



From left: Amal Al-Agroobi wears: Top, Dhs4,050; skirt, Dhs8,900; shoes, Dhs7,550, all Bottega Veneta. Abaya, Dhs2,900, Chi-Ka. Khadijah Kudsi wears: Coat, Dhs26,600; top, Dhs2,500; trousers, Dhs3,450; shoes, Dhs2,500; bag, Dhs79,950, all Bottega Veneta. Sophie Boutros wears: Dress, Dhs31,050; cape, Dhs12,350, both Bottega Veneta. Salma Azzam wears: Dress, Dhs21,700; shoes, Dhs9,050; bag, Dhs79,950, all Bottega Veneta. Nayla Al Khaja wears: Top, Dhs10,400; skirt, Dhs5,700; clutch, Dhs53,300, all Bottega Veneta. Abaya, her own. Afra Al Marar wears: Dress, Dhs11,800; shoes, Dhs3,800; clutch, Dhs11,050, all Bottega Veneta. Abaya, her own

# ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

*Emily Baxter talks power moves,  
artistic platforms and shattering  
cultural norms with the film  
industry's cinematic pioneers*

*Photography by RICHARD HALL  
Styling by ANNA CASTAN*



From left: Sophie Boutros wears: Jacket, Dhs6,050, Bottega Veneta. Salma Azzam wears: Jacket, Dhs5,600, Bottega Veneta. Khadijah Al Kudsi wears: Dress, Dhs24,200, Bottega Veneta. Amal Al Agroobi wears: Dress, Dhs11,350; earrings, Dhs3,650, both Bottega Veneta



As the curtain lifts on the 14th annual Dubai International Film Festival, *Bazaar* talks to six pioneers guiding the changing face of an embryonic-cum-contemporary regional film industry, each representing a proliferation of creatives using their work as a mouthpiece for the Middle East. Directors, producers, writers and filmmakers, each with their own definitive experience of life in this region, they use their unique cinematic narratives to bring our culture to the fore. By chronicling history and amplifying perspectives of society in 21st century Arabia and beyond, these visionaries cast light over a region oft shrouded in mystery. They are leaders in their fields and where they go, hopefully many more will follow, allowing a burgeoning film movement to blossom into a mature industry.

The stars align further more so when creative fields converge. Cinema has long-influenced fashion, with archival kinships dating back to the birth of cinema in the late 19th century. On a present day playing field, one fashion force heralding innovation, creativity, and artisanship in the arts is Bottega Veneta, an Italian house steeped in tradition and history. With a deep-rooted vision for attention to detail, high precision and relentless perfectionism, which sees it turn leather craftsmanship into a true art form, the house pays homage in parallel to the same masterful characteristics in other cultural fields. Last month Bottega Veneta hosted the Hammer Gala for the fourth year running, in celebration of visionary creatives who have changed the landscape of the arts. This month, the brand focuses its attention on film, illuminating the achievements of the six Middle Eastern women in our story.

Through Bottega Veneta's mutual affiliation with cultural creativity, it helps draw attention to relevant narratives from a contemporary Middle East, whilst strengthening the bonds between fashion and film even further. It's a beautiful, symbiotic relationship that coexists through a mutual language of vision, evolution, and originality, and one that *Bazaar* is always happy to celebrate. ➤

**KHADIJAH KUDSI**  
39, Saudi, Filmmaker

"For me, movies have always been about escape. From when I was little girl growing up in Saudi, watching Disney, old musicals or American series like *The Cosby Show*, it was my way of escaping into their world. I love stories and I'm very artistic, and I write children's stories as well as films. I went to New York Film Academy in Abu Dhabi in 2014. I only meant to go for four weeks, but that turned into eight, which led into a year and then into a whole career. I did a diploma in filmmaking and then I started working on short films and writing. My first project was working on *Amazing Grace* for a Chinese channel, with a 10-camera man team. I couldn't believe it was my first gig! Now, I like to highlight stories from Abu Dhabi or the Middle East, and I've just finished a story about a girl here who has a stutter (which premiered at Cannes), and next March I'm going to film Dana Al Ali – the first Emirati woman to climb Everest. I think it's important to have ties to this region and highlight positive stories coming out of it. But it's not always easy – the funding is hard. As is finding the right producer and managing your time being a mother and a working woman. I have four children, whereas most of the crew you work with on set are single or have no kids. They don't understand when you say you need to wrap by a certain time because I need to go see my kids. But I think we're lucky here; the industry is very small, you can count us on your fingers, so it gives us more time to shine. I want to help create a platform for story-making in this region. I love the rawness in the stories here and we have so much to talk about."



