

Bader Ben Hirsi: a Passage to Yemen

Bader Ben Hirsi, a British Yemeni resident in London, directed and produced the 75-minute documentary on Yemen, 'The English Sheikh and The Yemeni Gentleman' which was shown to members of the Society on 16 March, 2000.

Bader Ben Hirsi, now 32, was born and brought up in Britain. He is the youngest of seven brothers, and one of his seven sisters is the widow of the late Imam AlBadr who settled in Bromley, Kent, after the September Revolution in 1962. Bader's father, Yahya al-Hirsi al-Ban, followed the Imam into exile in Britain. Yahya was from al-Hamra, in Lahej, and his early career in the Aden Levies was cut short in 1958 by the decision of the young Sultan of Lahej, Ali Abdul Karim al-Abdali, to break with the British and take refuge in Cairo. Yahya, who shared the Sultan's nationalist sentiments, fled north and entered the service of Imam Ahmad, first as an officer in the Yemeni army and later as a senior member of the Imam Household, with the courtesy title of Amir'.

Al-Bader Ben Yahya al-Hirsi (the version of his name recorded in his British birth certificate) recalls that his interest in drama dates from his boyhood; he wrote his first play when he was eleven and vividly remembers a birthday treat organised by his father: a day off from school to visit The Duke of York's Theatre, London.

Although Arnir Yahya accepted and, up to a point, supported Bader's unexpected interest in drama, he discouraged him from regarding it as an alternative to a 'safe' career in business. So Bader, equipped with 'A' levels in economics and statistics, and a degree in business studies from the University of Buckingham, spent the first few years of his working life as an investment banker in the City. But his heart remained in drama and at the age of 25, having obtained an MA in Drama Production from Goldsmiths' College, University of London, he decided to try his luck in the world of TV and theatre: initially with Middle East Broadcasting but later as an independent playwright and producer, operating under the aegis of his own company, *Felix Films Ltd*. A breakthrough came with the performance at the Edinburgh Festival of three of his plays which won him critical acclaim: *A Boring Affair* (psychological thriller), *Claptrap* (comedy) and *On the Side of the Angels* (morality play).

The world of the Edinburgh Fringe must have seemed far removed from that of Yemen — now recovering from the scars of a brief war of secession in 1994. Bader paid his first visit there, with his elder brother Ali Yahya, in 1995. Their purpose (successfully accomplished) was to reclaim their father's land and property in alHamra which had been sequestered under the Marxist regime in southern Yemen. This visit was to have an influence on the future direction of Bader's life which he could scarcely have foreseen. In Dhafir, his mother's

highland birthplace near Hajjah, Bader glimpsed the girl whom, following a long-distance courtship and

despite strong local competition for her hand, he was to return to Yemen to marry in 1996. Marriage to a Yemeni girl underpinned the sense of Yemeni identity which his earlier visit and first encounter with many members of his extended family had awakened. The idea of a documentary on Yemen germinated, and grew with the publication in 1997 of Tim Mackintosh-Smith's book, *Yemen: Travels in Dictionary Land*. This made a deep impression on Bader and he saw its author playing a crucial role as guide and commentator in the film which he planned. Who better than Mackintosh-Smith to interpret the magnetic pull of Yemen's culture, its spectacular scenery and, despite their turbulent politics, the warmth of the Yemeni people? The reflections of an expatriate Briton — the fruit of a deep attachment to Yemen developed over more than thirteen years — would focus and complement Bader's own impressions as a young British Yemeni embarking on a voyage of discovery. But Mackintosh-Smith, preoccupied with a new book on Ibn Battuta and reluctant to plunge into a project outside his professional experience and control, declined Bader's approach. Nevertheless, Western media reporting of events in Abyan in December 1998 was to cause Mackintosh-Smith to change his mind and to prove the catalyst for the production of *The English Sheikh and The Yemeni Gentleman*. Their partnership was rooted in a mutual desire to do something to counter the highly damaging publicity to which the death of Western hostages in Abyan had exposed Yemen.

The film was shot last autumn — in Sana'a, the central highlands, Tihama, Hadhramaut, Aden and Taiz — after several weeks of intensive preparation. From the start Bader felt it important to engage an Arabic-speaking cameraman, and his choice fell on the award-winning Iraqi-born cinematographer, Koutaiba al-Janabi. The music was composed by Ahmad bin Ali al-Abdali, a British Yemeni and scion of the former ruling family in Lahej. Ahmad bin Ali has never visited Yemen and his composition is all the more striking for the fact that it was inspired and developed solely from the footage which Bader brought back with him.

What of Bader's future projects? They include a six-part cookery/travel programme and, if further proof of Bader's versatility were needed, what he describes as a contemporary British comedy of manners, *Silver-Studded Blue*, in which a shy young aristocrat, whose passion is chasing butterflies on his Devon estate, comes under growing pressure from his autocratic mother to start chasing a future wife to ensure continuation of the family line.

Will Bader do another documentary on Yemen? He is attracted by the possibility of doing one on Soqatra. Another theme which he would like to explore is the attitude of Yemeni Jews in Israel to the land of their forbears. Meanwhile, to break the gruelling routine of a twenty-hour day, he plans to return to Wadi Hadliramaut next September. There, in the tranquil ambience of the Hawtah Palace Hotel which he savoured while filming *The English Sheikh and The Yemeni Gentleman*, he proposes to write a screen play.

However, in keeping with the diverse cultural landscape which Bader inhabits, the plot is intended to appeal to votaries of Walt Disney and will be unrelated to life in Yemen.



Badr Ben Hirsi 'on location' in Yemen

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