



The Main Feature

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The Perfect Candidate

Saudi Arabia 2019

104 mins. Certificate PG

Director Haifaa Al-Mansour
Screenplay Haifaa Al-Mansour and Brad Niemann
Producers Haifaa Al-Mansour, Gerhard Meixner
and Roman Pau
Cinematography Patrick Orth

Cast

Mila Al Zahrani	Dr Maryam Alsafan
Nora Al Awadh	Sara
Dae Al Hilali	Selma
Khalid Abdulraheem	Abdulaziz
Shafti Alharty	Mohammed
Tareq Al Khaldi	Omar



Haifaa Al-Mansour was the first Saudi woman to direct a feature film, landing out of the blue at the 2012 Venice film festival with her coming-of-age drama *Wadjda*. Mansour's achievement was noteworthy in itself, but *Wadjda* turned out to be more than some dry historical milestone. It was rousing, galvanic, a big-hearted rebel yell about an 11-year-old girl who defies the elders in her efforts to buy a bicycle so she can race against boys.

Women in Saudi Arabia were granted the right to drive in 2018. In *The Perfect Candidate*, Dr Maryam is an overworked medic at an under-resourced clinic in a small town. She is seen driving purposefully to destinations that include an airport. At that airport, she is refused permission to board a plane because her travel permit has expired. Said permit needs the approval of a guardian (Maryam still lives with her father Abdulaziz and sisters Selma and Sara) for renewal. That's correct. Maryam - who is an expert diagnostician and deft surgeon, an excellent driver and a fully grown adult, can't get on an aeroplane without her father's permission.

Maryam decides to run for a seat on the municipal council. Never mind the fact that she isn't supposed to show her face in her campaign videos, or directly address the male voters at a rally in a tent, the doc is made of stern stuff and will not be dissuaded. Her dad is deflated, her little sister scandalised, but Maryam goes viral. She is seen as a novelty act. On the local TV news, the presenter kindly suggests she must be campaigning on issues that expressly interest women. 'Like gardens, for instance. You must like gardens.'

Actually, Maryam could take or leave gardens. What she really wants is to pave the dirt road that leads to her clinic. It has a tendency to turn to mud when it rains, which means her patients can't reach her. And

as her campaign gains traction, 'madame candidate' grows in stature. She wins over some doubters and shouts down some others. 'I finally feel like I'm someone', she says.



The *Perfect Candidate* is a simple story, told without frills. But it's soaked through with great power, conviction and an underlying hope for a better world. The Saudi Arabia it shows us is a place where modernity rubs up against entrenched conservatism, and where even the most decadent Barbie Princess-inspired wedding still features a singer who croons, 'There is no God but Allah'. The Kingdom's a mess, it doesn't make sense. You can't even drive your sick child to the clinic. But all is not lost because change is in the air. *The Perfect*

Candidate suggests that all it might take is for one bright, bold individual to put their shoulder to the wheel for the direction of travel to be altered, if only by a degree. That someone may be Dr Maryam, or Mansour herself.

Though you can hardly blame Al-Mansour for trying to advance the conversation by a little force, especially when Saudi women themselves are still living in a world where Al-Mansour sees that some of her countrymen would rather use their dying breath to spew hurtful misogyny, than – say – offer their gratitude to a highly qualified female doctor trying to save their lives, this is pretty much the set up and framing of *The Perfect Candidate*. On one hand, we see welcome shots of women driving and enjoying their new hard-earned liberties in the early moments of the film. But on the other, Dr Maryam gets disrespectfully dismissed by an old male patient who refuses to even look at her, insisting that he'd rather trust a male nurse than a female doctor. One of Maryam's male colleagues interferes with the disturbance, urging Maryam not to upset the patient. While his plea sounds more like a thoughtless piece of advice that suggests Maryam should pick her battles in a deeply patriarchal society, the doctor's erasure still feels like a slap in the face on this side of the screen.

Through scenes of this nature are designed to draw attention to what the Kingdom's women are up against, Al-Mansour - who reportedly had to direct her previous film *Wajda* in a van away from men, but was able to integrate with her crew this time, thanks to loosening rules - uses Maryam as a catalyst for the kinds of progress she wants to see in her world. This is especially evident in the memorable and important sequence where we witness her crushing disappointment when she realizes that despite having friends and family members in high places, she wouldn't be able to renew her expired travel permit and fly to Dubai for a medical conference, because it's a certification that can only be extended by the approval of her father, an oud player who is on the road touring the country with his band. While the requirement for women to obtain a guardian's permission to travel abroad was lifted in 2019, the juxtaposition al-Mansour exposes in her film that's set prior to this ruling is chilling—this is a world where roads mean freedom to men, but present nothing but obstacles to women.



The film was selected to compete for the Golden Lion at the 76th Venice International Film Festival. It was also selected as the Saudi Arabian entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 92nd Academy Awards, but it was not nominated.

