

THE BEAUTY ACADEMY OF KABUL

Directed by Liz Mermin
Produced by Nigel Noble & Liz Mermin

74 minutes

www.beautyacademyofkabul.com
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THE BEAUTY ACADEMY OF KABUL

A group of American hairdressers head to Afghanistan to open the country's first post-Taliban beauty school.

Short Synopsis

What happens when a group of hairdressers from America travel to Kabul with the intention of telling Afghan women how to do hair and makeup? This engaging, optimistic documentary tracks a unique development project: a shiny new beauty school, funded in part by beauty-industry mainstays, which sets out to teach the latest cutting, coloring, and perming techniques to practicing and aspiring Afghan hairdressers and beauticians. The American teachers, all volunteers, include three Afghan-Americans returning home for the first time in over twenty years. **The Beauty Academy of Kabul** offers a rare glimpse into Afghan women's lives, and documents the poignant and often humorous process through which women with very different experiences of life come to learn about one another.

Long Synopsis

The Beauty Academy of Kabul is a film about beauty in form and in content. And in Afghanistan, beauty raises serious questions: Why were women willing to risk imprisonment, even death, to run beauty salons under the Taliban? In a land that has suffered decades of war and loss, where people are ill, wounded, and illiterate, why are women so anxious to learn makeup-application techniques? It is also a film about globalization, a case study of how American culture is received abroad: Is the school imposing shallow American materialism, or helping women support and express themselves as they have across the world for centuries?

These questions are explored through the personal stories of the women whom the school has brought together for this first post-Taliban beauty school class - from Afghan-American hairdressers struggling with the guilt of having fled their homeland to Manhattan stylists out to spread the beauty gospel; from mothers who turned to clandestine hairdressing when the Taliban made them leave their jobs to girls who worship Hindi films stars and dream of escaping to the West. The film elegantly weaves together cinema vérité footage with interviews and mini-biographies of the Afghan students. The stunning cinematography, accompanied by the music of 1970s Afghan pop-star Ahmed Zahir ("the Afghan Elvis"), captures the beauty of the Afghan characters and the surprisingly game spirit with which they struggle to rebuild their lives in the midst of horrifying devastation.

The creation of the school is a bizarre and unprecedented event, bringing

together beauty-industry power-players with a group of impoverished women and girls who have been brutally sidelined in a nation that has been a pawn in several decades of global conflict. The women who travel to Kabul include the school's British director and six teachers - three earnest American hairdressers and three Afghan women who fled over twenty years ago with children in tow, now successful hairdressers in America returning to their homes for the first time. It is a grand experiment. The school strives to maintain the highest standards of the field as they are taught in Manhattan (adapted slightly to post-war circumstances), but differences are immediately apparent when we follow the students home. They work in half-destroyed buildings, with no running water or electricity, surrounded by children and hidden behind layers of curtains. Several students ran secret salons under Taliban rule; their husbands had lost their jobs, leaving the women and children to support their families with clandestine work. Though the practice was outlawed, the demand for hairdressers never dried up: even under their burkas, women wanted to look their best for weddings and engagements – a defiant gesture of humanity in the midst of violent oppression.

The students talk with surprising candor. They share stories about life under the Taliban and during the civil war before that; tell us how they feel about love and marriage, the past and the future, East and West; explain what drew them to the beauty school in the first place; and speculate about the roles they think women can play in Afghanistan's future. Smart, articulate, and charming, the women are disarmingly familiar, even though they are survivors of unimaginable loss and terror. Their perspectives are compared to those of the Americans and of the Afghan returnees, who struggle with guilt as they confront the astounding destruction wrought by the past thirty years.

These stories carry tremendous political weight for the future of Afghanistan – a weight that increases as the country struggles to maintain a tenuous peace, feed its people, and strike a delicate balance between tradition, religion, and the allure of a glamorous modernity represented monthly in the pages of *Vogue*.