Khadijah wears:  
Coat, Dh\$26,600;  
top, Dh\$2,500;  
trousers, Dh\$3,450;  
shoes, Dh\$2,500, all  
Bottega Veneta

**SOPHIE BOUTROS**  
44, Lebanese, Director

"When I was little in Lebanon, during the war, there was little to do but watch films and I'd hire three or four movies every weekend. Back then, it was a time of necessity not luxury, so there was no possibility to even think about going into film. The field of studies was very limited – literature, law, medicine... I come from a family of creatives, so I was surrounded by cultured people, but I was also very good at science and everyone expected me to become a doctor. But I decided, after a year of studying biology at The Lebanese University, that I wanted to do something creative, so I moved into TV, and made music videos, which was a way for me to do short films, tell stories and show emotion. But I always dreamed of doing film, and in 2015 I produced a short film called *Solitaire* with Nadia Eliewat. We then thought it needed to be made into a feature film, which premiered at DIFF last year, and it snowballed from there. I think we did about 30 festivals this year and it has been very well received. I'm working on a new project now, but I'm cautious... You can't *not* do something but at the same time, I'm cautious because I know the success of *Solitaire* and I'm anxious that I can't do anything less. I have a benchmark, to prove myself again. I don't like seeing myself as a female filmmaker – I don't like holding a flag. And I don't like to victimise women. It's not a race. We're all humans. I just want balance. That's what I want through my work – to make people feel something towards the human they're watching. I want to make an elite kind of film that reaches wide audiences, that makes them think and feel, but also understand. A cross-cultural approach that reaches out to my first audience, the Arab audience. I'm not the kind of person who dreams about Hollywood. I want to make films that tell our stories, that allow people here to connect to them, and to touch people in the Arab world." ▶



Sophie wears: Dress,  
Dh\$31,050; cape,  
Dh\$12,350, both  
Bottega Veneta

**NAYLA AL KHAJA**  
39, Emirati, CEO of Nayla Al Khaja Films

"I've recently been working on *Hakawi: Ambitious Saudi* on Quest Arabiya. It was a groundbreaking, high-end commission telling the stories of people making a big difference in Saudi, helping to elevate its cultural perception. We worked with the first Saudi all-female basketball team. It was amazing. And now I can say that I have published work, which is vital, because people don't take you seriously unless you do. The pilot to my short film *Animal* won Best Film at the Italian Movie Awards 2017, and I'm now developing it into a feature-length film. It's been nominated for the IWC Award at DIFF this year, which means Cate Blanchett will be reading my script. Even if I don't win, I'll be happy with that. It's about a mentally abusive father whose presence sends waves of fear through his family, asking the question whether the family will survive or break apart. A lot of people relate to it, because it represents anyone who is a control freak. Although I wrote it before the Harvey Weinstein story broke, the timing is very apt. If it wins or not, I'm going to raise the money to fund it – either by approaching banks or through crowd-funding. But I'd prefer to get the big bucks from the big boys. I recently attended a conference in the US that said only four per cent of women's work is produced and published. That's a joke. The execs signing all the cheques are men, so they're used to hiring men and have little faith in handing a big budget project to a woman. There's a better gender balance here, simply because the industry started late. It's only two decades old, so the boys and girls are coming up together, which means there will be a better balance once the industry takes shape. It needs more funding, which is my next move – to start the first private film fund, where I have the investors on board, and we get to sign the cheques. The industry here is an aquarium not an ocean, where we can really be heard. It's new, fresh and energetic, so the perfect place to start making films."

Nayla wears: Top, Dhs10,400; skirt, Dhs5,700; clutch, Dhs53,300, all Bottega Veneta. Abaya, her own. Chair, Dhs9,950, Boo Bury

