

Horses & Celebrities

Interview with Ghassan Massoud

By Nada H. Abdelmoniem

“Where you not close enough to a great king to see how to imitate one?” (Salah Al-Din Al-Ayoubi)

During the long history of Arabs, poetry has enjoyed a unique position among them, and it was very apparent when I spoke with the uniquely eloquent Syrian actor and film maker Ghassan Massoud. The dynamic star didn't just talk about horses, he praised and symbolised them with words that wouldn't just be exclusive to poets...he quoted Arab poets and even sang verses of passion to horses during the interview.

The star who has extravagantly starred in Ridley Scott's Block Buster 'Kingdom of Heaven', portraying the role of the great charismatic Muslim leader of the Saracens Salah Al-Din Al-Ayoubi (Saladin), has taken a leap forward into becoming an internationally recognised actor. He was recently awarded a prize at the Cairo International Film Festival for writing and directing a satirical play called 'Diplomassiyoun' (The Diplomats) which tackles the problems of leadership in the Arab world. In the theatre, he also starred in Jawad Al-Assadi's production of August Strindberg's 'Miss Julie'. He has appeared in numerous films in his native Syria, including Haytham Hakki's 'Memories of the Forthcoming Age', and Basil Al-Khatib's romance set in rural Syria during the 1940's 'Unshudet Al-Matar' (The Chant of the Rain).

How did you get into acting?

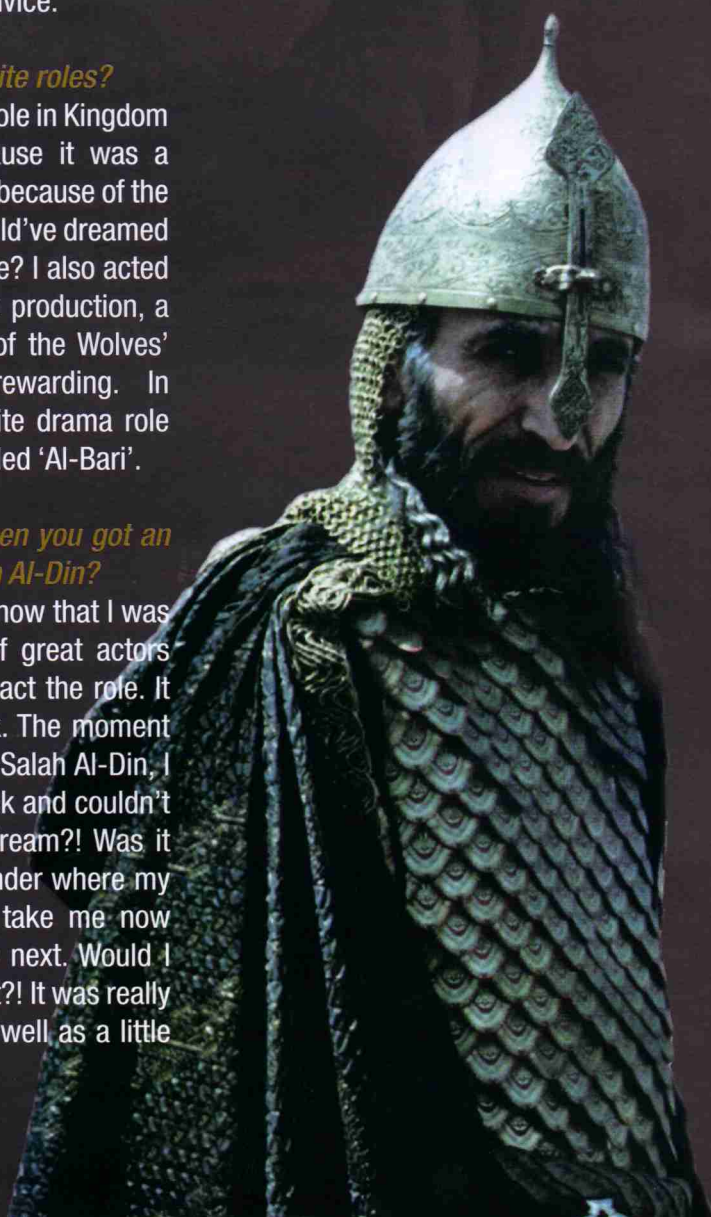
(Smiling) What gets a lot of people into acting? Sometimes it's not a choice, and as far as I remember, I think I was simply dragged into it. However, I was personally given words of advice and praise in regards to being an actor; friends told me that I would do well as an actor, and so I took upon their advice.

