

Postscript

Interview Transcripts with Egyptian-British Filmmaker Khaled El Hagar

Conducted by *Roger Shannon*

Interview One: 21 March 2013

Roger: Coming to the UK and studying at the National Film and Television School (NFTS), was that your choice or a choice made for you?

Khaled: It was a choice I made for myself. When my wife Janice [Rider; costume designer] was pregnant, we decided to come to England and raise the baby here. When the first Gulf War happened, I didn't want to go back to Egypt, because I could have been drafted into the army again and asked to fire upon Iraqis. I decided therefore to stay longer, and Janice said, 'Why don't you apply to the NFTS?' It is a very prestigious school, but I didn't know about it. I applied with a short film I made in Egypt, *You Are My Life* (1985), and I got accepted after three interviews. I made a film in my second year called *Little Dreams*, which was a feature. I then went back to Egypt and worked for a bit in the film industry. My graduation film, *A Gulf Between Us* (1994), was a political film and I got attacked by the Egyptian media, because it was a love story between an Egyptian boy and a young Jewish girl. I realized it would be difficult to make this kind of political film in Egypt, so I decided to come back to England, stay longer and just work in England.

Roger: How would you describe the benefits of basing yourself in the UK at that time, as opposed to basing yourself in Egypt?

Khaled: I think it's great, because you always have a second home, you always see the two countries from a distance. I am equally involved in the two countries, but I can always escape. I remember meeting once a young Indian filmmaker and he

said 'You always have another country, you can always run from England to Egypt or the other way around, when there is no work, for example, or the situation changes' and I think it's true. It makes you unique or strange in both countries, you are always looked upon as the outsider from both sides.

Roger: And do you think that that sense of uniqueness is important for your work, for your filmmaking?

Khaled: I think it's important because when you write you write with a third brain, you are not that involved in all the propaganda, be it in Egypt or in England, and you can see the truth. You are the third eye.

Roger: That gives you a third aesthetic in a way.

Khaled: Yes, sometimes I do not feel I am really part of what is happening in England or what is happening in Egypt and the Revolution; because I see from a third perspective, I notice what's dangerous and what's good at the same time in either context.

Roger: It is interesting that you use the word 'third' there, because in the 60s and 70s a new type of cinema appeared which was called 'third cinema'. It was a term used to describe filmmakers from non-European countries who were neither Hollywood nor from Moscow or Soviet influenced. It brought in more indigenous traditions of filmmakers rather than championing imported American ideas.

With what we can call 'your UK moment', *Room to Rent* (2000), a feature film which was British backed and French backed, so it was a completely European film, I'm interested to know whether the UK people involved in it, the financiers, and the French, had the same view of it or whether there were creative differences.

Khaled: I think they had a similar view. I was new, a graduate but with no job yet, and usually when you are new, with a lot of dreams, going to film festivals and winning awards, you become an exotic filmmaker. Both tried to invest in me. Especially when you are younger, people get excited by you and maybe they give you one chance or two [laughs] and then that's it! I think that *Room to Rent* was hard to sell to both the English and the French. Although I think the French understood more of the Arabic mentality than the English.

Roger: I suppose that's what I was wanting to get at; as a filmmaker you describe quite well the sense that you are inhabiting a third space, there is a third brain at work, and *Room to Rent* is a British context with a group of Arab characters. The main characters are Arab and there is an Arab back story in London, but with a French baddie. Did that give you the space to be as free as possible in making this film? Did the people involved allow you a lot of space, because of those reasons, or did you have to make compromises as a filmmaker who had lots of Arabic ideas?

Khaled: I think that in the beginning there was a lot of misunderstanding about Arab culture. In England people are more aware of Indian culture because they grow up with an Indian corner shop. For the British financiers Arab culture was a bit further away, they didn't understand the Arab theme. The French do understand it, because they have six million Arabs or more, so it's part of their culture, like Indian culture here is part of British culture. I think the French understood easily what I wanted to talk about; the British were trying to translate everything to how they think about Arabs, not to how Arabs think. I remember this script editor was using a lot of clichés and I thought 'I cannot talk about Arabs like that, because that is a cliché, it would ruin the project'. So, I had to do a lot of convincing for the British, it was very tiring.