Mike Widdup



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The BAFTAs 2023

Just in case you were out of the country on 19 February, here are the winners of the 2023 BAFTAs:

Best adapted screenplay: Edward Berger, Lesley Paterson, Ian Stokell – *All Quiet on the Western Front*
Best supporting actress: Kerry Condon – *The Banshees of Inisherin*
Best supporting actor: Barry Keoghan – *The Banshees of Inisherin*
Best film not in the English language: *All Quiet on the Western Front*
Best casting: *Elvis*
Best editing: *Everything Everywhere All at Once*
Best cinematography: *All Quiet on the Western Front*
Outstanding debut by a British writer, director or producer: *Aftersun* – Charlotte Wells (writer/director)
Best animated film: Guillermo del Toro's *Pinnocchio*
Best original screenplay: Martin McDonagh – *The Banshees of Inisherin*
Best special visual effects: *Avatar: The Way of Water*
Best documentary: *Navalny*
Best original score: *All Quiet on the Western Front*
Best sound: *All Quiet on the Western Front*
Best costume design: *Elvis*
The Bafta Fellowship: Sandy Powell
Best British short film: *An Irish Goodbye*
Best British short animation: *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*
Outstanding British film: *The Banshees of Inisherin*
Best production design: *Babylon*
Best director: Edward Berger – *All Quiet on the Western Front*
Best makeup & hair: *Elvis*
EE Rising Star award (voted for by the public): Emma Mackey
Best actor: Austin Butler – *Elvis*
Best actress: Cate Blanchett – *Tár*
Best film: *All Quiet on the Western Front*

And now for something completely different:

Cinema in the back of a lorry pops up in Newmarket

A 100-seater cinema in the back of a lorry has opened in a town that has not had a picture house for decades.

Organisers said they hoped to gauge the local appetite for a cinema in Newmarket, Suffolk, by setting up the attraction for 10 days. There are plans to turn the former home of National Horseracing Museum into a venue for films. David Hall, from the charity behind the scheme, said it would give the town a "boost".

The pop-up cinema has been set up at The Severals Sports Pavilion until 19 February 2023, with four to five showings a day. Mr Hall, director of the Newmarket Charitable Foundation, said: "For the length of half-term, local kids and adults are going to be able to be entertained at a 100-seater cinema, how cool is that?" Of the mobile facility, he said, "You would not believe you are in the back of a lorry", adding it was air-conditioned and had "high quality seats".

Newmarket used to have two cinemas but one closed in the 1960s and another shut down in the 1970s. He said the charity was working with Jockey Club Estates to develop plans to turn the old horseracing museum into a three-screen boutique picture house. Mr Hall said it would be "fabulous" to have a cinema back in the town. "From an economy point of view, it means that people would stop leaving the town of an evening to go to either Cambridge or Bury St Edmunds. "To have a cinema in the town would provide a boost to the high street," he added.

He said they were gauging local appetite with a questionnaire so they could then potentially apply for funding. Nick Patton, from Jockey Club Estates, said a lot of work would need to go into developing a cinema at the 250-year-old building. The building has been empty since the museum moved seven years ago.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-64597570>

Comments and reactions to: **The Mole Agent**

No of reaction slips received = 20

Average score = 6.00

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	1	~	4	9	5	1	~	~

A rather too depressing film for me. I prefer to be cheered up

Interesting

A sad film at times but highlighted the plight of so many abandoned elderly people

A slightly confused film – for a documentary about old age, I preferred Young @ Heart

Don't know what to say? Lovely piece of cherry cake – excellent

At 86 years a bit close to home!

The 'plot' was superfluous

A little too close to home to be an enjoyable experience but the film had value as a broadening and I am glad it figured in the programme

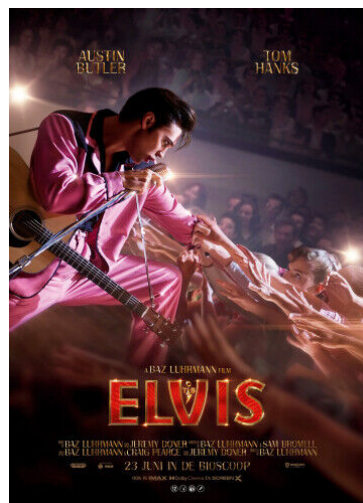
Very well filmed, great characters

Heart-breaking and heart-warming in equal measures

Although quite funny also a bit depressing, but who knows where any of us could end up! The short was rather sweet!

Position	Film	Average score
1	Belfast	7.96
2	The Duke	7.75
3	Seven Chances	7.61
4	Mandela and de Klerk	7.47
5	After Love	7.36
6	The Band Wagon	6.91
7	Flee	6.79
8	Day for Night	6.57
9=	The Mole Agent	6.00
9=	Son of Saul	6.00
11	Guardians of the Galaxy	5.53
12	L'Eclisse	3.00

Forthcoming attraction: 23 March 2023 – **Elvis**



From an opening that cheekily evokes the dropped snow globe of Citizen Kane to an Unchained Melody finale that had me crying in the chapel, Baz Luhrmann's Elvis is a turned-up-to-11 treat. This blistering pop biopic combines the kinetic musical madness of Moulin Rouge! with the turbo-charged irreverence of The Great Gatsby, the Shakespearean tragedy of Romeo+Juliet (with an added touch of Falstaff and Prince Hal) and the "what-all-of-it!?" ambition of Australia. It's a riotously audacious work, a kaleidoscopic portrait of the king of rock'n'roll and his puppet-master promoter, the latter of whom narrates the story (like Salieri in Amadeus) and who tells his money-spinning client: "We are the same, you and I – two odd, lonely children, reaching for eternity."

Guardian