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Iraq-Born Austrian Auteur Kurdwin Ayub Keeps It Provocative With 'Moon': "I Want to Trigger People"

After winning a Berlinale honor for her debut, the filmmaker premieres her sophomore fiction feature, shot mostly in Jordan and starring Austrian dance performer Florentina Holzinger and Andria Tayeh, at Locarno.

BY GEORG SZALAI AUGUST 11, 2024 12:30AM





'Mond' ('Moon') COURTESY OF ULRICH SEIDL FILMPRODUKTION

Writer and director **Kurdwin Ayub** was born in Iraq, but her family came to Austria as refugees when she was still a baby. Now, she is 34 and has been making a name for herself in the film world as an auteur.

Her 2016 feature documentary *Paradise! Paradise!*, which she wrote, directed, and handled the cinematography for, won the best camera honor at the Diagonale – Festival of Austrian Film. It follows Omar, the father of a family that has lived in Austria since 1991. Now, he plans to buy an apartment in Kurdistan as an investment. **THR's review** called the doc an “engaging intersection of the domestic and the geo-political.”

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Her fiction short *Boomerang* premiered at the Filmfestival Max Ophüls Preis in Saarbrücken, Germany in 2019 and won the jury award for best short. “Adnan is obsessed with going to his ex-wife’s housewarming party,” explains a plot description. “Unfortunately, he isn’t invited.”



in the Encounters section, which wants “to foster aesthetically and structurally daring works from independent, innovative filmmakers.” The film focuses on three female friends who decide to shoot a burqa music video “in a moment of ordinary madness.” Ayub ended up winning the **best first feature award**, picked from across all sections of the festival.

On Sunday, her sophomore fiction feature *Mond* (*Moon*) will have its much-anticipated debut in the **international** competition lineup of the **77th edition** of the **Locarno Film Festival**. Just like her first fiction feature, it was produced by Ulrich Seidl Filmproduktion, with Austrian directors Ulrich Seidel and **Veronika Franz** as producer and associate producer, respectively, among other team members on the film.

“Former martial artist Sarah leaves Austria to train three sisters from a wealthy Jordanian family,” says a plot description on the Locarno website. “What initially sounds like a dream job soon becomes unsettling: the young women are cut off from the outside world and under constant surveillance. The sport doesn’t seem to interest them. So why has Sarah been hired?”

In a director’s note on the website, Aybu explains: “It’s all about sisters, no matter where they come from, and about cages, no matter where they are. Cages you want to leave and those you wish you could return to.”

Ayub talked to *THR* about her new film, the importance of music, why she likes to provoke audiences, and what is next for her.

How exciting is it for you to bring *Mond* to a prestigious festival like Locarno?

To be really honest, there is some kind of pressure. Last week, I thought that *Sonne* had so much success, and I just suddenly realized that it’s not normal to get this big first film award at the Berlinale. When I realized it, I thought: “Oh my god, *Moon* has to also be successful.” But I have to deal with this kind of pressure. And I wish I can one day, maybe in a year, say: *Moon* was good and everything went perfectly.

People often say that second features are hard, right?

It’s like a horror movie. Everybody is saying the second one is the hardest because then you must prove if you really are a filmmaker. With the first film, maybe you got lucky or

**Tell me a bit about where you made *Mond* and how you cast the film.**

We shot it mostly in Jordan. The casting procedure was very difficult because we went there and wanted to cast different young women and girls. And every time when we told them that we wanted them for the film, they ghosted us. It happened a lot. So I discovered that they just came for the castings and didn't tell their parents. When we chose them, they started to talk with their parents to ask if they could participate in a movie, but the parents didn't allow it.

Was that because of this specific movie or films in general?

No, it's any movie. Acting for girls is for some not considered honorable work.



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So how did you end up finding your wonderful cast members?

I found them there. Andria Tayeh is a very famous Netflix star in Jordan. She was the lead in *AlRawabi School for Girls*. She is also a very big influencer. So when I go onto the street with her, everybody recognizes her. So, when we got her, everybody wanted to be part of it.



Austrian dance and performance scene, and you work in the broader cultural sphere. Did you know each other before?

Yes, she's also from Austria and I knew that she did martial arts earlier. So when I wrote the story, I knew from the beginning that she would be the lead.

I felt she brings great depth to the character of Sarah...

Yes, she's very good. In every take, she was very natural and great.

Why did you choose Jordan? Were there any real-life stories that happened there or in the broader region that you wanted to reference?