Roger: That's interesting that there is this dilemma between working with French execs on the film who would have wanted you to make a film from within the Arab perspective because they understood that and at the same time you have British film execs wanting you to almost comment on the Arab experience and then produce certain types of characters which you obviously refused to do in the film. Are there any other examples of this tension that you can remember from that time?

Khaled: I remember going with Juliette Lewis, who played Linda in my film, to this film set which turned out to be a Bond film, with a British director. I remember someone asking me about rich Arab men. But why would rich Arab men be making a Bond film in England? Comments like these about rich Arabs show that nobody really understood Arab culture in England. Even when they went abroad the British were never part of the Egyptian culture. They even had places like Zero Club or Garden City, which were only British, so you weren't allowed to live there if you were Arab. The British liked to isolate themselves.

Roger: Whereas the French would be different?

Khaled: The French have more of a mentality of cultural invasion. The British have a mentality of oil or spice invasion. [laughs]

Roger: Some final questions about *Room to Rent*. Were you conscious that you were introducing into your British story elements of Arabic story-telling or Arabic filmmaking that were very different from conventional British film?

Khaled: I think so, it's my culture, I was born in Egypt, whereas my son Adam [El Hagar; actor and writer], he would feel more British than Egyptian. I was one of the tutors in this NFTS (French, English, Arabic) writing workshop with five Arabs, four French, four English and you could see there was an English script, a French script, and an Arabic script. The way one tells a story is completely different. How we think, how we draw, how we see things, is part of our culture. We Egyptians tend to have a more Arabian Nights approach to writing, a 'once upon a time' approach, whereas the French have a more romantic approach in their writing about humanity and the human spirit. The British are more interested in real life, council flats and rough kids. I think that is what makes cinema very interesting.

Roger: What other elements of filmmaking do you feel you were introduced to, for example in visualizing a film and the use of colour.

Khaled: Yes, maybe I wanted England to be as bright as the colours of Egypt without noticing, because I like bright colours, I like flowers, things that reflect my culture. I never consciously noticed I was doing that.

Roger: At the time that you were making *Room to Rent* there were also other films about the migration experience in the UK, Stephen Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), Jasmin Dizdar's *Beautiful People* (1999), films by Black and Asian filmmakers in the UK that had an alternative approach to presenting the British experience. Did you identify yourself in that tradition? Or did you see yourself as a professional Egyptian filmmaker working on an international stage?

Khaled: I always thought I am a filmmaker, and I can work in different countries on projects that would be different. I always thought of myself as an artistic technician,

I can work here, I can work there. But of course, there are limitations when you approach financiers, they always want to bring you to their level of understanding art, they don't just let you fly. So, the problem I'm facing is one of mentality. Especially because as a filmmaker I don't come from a traditional filmmaking country that makes 200 films a year, starting from the time of silent films. I am also different from Black filmmakers. They talk to Europe or to their own people.

Roger: I suppose Black filmmakers come from a particular type of experience with the UK, going all the way to slavery, the Caribbean experience and then family relocation to the UK, so different layers.

Khaled: It's a different history.

Roger: It is interesting that you said that in *Room to Rent* you were trying to do something different, a colourful palette, a different visual imagining of London and the UK. And that was, in some sense, different from British cinema which might be shot on council estates. Recently one of the award-winning Egyptian directors in the UK, Sally El-Hosaini, whose films [*My Brother the Devil*, 2012] capture drug dealing and Arab gangs in London, has used a UK format to express her filmmaking.

Khaled: She was mainly brought up here, she is Welsh-Egyptian, although she did live in Egypt too. It's different if you are brought up here, as British. My son Adam is completely different, he would never write scripts like me.