What are your favourite roles?

Honestly?! It was my role in Kingdom of Heaven. Not because it was a Hollywood movie, but because of the role I played. Who would've dreamed of such an intense role? I also acted in a Canadian/Turkish production, a movie called 'Valley of the Wolves' which was also rewarding. In Television, my favourite drama role was in a TV series called 'Al-Bari'.

How did you feel when you got an offer to portray Salah Al-Din?

Initially, you have to know that I was picked from a line of great actors who had potential to act the role. It was not an easy task. The moment I was told I would be Salah Al-Din, I was in a state of shock and couldn't believe it! Was it a dream?! Was it real?! I started to wonder where my acting career would take me now and what would I do next. Would I act the role well or not?! It was really happiness I think, as well as a little bit of disbelief.



In these troubled times where Islam is not positively symbolised by the western media, how did you take on representing one of its greatest leaders?

I felt that I was passing on a message that would serve the culture of our nation. I felt I had to do the role so well because I was not just serving the viewers, I was also serving my religion, which gave me a majestic feel. It was my duty and responsibility, and I felt very lucky to have played such a role; it was a unique experience. I see Salah Al-Din as first and foremost a statesman, and second, he was a man of war, and the winner of many battles who made dialogues with the enemy which was a very important role for a leader at that time. He was a very charismatic character yet very human and very sweet from the inside.

How was the experience of working with the British director Ridley Scott like and what was his perception of Salah Al-Din?

Ahhh, I can go on and on about this man. Ridley is not just a great director, but also a cultural and noble dreamer. He was so free, fair and objective, and when someone is like that, then his vision is bound to come alive and well presented. The way he looked into details was so delicate and he felt a responsibility towards history, and that was his perception of Salah Al-Din; a genuine leader who played a significant role in our history, also revered as a great Muslim leader, a politician, a gentleman, and a great strategist who wasn't just adored by the Saracens but who was also very respected by the other side. From the directing perspective, his concentration on the presentation of the horses was overwhelming! Many of the viewers would not notice the details of the horses in action, but he always made sure, trial after trial, that it was imperative that everything

should look accurate, down to the details of the horse shoes. As you know Ridley was nominated for two Academy Awards in the Best Director category for his movies 'Gladiator' and 'Black Hawk Down', so you can imagine how meticulous he is as a director.

How was it like working along with Alexander Siddig, Orlando Bloom, Edward Norton, Liam Nesson, Jeremy Irons and the rest of the cast?

They are such nice people! I would like to call them friends and they were so enquisitive about our culture. And Alexander Siddig's father is Sudanese, which made me feel I had another Arab acting beside me. It was a lovely experience, and they were all lovely.

What can you tell us about your skills with horses in real life and in film?

As a human being, it was a responsibility for me to learn how to ride and so I learned. As an actor, it was crucial to extend my skills further, as horses are part of what I do nowadays. But then again, riding is not just a spectator sport, it's an idea of many meanings which may point out a person's moral values and conduct. Arabs sing to horses, what more can I say?! I don't feel that horses are animals, for if they were, then they are the most noble of animals. Horses are much better than humans; they don't hurt, they don't command, they don't hate and they don't conspire. Horses are a product of beauty, nobility, freedom, they dance with the air, and air gives us humans feelings and passion.

What do you think about Arab productions that feature riding and horses? With Syria being one of the leading countries when it comes to classical Arabian drama and horse riding, what about other countries?

To tell you the truth, generally speaking, horses in our productions are misused terribly. They are improperly presented and they look fake and poor. The presentation of horses in our Arab dramas should be taken more seriously and it's the producer's obligation, not the actors'. At the end of the day, you will simply give the actor a horse and tell him to ride. But the producer needs to concentrate on the horses more. A knight and a horse are considered to be one; you can't have a knight ride a poor horse. In the future, I truly hope that the producers invest more time and money when using horses, it would make a difference.

Do you own any horses?

(Laughing) No, sadly I don't, but I would



love to own some, and I'm planning on doing that soon. I love Arabian horses of course, and to buy some, I'll have to invest a lot of time and money, and hopefully I will be able to do so soon.

Do horses influence you as a human being?

Of course they do! Poetry and horses surely must have a huge impact on us humans. Our finest classical Arabian poet of all time Abo Al-Tayib Al Mutanabbi once wrote:

"I am known to the night and the horses and the desert, to the sword and to the lance, to parchment and pen". HT