the topic. It was an upside down way for Sean to make a film in many ways because for him character is king. He looks for people who he can make a film with and who will jump on board with him to make a film. But this was slightly different, but it worked out and it's all testament to I think Steve who is such a wonderful human, and with such a beautiful way of looking at the world and existing in the world.

And as for ***Ayuni***, I feel like every one of these films could be their own podcast in a sense, ***Ayuni*** was made over seven years and the starting point was actually completely different. We were making a film about Father Paulo Dall'Oglio who is a Jesuit priest who'd been living in Syria for over 30 years. He ran a wonderful monastery called Mar Musa, an interfaith space. He was a friend of Yasmin the director. She'd known him for many years, she'd made films with him in the past, but he was expelled from Syria when he started speaking against the regime or against what the regime was doing against protesters. And at that point we started filming with Paulo. A couple of months into that filming, Paulo was going back into Syria from Turkey to have these broadcast conversations about what people envisaged for the future of Syria and this was a time of imagination, of possibility, but during one of these trips he disappeared, he was forcibly disappeared. He was kidnapped and never seen again. That was over ten years ago now, it was July 2013.

At this point it's a very strange thing that the central character of your story disappears from the narrative. We had a big question mark around safety and responsibility. What was it right to do, what should we do, what does his family want us to do, what kind of negotiations are in place, does anyone know anything more or not? It took us many years to work out how to tell that story in the way that was right. Along those years we filmed in many places and researched and spoke with many people about the reality of forcible disappearance. We also encountered Noura who is a lawyer and was an advocate working to bring visibility and speak about forcible disappearance in Syria and prisoner rights. She was also lawyer to and wife of Bassel Safadi who is a software developer and was also based in Damascus, but of Palestinian origins as well who had also been forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime.

The film became about Noura and Machi, Machi being Paulo's sister and their search for their loved ones, and this felt the best way we could reflect on the limbo of forcible disappearance the way that this is an incredibly potent weapon of war. The way that this puts people into a never-ending limbo of just not knowing, and not being able to close the chapter of understanding what happened to their loved ones, and as a result has these repercussions on whole families and destabilises whole families and communities, and the kind of potency of that, and the darkness of that, and the violence of that.

Ayuni means my eyes or my love.

Angela Clarke
Ah okay.

Elhum Shakerifar
It's an expression, it's a term of endearment. It's a way I guess of underlining that when someone you love has been disappeared, you see them everywhere, and you see them nowhere. We finished the film in 2020 you know as Covid hit. The first festival that Covid hit was CPH:DOX and that was the first festival we were meant to go to with the film.
That was a slightly different journey in that we learned to navigate an online space, like an entirely online space and we had to make decisions over the course of that year around what it was we felt that film could do or should do.

So instead of planning a festival release or anything like that, we got the film translated into all the languages that were relevant to the European Security Council conversations and we made it available online, for free, in all of these languages, with the partnership of the Syria campaign and Amnesty International in the hope that it would contribute to the efforts that many organizations like the Syria Campaign like Amnesty International, like Noura's organization, that also campaigns for the rights of families of the forcible disappeared and people who are in prisoned, to bring accountability to those families to those realities.

There are so many unanswered questions and so much that remains to be told, to become more known, and to be shared. There's a lack of transparency in this space, of transparency in these spaces, that's also key to understanding how can we imagine the future of a Syrian society. But also, of global societies whilst the existence of these weapons of war continues to destabilize.

Angela Clarke
I mean, it again, is another beautifully powerful film and that was one that I had watched most recently that I hadn't seen before. I think it feels more potent with the backdrop of everything that's playing out now as well.

Elhum Shakerifar
Absolutely.

Angela Clarke
What will happen in the future, in Gaza and sadly probably a myriad of other places.
What I was intrigued about with all your films is as you say the challenge of the end product of that film not just being a commercial success, that it has this different life and a life that gives it a lot more worth, and a lot more power. and a lot more importance, I guess. What I like about your approach to films and the filmmakers that you've worked with is that there is an absolute unending sense of energy and tenacity that whatever's happened, all those stories, they've had a fulfilled outcome.