Ruxandra: Were you ever tempted to produce something exotic, to purposefully emphasize the exoticism of your position?

Khaled: I had plans for a couple of scripts; I didn't just want to make *Room to Rent* but also make two or three other films that people would recognize as Khaled El Hagar's filmmaking. But it never happened. I'm not making comparisons, but Pedro Almodovar makes colourful, flamboyant, deeply Spanish movies; they have a similar feel, culture, and colours, so he's become like a school of filmmaking. People talk about Almodovar style films. When you allow filmmakers to do that, they develop a different voice. If you are only allowed to do one film and that's it, that doesn't happen.

Ruxandra: You said that it was an advantage that you were removed from either British or Egyptian realities, you saw things at a distance, but don't you ever get lost in this intermediary space, isn't disconnection a disadvantage when it comes to drawing inspiration from social realities?

Khaled: No, I don't see it like that, because I am involved, although this involvement may be different. I remember when the Egyptian Revolution happened [2011] everybody was excited. The most excited were those who couldn't understand what was happening. I was worried when the Muslim Brotherhood took over, I could see things that my Egyptian friends in Tahrir Square couldn't see. Actually, by living abroad, I read more international press, I read more analyses about what is happening in the Middle East more generally. If you do not have access to this information, you are not aware of the whole situation. You don't see the whole reality, of what is happening now. Egyptian filmmakers wanted to make films about the Revolution after three weeks, without really understanding what was happening. This wasn't mature enough, I needed to wait, to understand what is happening, why Americans were asking Mubarak to leave now, after thirty years. What was the plan? I could see something coming from the people, but not completely from the people. People were pushed by other forces. I tried to find this other force and understand why it's happening now. I feel my position was an advantage. I was never blind, here, or there. When I come to England and I hear people talk about immigration and immigrants, I think you can get trapped if you live in one place. So, I feel that my position is an advantage.

Roger: After *Room to Rent*, you could say that your career in the UK slowed down and your filmmaking career picked up once you resumed working in Egypt. Was there a sense that having been discovered in the UK – *Room to Rent* didn't do a massive box office, but it was well regarded and won fifteen awards around the world, so it brought you to the attention of the UK and international film world and you worked with a Hollywood actress on it, Juliette Lewis, and you worked with a very successful French actor, Saïd Taghmaoui (*La Haine*, 1995 etc.) –, but then there is a sense in which your career stalled in the UK. As a producer trying to make some films with you, there was a question in my mind as to whether there was something to do with the impact of 9/11 Jihadist bombings, and a sense that as an Arabic filmmaker working in the UK you weren't as interesting a prospect. In

the sense that you are an exotic filmmaker doing something different, but your persona as an Arab filmmaker changed and people wanted you to come up with different types of stories, maybe more politicized stories or stories commenting on the experiences of the World Trade Center attack.

Khaled: Actually, myself with other writers and producers tried for over two years to do something; I wrote several scripts (e.g. *Sex for Happiness*). But all of us, foreigners living in England, realized that we don't have enough years to try and make just one film in five years. As a filmmaker I need to work, I don't need to dream. After talking to you and other people about what I should do, I thought that for me working in any country is better than not working. I thought I'd go where the work is. You are right about 9/11, but I am always worried about making very fast films, about what is happening now, which are cliché films about what people think about what is happening now in the Middle East and about Muslims. I never liked an instantaneous response, and I am not able to write about that. Maybe if I get a script and finance, I would do it. But my brain would not allow me to see an accident and immediately write about it and make a film about it. It is part of big propaganda, if something happens, to make lots of films about it. Like the Iraq War. When people are still asking why the war happened.

Roger: I remember, with so many of your scripts after *Room to Rent*, that had the same qualities of *Room to Rent*, where you were mixing comedy with melodrama. I remember people who you were going to see about getting those films backed, would say 'We'd rather have the social realism and the comedy, but not the melodrama'. The different tones you were doing, they were shying away from it, they didn't want that kind of style and were wanting stories about what's it like to be an Arab family with a Jihadist.