There are also stories in Jordan. I think the most famous story is about the sister of the king, who is Jordanian and was married to the ruler of Dubai and went away to England. But a lot of stories are happening, and it's very common to hire personal trainers if you're a rich family. We had a makeup artist in our crew who also spent one year in the Gulf. I also wanted to have a country that is really liberal on the outside and also rich but still has these issues.

I could see some of your dialogue provoke debate. Some of the things people, such as Sarah's friends, say in the film are not politically correct. How important is it for you that there is this kind of bite in your dialogue?

Yes, I wanted to show the white chick going over there, and I needed to have this realistic approach. It has to go through your body for you to feel it. What they say is what I told them to say but how they say it and everything is them. So it's also improvisation, but I guide them and tell them, "You need to be more incorrect." I mean, I tell them what I need from the scene and how it ends and guide them. The biggest part is the casting procedure though. When I cast people, I do different scenes and try out everything, so that I'm really sure that they are not only natural, but also smart and imaginative.

You obviously know the culture you are writing about really well. How much of your own experience do you pack into your movies?

I guess some parts of the characters and the movies somehow are myself because I wrote them. How Sarah, the character in Austria, sometimes feels, I also feel. And how

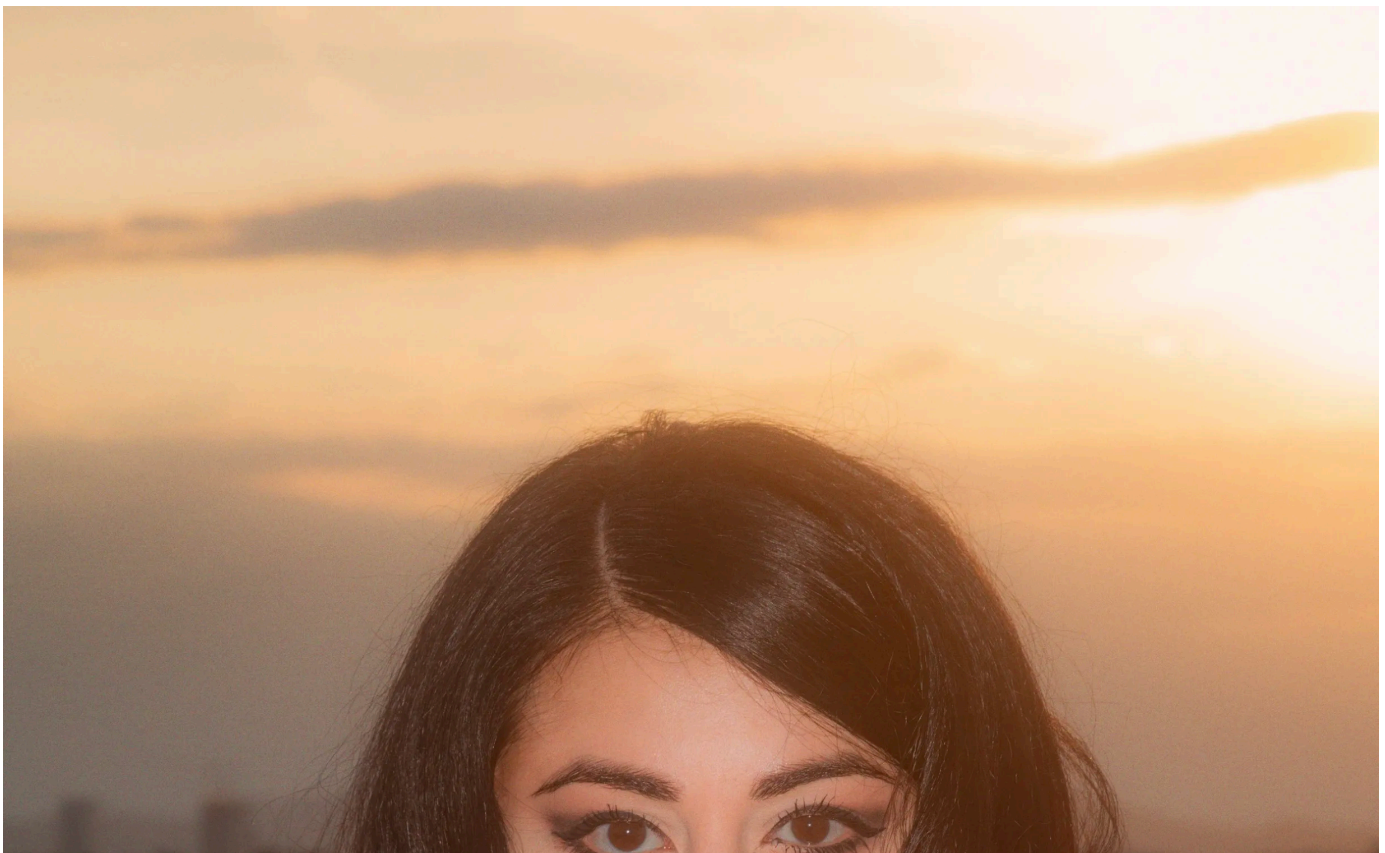


When did you move to Austria, and how much did you go visit family back in Iraq?

I came as a baby but I went to Iraq a lot. Sometimes I feel like a stranger, like the Sarah figure, when I go to Iraq. So I'm in the middle of these cultures. I have both of them, and I don't have any of them. I don't think in identities or borders or countries anymore.

What was your thought process behind the ending of the film? How did you decide whether to have a clear-cut end or an open end? [The next answer contains spoilers about the ending.]

I wanted to leave it like this because in reality, it would be like this. If you have just a glimpse of what you see or what you think you see, and will never truly find out. I wanted to show that. And Sarah is the perfect identification person for my culturally white audience. I realize that a lot of privileged white people go see my arthouse movies, so I thought I needed Sarah to guide them. And I wanted to have a white savior story but tell it in a very realistic way to tell the audience: "It's not easy to help — you still like to?"





COURTESY OF NEVEN ALLGEIER

Kurdwin Ayub

Also, on the other side of this cliché and stereotype are the refugees who come here and think there is help. That was my main goal: telling the story to show this stereotype and show both sides. This is not like in the movies.

So the themes you wanted to explore in *Mond* are...

Like I said, it's about the realistic approach to the white savior. And it's about violence and also cages. Sarah is a cage fighter in a cage. And the girls are in a cage of wealth.

