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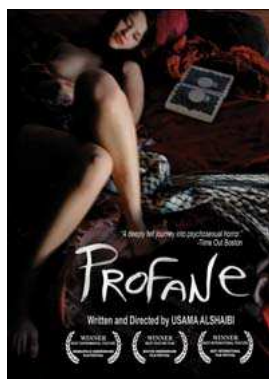
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STRANGE THINGS ARE HAPPENING

PROFANE

DVD. MVD.



You have to admire the balls of director Usama Alshaibi. His film **Profane** is a secular, insiders critique of the narrow religious dogma of Islam and an exploration of how a young Muslim woman in America tries to connect her religious (and repressive) upbringing with the social and sexual freedoms she now enjoys. It's a film that is aptly named, with images and ideas that might seem sacrilegious to believers, and it's hardly going to win him many friends. Aside from the fact that criticising Islam is something that has been proven to be dangerous, even deadly, for artists (as Theo Van Gogh discovered to his cost), there are plenty of Western commentators who will be quick to label someone as racist or islamophobic for producing something so deliberately 'blasphemous' and confrontational – the fact that the artist is a Muslim rarely making any difference to such dogmatic critics. Add to that the transgressive and unapologetic sexuality of the film, and you have a recipe for outrage.

Alshaibi's film follows Muna (Manal Kara), a young woman who is working as a pro-domme in the sex industry, having formerly dabbled in prostitution. She drinks, takes drugs, has casual sex and gee rally behaves like a liberated Westerner, but she is also interested in exploring her Islamic roots, without losing her identity to religion. A meeting with devout taxi driver Ali (Dejan Mircea) seems to offer a way forward, but it soon becomes clear that his narrow and rigid interpretation of his religion is not going to work for Muna.

Inspired by his own childhood, Alshaibi brings us a character who has been abused in the name of religion (beaten for not memorising the Qur'an properly, forced to undergo exorcisms to rid her of her sexual desires) and who wants to explore that religion without committing to the extremes of it – a conflict between her upbringing and her intellect that begins to manifest in the form of Jinn – the demon that is said in Muslim mythology to reside within each of us. The question is, is the Jinn the result of her secular life, or because of her religious indoctrination that teaches her that her life of sex and pleasure is sinful?

Profane is a mix of filmmaking styles, mixing pseudo documentary and interview footage with non-linear narrative and moments of surrealism, all liberally sprinkled with pretty graphic sex scenes – all too authentic thanks to the use of genuine submissives for the BDSM scenes. Kara is striking as the conflicted Muna – not just physically (though that too), but giving a performance that feels genuine. Molly Plunk as her coked-out dome partner (and possible girlfriend) Mary is convincing too as a character who is pretty hard to like, while Mircea is excellent as the devout character who eventually represents the control and repression that Muna is trying to escape from.



The improvised dialogue, cut-up editing, graphic sex and heretical nature will ensure that **Profane** is not for everyone. But if you've ever had a conflict between a religious upbringing and a secular, intellectual and (by religious standards) decadent lifestyle, you'll probably find much in this film that speaks to you.

This challenging film has an extra 20 minutes of outtakes and other footage on the DVD, including longer BDSM scenes that would fit within any fetish video, and the director interviewed, his face understandably blanked out. Because as we know, religious fanatics of all stripes rarely take criticism well.

DAVID FLINT

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