Khaled: *My Son the Fanatic* (1997).

Roger: That's right. They weren't that interested in your aesthetic approach, like previously. I always wondered whether a shift was taking place in what people were after. That forces you into decisions: 'if I can't get films made in the UK the way I want to make them and I'm not going to make the films they want me to make and compromise, where do I go?'

Khaled: Yes, I felt like that, and I feel like that now. Everybody wants you to make films about the Revolution. If you don't understand what is really happening how can you make a film about your country, when everyday there is something new, every day something is changing. They want you to make happy films, but now the Muslim Brotherhood has taken over, it is worse than before. Even emotionally, people think that under Mubarak it was better. There is always this pressure of feeding the media, instead of trying to understand what is really happening. One of the best films about Hitler was made just recently (*Downfall*, 2004). Also, a film about the fall of the Berlin wall was only made a few years ago (*The Lives of Others*, 2006). Filmmakers need to try and understand history, humanity. The filmmaker is not a journalist.

Ruxandra: In Romania we also went through a Revolution. In a way, what you are describing, happened there as well. No relevant films came out in the first twenty years after the Revolution to make real sense of those events. Most films just tried to understand the effects of the communist regime. So, I wonder where you see Egyptian cinema going because you have different influences there. On the one hand, you have the Muslim Brotherhood, which from what I was reading in the press, are really trying to influence some elements of filmmaking in Egypt; on the other hand, you have the amalgamation of Egyptian cinema into African cinema; and then you also have the impact of Hollywood. It's a very complex film environment.

Khaled: Egyptian filmmaking is very confused. Some Egyptian filmmakers flirt with the Revolution, to maybe go to festivals, because festivals like those kinds of films now. In 2011, just three months after the Revolution, the Cannes Film Festival asked one of the directors to gather other ten directors and make short films about the Revolution. It's annoying that such a big festival encourages short turn films like that. A lot of filmmakers in Egypt refused. People like me are waiting to try and understand events. I'm involved in scripts about people who didn't go to Tahrir Square, people who are fighting for freedom against the pressures put on filmmaking by the Muslim Brotherhood. Now films are struggling, television is struggling. Last year, when the Muslim brotherhood wasn't as strong, we made for Ramadan (so for one month only) seventy-seven TV series, whereas this year we only made six. Things are confused because there is a lot of pressure from different directions. Plus, there is a general atmosphere of disappointment, and anger, people are

wondering whether the army will take over. It's a time when nobody understands anything, and this is reflected in the cinema. It is as though nothing happened in Egypt, films are the same as ten years ago or three years ago, not talking about social problems. And then you have films about the Revolution, that audiences here do not watch, so they don't make any money, though they go to festivals. Big films are not happening now because of the confusion, so financiers have gone away. Egypt is the biggest market for Egyptian films, so production has stopped.

Roger: Does it benefit you as a filmmaker now, in Egypt, to have had the experience of working on films in the UK – the contacts you have beyond Egypt and your international profile?

Khaled: Since coming back to Egypt I made five films and two big TV series, and I got more recognition internationally than if I had stayed in the UK. You need to prove yourself in your own country so that other people take you seriously [laughs]. In Egypt I had more chances and I proved I can make good films for my country and go to many festivals. With TV series you enter everybody's house. The two TV series I made were political but at the same time entertaining.

Roger: With the younger generation of Egyptian filmmakers who are fired up by the Arab Spring, do you get negatively perceived because you spent time away rather than being in Egypt all those years?

Khaled: No. I always made it known, even in the press in Egypt, that I thought the Mubarak regime was wrong to stay thirty years and some of my work has not been shown in Egypt during his regime, but I didn't want Mubarak to just go, I wanted him to stay for six months and oversee the transition. Some in the current government are not political people, they don't understand the economy, so the country is going down. There are no tourists. Egypt has become one of the countries one shouldn't go to, because of the violence. People feel strongly that the Muslim Brotherhood do not have good intentions. You have a government which is fighting against its own nation.