I would like to ask you about how you choose music. Because music does play a key role in *Mond* as well...

The music is always very important for me. And especially for this movie, every piece of music in every scene, I chose for that scene. The music should add a special feeling to the scene, which goes along with what is happening. The last song is *S&M* by Rihanna. I guess I chose this song because Sarah chose violence for her work but she shies away from it in reality. So I wanted to show the different kinds of violence and how characters are fighting with it, and are for it or against it.



I already have the story. I'm writing it. We will hopefully be shooting it again in Jordan, maybe in 2026. And I don't know, maybe it's the whole planetary system. I don't want to end it. I was thinking it should not end with *Stars*. Maybe it's more. Maybe it's *Mars*.

Anything you can share about the next story?

It's similar. It's about the escaping part but with another constellation.

Your cinematic voice is quite sarcastic and provocative. Where does that come from?

I got very cynical in my life. I think movies have become very nice lately in general. They try to be okay with everyone. And I don't like that.

I want to trigger people. Because everybody is scared to get triggered. But I had a lot of therapy in my life, and I found out that you have to know why you get triggered by something. And you have to think about it, and you have to go through it, and you have to learn. And if you see art or movies or read books, you feel after that experience, you see yourself and think about yourself. That's great.

I want people after a movie to argue with each other and discuss things and think about how they would react in these situations because it's an important subject. It's not a love story or comedy. Big things are happening there, so the film should live up to that.

And I have very dark humor. I like horror movies also. I was a baby when we fled Iraq during the Gulf War. But I guess when you survive war, or the trauma of war, you have this kind of very cynical humor.



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Your films feature strong female perspectives. Do you think of yourself as a feminist?

I think every woman is a feminist, right? I don't know. I first think of myself as an artist, but it comes very naturally to me to direct and write these subject matters because I also fought for my rights in my family. It's important to see this movie, for everyone, and for my family, too.

Anything else you would like to highlight?

I want to highlight that these characters in the movie are special and, of course, I show specific issues. But in the end, you can have to deal with sexism or being in a cage wherever you live. If it's Baghdad or Amman or Vienna or another city. It doesn't matter where you live or where you are from. But the film is set there because I also want to provoke people and want to show something to give people something to discuss.

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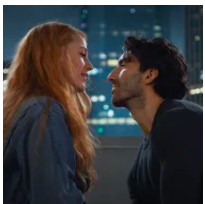
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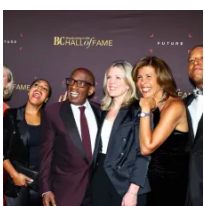
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