



Film Review: Wilaya by Pedro Pérez Rosado

By Jose Luis Benavides on March 6, 2013

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As part of the **16th Annual European Union Film Festival** at the **Gene Siskel Film Center** several Spanish films have been entered into the wide array with the help of Praga's **The Festival of New Spanish Cinema**. *Wilaya* is one of those wonderful selections added to the line up.

Wilaya / Gene Siskel Film Festival / 164 N. State Street, Chicago, IL - (312) 846-2800

Fri, Mar 8th at 6:00pm

Thu, Mar 14th at 6:00pm

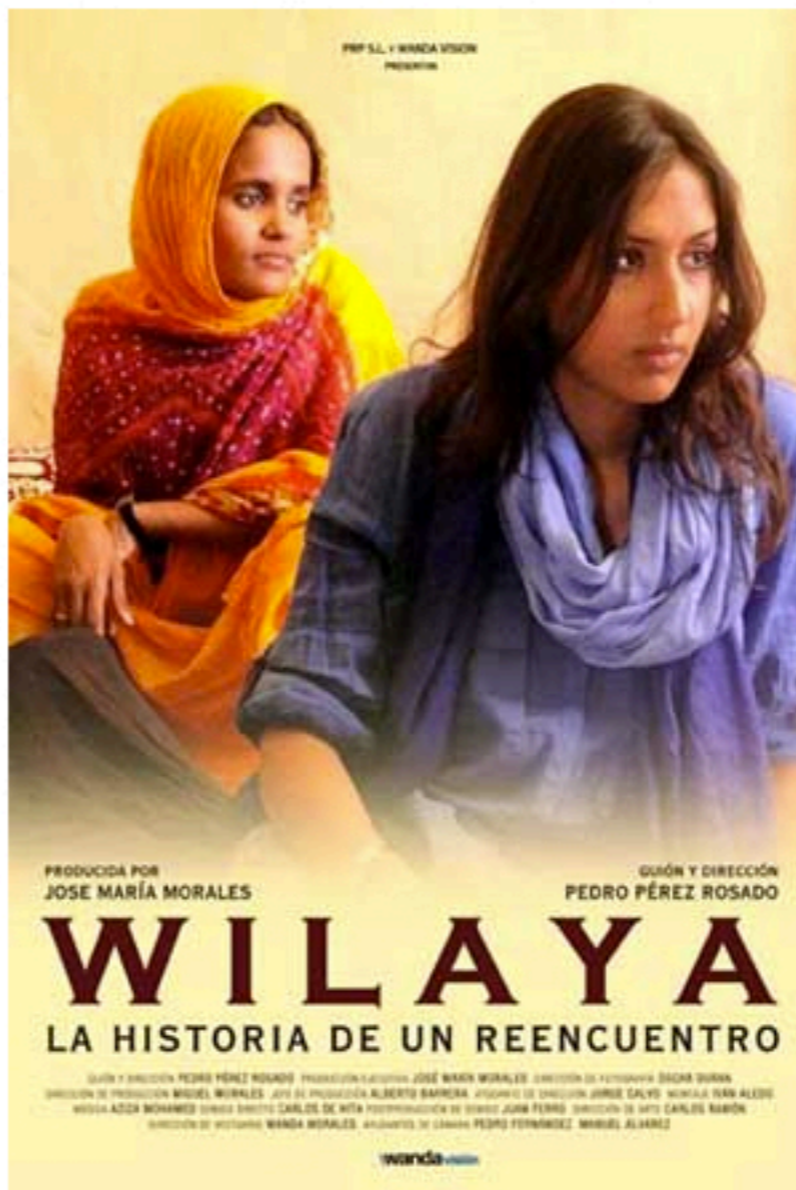
Nadhira Mohamed and **Memona Mohamed** effortlessly portray sisters separated at an early age and reunited upon the death of their mother. Nadira's character, Fatimetu, was sent to foster parents in Spain at a young age, representing a whole generation of exiled culture similar to the Operation Peter Pan-lifted youth shipped to the U.S. by the CIA due to the Cuban Revolution. Returning to the Tindouf province of Westernmost Algeria, to the **Sahrawi refugee camps** where her brother and sister still live, Fatima finds herself slowly acclimating, and carving out her own place amidst her family. The film peers inside a rarely seen segment of West African society still living in a non-self-governed dispute since Spain relinquished colonial control in 1975, ten years after the U.N.'s request for decolonization.

In an apt metaphore and interesting dialogue on self-government autonomy, woman's lib and neocolonial aftermaths, *Wilaya*, which means province, tackles big subjects with poetic brevity. Already independent and liberated in her own ways, yet simultaneously fettered by tradition and obligation, Fatimetu's handicapped sister, Hayat, stands as a beacon of self-sustaining hope for her class of learning impaired children, eager to learn from her estranged sister. None of the characters fall heavily into any exaggerated Western stereotypes of gendered polarities for the Arab world. Instead of driving home any agit-agendas, the work stands as a careful and respectful representation of people instead of a glaring documentary, ethnographic or overly romanticizing art-film gaze or inspection of issues post Arab Spring. Relying less on plot while utilizing the mundane and small glances, smiles and breaths of satisfaction, *Wilaya* works as a breeze into a tented segment of Spanish colonial history, lineage and circumstance.

This simple yet supple film expects its audience to be mature and exacting. While not showing an abject or contentious exploitation of a people or a delicate political situation, the film opts for the languid, over-head relaying of rations, vaccines and organizing segments of the camps' daily life. Like a muted or dulled 1984 *Big Brother*, dictating certain movements, the voice erodes with the desert hum, it fades and bends with the scenes, not unlike the sand dunes that line the horizon. The life in these Saharan refugee camps, though sparse and barren at times, is portrayed in all its wealth and stoic, almost austere delicacy through the graceful rituals of tea and sugar poored repeatedly from glass to glass.

Commenting on the state of affairs of the developed world, with people struggling for food and to make ends meet, **Director Pedro Pérez Rosado** **boldly states**, in response to the people who unexpectedly relate their own stories of survival to the "other," foreign, seemingly distant struggles of those living in the forgotten and perpetual refugee communities of the Algerian Sahara, "Well, you're living in your own kind of refugee camp, even if you don't know it."

However, a quieter film, *Wilaya* drifts between subtle and offbeat beauty while smartly avoiding forced platitudes or trite tropes of overstated culture clashes. The idea of a Westernization and desert life do not so much contradict themselves as they do, quite naturally and effortlessly, coexist on in the same realities, the same quotidian sphere. As if to remind both outsider and insider, the leavers and the left, the world remains a constant and us, the shifting entities, the season, the winds pretend change. In the end we return to our homes, our origins and motherlands. We adjust, coexist, challenge and try to complement each others' existence, adapting to our environment.



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Luna Negra Dance Theater presents Made in Spain
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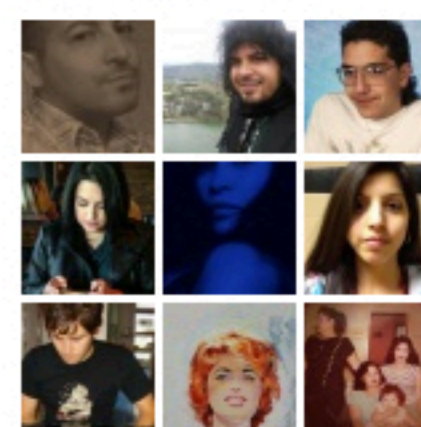
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