Ruxandra: Are people in Egypt turning towards Hollywood movies, since they don't go to watch films about the Revolution?

Khaled: Egyptian audiences have always watched Hollywood films. It is part of our tradition to watch both Egyptian and Hollywood films. Egyptians love Egyptian cinema, they go and watch romantic comedies, but if you give them reality on screen they say: 'but we see that every day, we don't need to see it in the cinema'. The majority are still confused about the Revolution because it happened so fast. They don't know whether what is happening is right or wrong. So, we got rid of Mubarak to get in a more fascist regime. Even those who wanted to get rid of Mubarak are now confused.

Roger: Can you say something about the work that you are developing now, which is about a group of characters who don't go to Tahrir Square? You are choosing again to do something different. Can you tell us how you came to this premise?

Khaled: I worked with someone who wrote one of the TV series and we were interested in people who didn't go to Tahrir Square because of fear. I was interested in fear and humanity, but also change. Like an earthquake, the Revolution changed people. People who were political proved to be cowards and people who you thought were cowards, suddenly became very political. So, I'm talking about the human condition during hard times.

Roger: We were talking about it, and I suggested to make one of the characters English so that you could go to the BFI and get some money for it, because there is a British perspective in there as well. Coming now to *El-Shooq* [Lust, 2010], that's quite a hard film, which also has a hard character in the mother of the family. When it was released in December 2010, just two weeks before the Arab Spring started, some critics have said that it prefigured the Arab Spring Revolution because it looked into the condition of poor people in Alexandria. I find it a very joyful film, but the characters are very hard, and it seemed a very different film from the ones you were previously making in Egypt. It is more of a signature film for you. Is it a departure?

Khaled: Not consciously. I made four popular films for the Egyptian market, and they have won awards, but sometimes they seem that they are not really my films, they are not like *Little Dreams* or *Room to Rent*. I wanted to do something more me. When I read the script, I just felt it was the right time. I felt the country was so bleak, so miserable. I wanted to reflect that. I didn't want to make a funny film or a

comedy. I wanted to tell people that we are really in trouble. Like other artists, I felt very constrained in strange times. We had the same president for thirty years and we used to talk about when Mubarak dies, who would take over. When you disappear after thirty years you suddenly paralyse your country, people fear the future. The mother was for me a metaphor for power, the misuse of power and how power can kill itself. I thought, people are dying from hunger in Egypt, I cannot make a funny film.

Ruxandra: Because of everything that has happened in Egypt, is it more important now to make political films?

Khaled: Yes, people will be waiting for more political films, people have become more politically involved than before. Before the country was flattened emotionally, whereas now people's emotions are really high, they talk about political issues on Facebook and Twitter, everybody I know has become so involved politically. This will come out in our films. Unless there is a good story, I cannot make a comedy now, I feel I have a duty. But I want to make the right political statement, not the statement that people want me to make. I need to first understand what I am talking about. I am not here to just be *en vogue*.

Interview Two: 7 October 2022

Roger: What had the bigger impact on you as a filmmaker – emigration to the UK and working in the UK, or was it the return to Egypt?

Khaled: I think both experiences feed each other but moving to England opened for me a new way of thinking through meeting new people and encountering a different cinema. That had a big impact. Returning to Egypt meant returning to a place I was familiar with. For the first five years I was thinking differently from everybody around me. I still had this idea of freedom from England – you can do what you want – but then sadly I discovered I couldn't do that. You must work trying to find your way between the lines. But my first few years back in Egypt were quite daring for Egypt and the reason for that was my experience in England.

Roger: Was it the case that by being in England you became aware of a wider sense of film styles, and it made you more open to different approaches in film?

Khaled: Yes, because you watch different films. Even in Egypt I watched German and Italian films and that's why I went to Europe, so it's probably not necessarily the cinema, because you can watch films from anywhere, but the atmosphere and the freedom of thinking are different. It's very hard to think freely when you have censorship. I am now doing a film about someone changing their gender and it is so hard to do something like that in Egypt.