Director's Statement

I knew very little about Afghanistan and even less about beauty school when I came across a story about an American-funded beauty academy in post-Taliban Kabul. The dangers of presuming to represent foreign cultures have been hammered deeply into my brain (I was almost an anthropologist), but I found the story irresistible: it was controversial, inherently aesthetic, and dealt with a part of the world which we need to try to understand. Our standard vision of Afghan women - oppressed, hidden, tormented - isn't entirely wrong, but it's terribly narrow. The seriousness with which the students took hair and makeup amidst such tremendous destruction and poverty seemed, at first, anomalous; but beauty is big business in Kabul (giving lie to any equation of Islam with the erasure of femininity). And even in the grimmest circumstances, our humanity is preserved in the mundane. Maybe this is why the women so often, and so disarmingly, followed up their horror stories with laughter. We were in Kabul for almost ten weeks, and the exchanges that took place behind the camera informed my treatment of those we caught on tape. The students seemed as amused and touched by us – four women far from home with a lot of heavy equipment, bizarrely determined to film their every move – as we were by them. They had a lot to say, and back in the edit room the responsibility of conveying their message seemed impossible to meet. What I heard again and again was the fear that Afghanistan might be forgotten by the rest of the world as it has been in the past, used as a pawn in a bigger global game and then left to deal with the consequences on its own. And so I hope in its small way this film will play a part in bringing their reality closer to ours, in reminding us that we're all part of the same fragile world and that only chance has kept some of us safe while others endure incomprehensible violence, and in keeping us thinking - and arguing - about what we need to do to make that world a happier place for everyone. I hope too that it will teach people something about the fine art of cutting hair.

-Liz Mermin

Background

Political conflicts and traumas do not simply disappear: they leave an aftertaste. The US declared victory in Afghanistan in 2001, but the battles continue to this day. Women's rights have been written into the new constitution, but girls' schools are still being bombed, as are buses carrying workers seeking to register women voters. Economic development, distributed across the board, is one weapon against fundamentalist rebels and "warlords." Women who support their families financially earn freedom and respect.

Sixty percent of Afghan women are widows, many with children to support. Since women were denied education under the Taliban, most are also illiterate. Hairdressing is a skill that can be learned relatively quickly and for which there is an apparently insatiable demand. Beauty salons give women economic independence while helping others celebrate their newly won freedom from the burka. This is the surprisingly solid foundation of what seems at first like a crazy idea.

The school came into being because of a 2001 profile in *Vogue* magazine. The subject was a 73-year old American named Mary MacMakin, who worked with women in Kabul until she was arrested by the Taliban and expelled. While being photographed for *Vogue*, MacMakin met a stylist named Terri Grauel; and when the Taliban lost power and MacMakin returned to Kabul, Grauel contacted her and asked what she could do to help. MacMakin suggested a beauty school.

The idea that the pursuit of beauty is an element of democracy and nation building made the school an attractive prospect for beauty-industry philanthropists. *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour rallied the industry. Funds were raised, products were donated, and "Beauty Without Borders" was born.

The Americans were horrified by the state of hairdressing in Kabul. Salons lack basic safety and sanitation, and hairdressers teach themselves from magazines and posters that are several years old. "They don't have any technique whatsoever," observed Grauel after her first visit. Patricia O'Connor, a marketing consultant who became the school's executive director, sees the school in a global context: "Beauty is a part of every culture. It's passed from generation to generation, through weddings and celebrations, all over the world." Needless to say, not everyone agrees. The school represents everything the Taliban opposed - not least because it is funded by Western corporations. Even with the Taliban gone, opposition to changing women's status remains fierce. Whatever else one might think, there is no denying that the women who take part in the first classes are a brave and determined group.

Liz Mermin started pursuing a documentary about the beauty school in the fall of 2002, when the concept was still coming together. She got to know the team in

New York and on a scouting trip in the spring of 2003, and then brought her crew over to Kabul in the summer and fall of 2003 to document the first session of the school in its entirety. To ensure full access and a basic comfort level with the students, the crew were all women. They spent 10 weeks in Kabul (longer than any of the teachers), building up trust on camera and off and documenting the subtle transformations and amusing cultural exchanges that took place over three intense months.