They've gone somewhere and they've had resonance and they've left a footprint and hopefully they've made me feel and think differently about the things that I've seen along the way, and as you say if that's to me that is the purpose of film and you carry that with

you and hopefully that experience allows you to see another story in a different way, and think about things in a different way. I think that's a far richer outcome than something that can be placed just upon profit. It's like you referring to that first film about sometimes something just impacts in a way that you think that's made me think about that and that takes you on that journey doesn't it.

Elhum Shakerifar
Yeah, definitely. Well thank you for speaking about these films in these terms. It's lovely to hear and very moving also because they're like pieces of life, each one of them. With the directors that I've worked with often we reflect on how we know those films as many different things and they're also moments or chapters of our lives that are woven into those films and make them what they are which is the other side of things. But they become something else in the hands of audiences or people who watch them and take them and do different things with them, and it's always very humbling I think to see when a film is still in mind because we do see so much nowadays. There is real competition for our attention and so to know that you know you live in people's hearts is very moving.

Angela Clarke
And I was going to say that if anyone haven't seen the bulk of the work that you've done. There's quite a lot of on your website or links to things anywhere aren't that in terms of Hakawati have I said that correctly? Yeah, so people should seek them out if they haven't seen them, because they're all beautiful pieces of work in and of themselves that take you into very different territories with very different questions. But I think all share that same link, there is just an honesty and a respect in each of the films towards the people that are featured and the way that the film is made. I think that's an important thing for people to remember as you say, for you to be guided by. Whether that be as a producer or a director along the way. Just to sum up, I was going to say what for you are those values that producers coming into the industry now should try and endeavour to carry with them?

Elhum Shakerifar
You mentioned I do often talk about this question of North Star, and I think understanding where your compass is pointing towards is important. Knowing what your red lines are. You know they might be spaces; they might be people; they might be institutions or countries that you refuse to work with and you should stand by your red lines. And you should also know where your team stands. And you should ensure that as teams you're aligned on those red lines. As a producer I need to never again make the mistake of not being paid for my work. I've made that mistake multiple times and I think this kind of belief that the film is more important is understandable but also not fully true. We need to be able to live to make the work, and especially because life is becoming harder and harder here as well, and so to recognize that. I think something that's important that maybe we haven't spoken as much about in the film industry is that as a new producer coming in, I was constantly made to feel like I was small, and that I didn't know and that I had so much to learn from other people.

And while all of that is true, there's a difference between learning, and there's still a space of dignity in learning. I think we're always learning but I think not having made something

before or being a first-time director or first-time producer doesn't mean that you're any less capable than someone with huge amounts of experience. I think the industry is very much set up to make you feel like some people, particularly people in decision-making positions or gatekeepers, have knowledge, have power and of course they do.

But we also have power. We're making the stories. We are making the things that people aka the industry functions on, that is our labour. So, try not to buy into this hierarchical positioning, to not buy into this way of looking up to anyone who can give you a no or yes, or a pot of money. You need to value yourself and your story just as much. Sometimes in knowing the value of your story, you can say stronger no's, you can negotiate better terms. You can say a happier yes, you know. But definitely that kind of hierarchy in the film industry is a hard one to navigate when you're entering the space, and I really don't believe we need to embrace it at all. I think we need to destabilize it and challenge it and remember that we're making the films. The entire industry exists because we're making the films.

Angela Clarke
That's a lovely piece of advice to give and who knows how that trajectory will go. But it feels like if there are producers like yourself still amongst the mix, then there are examples of people that can work in a particular way and have success and challenge what that success means in terms of it isn't just about money as an end game. It's about something else. I think the more people like yourself that continue to do that helps others that come behind them have a stronger case to say well actually that film did what it needed to do, and it helped shift that notion of where a film needs to be, and what its endpoint is. I look forward to seeing what films that you make next and where you push that boundary to again. Thank you so much for your time. It's been so lovely to speak to you, and good luck with all your projects in the future.

Elhum Shakerifar
Thank you so much. I very much enjoyed this conversation.

Angela Clarke
Me too.

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