Roger: Is it like a hand on your shoulder holding you back?

Khaled: Yes, exactly. You are watching yourself. When I was in England, I felt completely free and that was very surprising and very refreshing. That's why in *Room to Rent* I did everything I wanted to do.

Roger: You explore contemporary issues in your films. Have these issues changed now that you are working from a different location? Or do you think that they are universal?

Khaled: I remember when we watched the film [*Room to Rent*] at the MAC [Midlands Arts Centre], everybody was saying it is exactly about what is happening now: it's about immigration, people being told to go back home because there is no place for them, having to marry a white woman to stay in England, the issues that you could talk about now. And immigration then was much less than now. Especially now when there is a war with so many Ukrainian refugees.

Roger: I suppose what you are saying is that the contemporary issues you explore, you were already exploring ten or fifteen years ago in England.

Khaled: Yes, we still talk about those issues.

Roger: In some sense they are universal, but the way that you approach them is maybe slightly different in a different context.

Khaled: Yes, I would not make a comedy now. It's a sad time. All films about immigration from Syrian or Iraqi filmmakers are sad, because they talk about the experiences of sad people. People are drowning and you feel helpless, so you cannot take that lightly.

Roger: In this book we are trying to understand the notion of dislocation (physical, ideologic, symbolic), as manifested on screen. Did you ever feel dislocated when you arrived in the UK, or did you feel dislocated when you returned to Egypt after a long time abroad? Did you ever feel like a fish out of water?

Khaled: I think that in England you start to feel dislocated when you are hit with racism. You think that you are like everybody else, you are married to an English woman, you have a British baby, you live in an English house [laughs], until somebody tells you that you ARE different. You suddenly think – I am different, I don't belong here, people do not want me to belong here. I remember I got my citizenship and I said to someone 'I got my citizenship today; I am British now!' and this friend of ours just turned around and said, 'You will never be British, Khaled!' Yes, it was right in my face. One of my film tutors at the NFTS used to ask foreign filmmakers 'When will you go back home?' He never thought that maybe I do not want to go back to my home. The discourse was always 'You are very good students and I'm sure that when you go back to Egypt, you will make a lot of good films.' Then they had an open discussion at the NFTS about racism, because there was a lot of it, even between the students. All the foreigners worked together, and all the white British kids worked together, they didn't mix automatically, it was very weird. After talking to one head of production, as I was turning to leave, I heard him saying 'Bloody foreigner, taking over the school'. It was tough. Then you think, ok, I will never really fit into this society, there will always be people like that in important positions.

Roger: So that experience of dislocation is overwritten by a more dramatic sense of a racist approach that you would feel was coming towards you.

Khaled: Yes, after *Room to Rent*, it was a big struggle to make another film. In my country I have now made nine feature films and four big TV series; I would have never made them in England.

Roger: After *Room to Rent*, those wanting you to make a film about Jihadis clearly didn't know your work. It was a form of racism to ask you to do that. But to come back to our discussion, do you think that a sense of dislocation is an incentive for creativity? Does in-betweenness, living between two cultures, inspire certain types of story lines?

Khaled: Maybe if I stayed longer in England, I could have achieved a different filming style. All my friends from the NFTS went back to their own countries (Norway, Germany, Japan, Spain). All these people had plans to stay in England, but they work in their motherland now because it is much easier to work in the EU than in England, where you can be boxed.

Roger: Has it been important for your work as a filmmaker to have lived in-between cultures? Has it been important for your filmmaking?

Khaled: Yes, here, people say, 'Your films are different!' Their look is different, they are a mix between East and West. I have a precise way of shooting and I like beautiful frames; I don't like messy frames. The two cultures come together.