**AMAL AL-AGROOBI**  
31, Syrian/Emirati,  
Director, producer, writer

"A lot of my films are social cause films, because I talk about a lot of things most people are afraid to. But I'm a storyteller, it's my job, and it's my expression as an artist. My 2013 film about autism, *The Brain That Sings*, changed legislation. The Federal National Council saw the film and decided to make changes because they realised they had bigger problems than they first thought. So, you shed light, you change the world, and that's what I want to do. I hate being thought of as a female filmmaker, even though I always say it's better for women than men in this industry. Women are doing more; men are useless, we're more determined. They have the 'scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, club'. Women don't, so we just get things done. You have to forge your own way. It's hard, because you struggle to find the right people, the money... But here, it's a lot more open to women and we're quite dominant. There are misconceptions from abroad about Emiratis that have an impact on financing, which can be a problem. Emiratis have been branded stereotypically lazy, living in a big house, with a big car, living off daddy's money. This causes the biggest obstacle in terms of financing, because people would always choose a foreign company to work with over an Emirati one, believing that to be the better choice. The other difficulty here is financing and storytelling. Sometimes I feel like Arabs aren't allowed to tell their narrative, so the stories coming out of here are often Western viewpoints. My aim is to create the Arab-centric story from an Arab's point of view, and that's another big obstacle for me. My dream would be to have a fund, run by a private equity firm, because then there would be less censorship. That way, Arabs would be trained up to be part of the industry and instead of going to so-and-so cinematographer in Hollywood, you'd hire locally. We're all Arab, we need to work together." ▶

Amal wears: Top, Dhs4,050; skirt, Dhs8,900; both Bottega Veneta. Abaya, Dhs2,900, Chi-Ka

**AFRA AL MARAR**  
31, Emirati, Owner of Toaster Productions

"I wanted to become a filmmaker ever since watching *101 Dalmatians*. I then studied theatre and Shakespeare – I loved the story-telling, the acting... When I graduated my Media Production course at Higher Colleges of Technology in 2006, my father didn't let me work – he didn't feel the necessity, especially in the media field. After various internships, with Abu Dhabi Media and Comedy Central Studios, I joined TwoFour54 in 2010, working in a department that funds short films, reading scripts, assessing, developing and producing projects from Arab filmmakers. We worked with quite a few women, such as Amal Al-Agroobi and Aisha Al Zaabi, who just did a feature film. We developed her first short on a professional scale, so to now see her doing feature films, it was a step forward for women. I'm currently prepping for a South Indian feature film to be shot in Abu Dhabi. Here in the UAE, they respect women so much that they try to make things happen for you. As a female filmmaker, a lot of people will tell you that 'you won't find the right husband, you'll never get married, people won't look at you in the right way...', which is something I get a lot, because I'm forging a career in media. Every creative is just doing their own thing, and for me, that's trying to change how women are perceived in film, by having strong characters, and having stronger issues represented through film. When I was a kid, Oprah Winfrey really inspired me. She struggled, yet gave hope to so many people. Everything she did was to help, educate or support someone else, and these are the things that I try to learn from her. I've always thought that, through media and film, you can change so many lives. Yes, we want to watch entertainment, but we also need to know that there's a message. That's my main focus."



Afra wears: Dress, Dhs11,800; shoes, Dhs3,800, both Bottega Veneta. Abaya, her own

**SALMA AZZAM**  
20, Syrian, Director

"I fell in love with film because it sends a message, and it literally has the power to make dreams come true. So that is what I hope to do. I work on commercials, documentaries, shorts, and I write a lot, too. But when I started, I knew nothing. I didn't even know how to hold a camera. But I've learned day by day and now I have the education to start a film from scratch – from an idea, to a script, to take it all the way to the credits. I want to specialise in directing, but what I say is, 'I can do whatever you want'. I know the roles of all the crew members, because in order to understand where you're coming from and to be a good director, you need to understand all points of view. What excites me the most about the film industry here is the opportunities. That's why I came to the UAE – here they give you the support you need. And there's no other place in the Middle East that will give you the same experience. I believe any soul can do whatever they want to, it just depends how strong you are. It's all about your drive. What drives me is to create a better future through filmmaking. We can change worlds. I want to help people be heard, to show we're always here for each other, and that can be translated very easily through film. That's why I would love to see more feature films being produced here. The UAE has a beautiful amount of filmmakers here who would kill to get that opportunity to speak up and get the UAE's name out there as much as it should be. It would unite people too, as we'd all be working together for the same cause." ■

Salma wears: Dress, Dhs21,700; shoes, Dhs9,050; bag, Dhs79,950, all Bottega Veneta. Prices approximate. Make-up: Alexandra Apreutesei, Veronica Maria and Francy T at Wilhelmina Dubai. Hair: Valentino and Katie Cousins at MMG Artist. Fashion assistant: Madhu Dhanapal. Art direction: Anna Savelieva. With thanks to Media One Hotel