Roger: They are a kind of hybrid, in a way. One of the descriptions of your films, which is possibly influenced by the in-betweenness of different cultures, is that your films are visually flamboyant. At the same time, they are about certain social and contemporary issues. You get some filmmakers who are visually flamboyant and there isn't real substance to what they are on about. Your films are about important contemporary issues. Often these two aspects don't go well together in British cinema. They do in your cinema.

Khaled: I get confused critiques. As if you made films about social issues, they should be dark.

Roger: You are not Ken Loach!

Khaled: No [laughs].

Roger: How do you think this in-betweenness is reflected on screen in your films? I suppose we partially covered that because we were talking about a visually

flamboyant style, and you were saying it confuses the critics. If you are talking about trying to get a Green Card to stay in the UK, you might expect a grim and serious looking film. But in *Room to Rent* it looks carnivalesque (with the colours and the palette), without belittling the issue. It's a fun film to watch but at the same time it is about a serious thing. So, moving on, do you define yourself as an Egyptian filmmaker and if you do, why?

Khaled: Honestly, I am an Egyptian-British filmmaker. I am both. I can move tomorrow to England, and I can make a film. I have no problem with working in different cultures. I remember when I made *Elements of Mine* (2003), a dance film, in Germany [with Norbert Servos], I went to Germany for a quick shoot, and I felt in harmony with all the people. I didn't feel I was coming from a different culture. I just filmed. I always wanted to feel that I am a free filmmaker; nobody can judge me because of my language or where I am from. I am a filmmaker. There is no difference between an Indian and a British doctor. They are both doctors.

Roger: That's a good metaphor.

Khaled: I know my job; I know how to direct different actors. My last films have been in different countries (Jordan, Japan, India). I'm a filmmaker.

Roger: Clearly, your description of yourself as an Egyptian-British filmmaker hasn't prevented you from making films in Egypt.

Khaled: Even in Egypt they introduce me as an Egyptian-British filmmaker.

Roger: I wonder whether if you were back in England, and you identified as Egyptian-British, would you have the same response, would you be 'allowed' to make so many films?

Khaled: Probably not [laughs]. But I think it is difficult for all filmmakers in England, not only me. I am one of the lucky ones in my year at the NFTS. Some colleagues work in television, but only one made his first feature film last year. Can you imagine? I would be struggling like any foreign filmmaker in England. You struggle as a filmmaker even if you are white. Except, if you are a different nationality, you have a different struggle. If people are kind and give you something, it is never repeated.

Roger: Where do you feel more at home?

Khaled: I feel at home in either country. I miss England.

Roger: We miss you too!

Khaled: [laughs] I miss the parks, I miss my friends, I miss my family, but when I'm in England I miss Egypt, I miss the sun. Yet, I have no complaint about this.

Roger: Because you are most productive in Egypt.

Khaled: That's right.

Roger: That's an interesting context, in the sense that you have lived in England, you have a home in England, your son was born in England and he's doing very well as an actor [Adam El Hagar], you feel at home in England, you also feel at home in Egypt. But Egypt, as well as being your home, is where you are most productive.

Khaled: I have become one of the top Egyptian filmmakers now. I will always be in the memory of Egyptian cinema. If I died tomorrow, I have ten films, I have TV shows. In England, I am not in the memory of British cinema. I am just this guy who made one film once. That's the difference. In Egypt I am known.

Roger: That's an interesting point. Your work will be acknowledged as part of the Egyptian cinema in the last decade and your influence in the UK will not be recognized in the same way. You haven't done as many films in England as you did in Egypt, but the way history works, is that you get erased out of British cinema, which perhaps is the case for other diasporic filmmakers too.

Khaled: Yes, exactly. The second film I made in Egypt, *Women's Love (Hob El Banat, 2004)*, is so popular, it has been voted the most popular Egyptian film for that generation. There are thirty million views on YouTube. My film *Lust (El Shooq, 2010)* now has over nineteen million views on YouTube. I became part of the Egyptian psyche [laughs]. But in England, nobody has seen them. Some might have seen *Room to Rent* only.

Roger: Could you say something about the last film that you made in Egypt. And tell us a bit about the project that you are working on now, which is a TV series.

Khaled: I made a film in Saudi Arabia called *Shihana* (2019), a very big film and then I made another film, which was also shown at the MAC in Birmingham, *Immobilia Crime Story* (2019), about a killing in the Immobilia building in Cairo.

Roger: That was a great film. That was shot in your house, your flat in that building.

Khaled: It's funny and it really reflects who I am. In Cairo, I live in the most famous building in the whole of Egypt [Immobilia]. In Birmingham I live in King's Heath. Great artists and directors lived in the Immobilia building (Abdel Halim Hafez, Asmahan, Camelia, Farid al-Atrash, Leila Mourad, Mohammed Abdel Wahab, Mohamed Fawzi, Naguib el-Rihani, Omar Sharif).

Roger: It's like Cairo's Chelsea Hotel [in New York].

Khaled: I am now doing a film about transgender in Egypt, a girl trying to become a boy. I wrote the script when I was in England about a real girl I know, the daughter of a friend of mine. Becoming a boy was a big struggle and she now lives in Canada. She did it, she changed. I also know another famous actor's daughter who changed. So, people are aware of it now, but it is difficult for the censorship to allow something like that.

Roger: Is that a film or TV drama series?

Khaled: It's a film. I am also preparing fifteen episodes for NBC Saudi Arabia. This series is about corruption.

Roger: Tell me a bit more about the transgender story. What is the age of the young girl?

Khaled: She is 20, transitioning to be a boy. She always felt like a boy and was always attracted to kickboxing and football. Her father dies and she gets very badly injured in an accident, together with her girlfriend who becomes paralysed, so she decides to do what she wants to do, because she is not happy. Her uncle will help

her through this process, though he has his doubts, but of course she will lose the family, her mother. It's very emotional. The pain is also physical. She says 'I hate my breasts; I want to cut them off! I should have a penis.' So, it's very heavy. Wish me luck to be able to do it.

Roger: Are you facing some challenges about the script, about getting the film made?

Khaled: Yes, two producers are interested but some financiers got so afraid to just talk about the subject. It's easy to talk about a man becoming a woman, because it is not challenged by society. The man gets some hormones to look like a woman, cuts his penis, but a woman becoming a man . . . people start to think that if she has a penis, then what will happen? How will she have sex? Is it lesbianism?

Roger: Will this be the first Egyptian film about transgender?

Khaled: Yes, it appears to be. It is in your face, looks at the whole process.

Roger: Do you have a synopsis or treatment about the idea?

Khaled: Yes, I have a whole mood board, with actors and a synopsis. I have sent it to a friend of mine in BFI and I am waiting for her answer. It's an important subject matter, it's important to bring up issues that the whole world is talking about.

Roger: It's good that you are still making films that have got the finger on the issues which are dominating discussions about sexuality and gender and that takes you back to your earlier forays. Thanks for answering our questions so honestly.

Executive Producer and Film Professor, **Roger Shannon** is a film industry professional and a published academic of over 40 years standing. Following postgraduate study at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, he has worked in the UK film and TV industry as a producer, film funder, Film Festival director, executive producer, film consultant and policy advisor. He has headed up film production funds at both regional and national level, including at the British Film Institute, the UK Film Council, Scottish Screen and the Moving Image Development Agency in Liverpool. Amongst many films he

is associated with, there have been major awards at international film festivals at Cannes, Sundance, Berlin, Locarno, New York, Edinburgh inter alia. His academic roles include Visiting Professor of International Film Business at Glasgow Caledonian University, International Film Professor at the Cuban Film School, and Professor of Film and Television at Lancashire's Edge Hill University, where as Director he established the Research Institute for Creative Enterprise. He is currently a Visiting Professor at Birmingham City University, Visiting Executive Producer at the Screen and Film University in Birmingham and Associate Director of the Institute for Creative Enterprise.