Director Bio

Liz Mermin is a New York-based independent director, producer, & editor specializing in social-issue documentaries. Her most recent documentary feature, **THE BEAUTY ACADEMY OF KABUL**, offers a rare window onto Afghan women's lives and American efforts abroad through the story of a bizarre development initiative. It premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and has been rapturously received by audiences at festivals around the world. Her first feature documentary, **ON HOSTILE GROUND**, tells the stories of three US abortion providers at the end of a decade of unprecedented anti-abortion violence. It was released theatrically in 2001, aired on the Sundance Channel, and has been used by Working Films to promote discussion about abortion access in medical schools and community groups in the Southern US.

As a freelance director, Mermin's recent television credits include **AMERICAN TALENT** (director/editor), a PBS special profiling ten exceptional, nationally recognized high-school artists; **REPORT FROM GROUND ZERO** (producer/editor), ABC's 2-hour anniversary special about rescue workers and the World Trade Center attacks; and **PARKING LOT** (director/editor), an original six-part series for Trio about fan culture (based on the underground classic "Heavy Metal Parking Lot"). She has also made documentary shows for Discovery, Court TV, Oxygen, and various non-profits, and directed, edited, & wrote an award-winning series of public service announcements profiling human rights activists for the organization Speak Truth to Power.

Mermin graduated summa cum laude from Harvard College with a degree in literature (French, African, and American), and has a Masters degree in cultural anthropology from New York University, where she was a National Science Foundation fellow. She also has a Certificate in Culture and Media from NYU, representing the study of film and video production, ethnographic film, and media criticism. Between these institutions she spent a year (1993-94) as a Fulbright scholar in Dakar, Senegal, studying the film industry and the rise of an independent press; was a Critical Studies Fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York, where she wrote about African-American film; and worked at the Africa desk of the Committee to Protect Journalists. Her writing on African, African-American, and documentary film has been published in academic journals and film/arts magazines, and she has presented her documentary work to classes at Cornell University, NYU, Middlebury College, Scripps College, and Stephens College, and taught workshops at the Pacific New Media Center in Honolulu.

LIZ MERMIN - SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

Director, Editor *American Talent*. PBS.

One-hour PBS special about 10 high school seniors who have won the nation's most selective arts recognition award and become Presidential Scholars. Produced by Steven Haft, for Haft Entertainment. Airing September 2004.

Director/Producer, Editor *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*. BBC/Discovery.

Feature documentary about an American-sponsored beauty school in Afghanistan. Produced by Wellspring Media, Magic Lantern Media. With Nigel Noble, producer.

Director/Producer, Editor, Camera *On Hostile Ground*.

Independently-produced documentary feature profiling 3 abortion providers in the wake of the killing of a doctor in Buffalo, NY. Funded in part by the MacArthur Foundation. Aubin Pictures. Released theatrically in 2001, aired on the Sundance Channel. With Jenny Raskin, Director, and Catherine Gund, Producer.

Director/Producer, Editor *Parking Lot*. Trio.

6-part original series about fan culture around the country, based on the underground-classic video "Heavy Metal Parking Lot." Radical Media. Aired 2004.

Producer, Editor *Report from Ground Zero*. ABC.

2-hour anniversary special about rescue workers and the 2001 World Trade Center attacks. Directed by Lloyd Kramer. Radical Media.

Producer *Behind the Headlines: The Real Saddam*. Discovery Channel.

1-hour biography of Saddam Hussein, produced during the buildup to war. New York Times Television.

Director, Editor *Body of Evidence: From the Case Files of Dayle Hinman*. Court TV.

1-hour pilot for a documentary series about a criminal personality profiler. Moxie Firecracker Films.

Director/Producer, Editor, Writer *Speak Truth for Power PSA series*. Court TV.

Five 60 sec profiles of human rights activists. Received Cine Eagle & 5 Telly awards. Moxie Firecracker Films.

Producer, Co-Director, Camera *Sixteen: Sex Talk*. Oxygen.

Teenage girls from around the US talking about sex. Directed by Alison Ellwood.

Moxie Firecracker Films.

Producer *Sixteen: Refuse to Lose*. Oxygen.

Four girl athletes competing for national titles, in basketball and figure skating. Directed by Alison Ellwood. Moxie Firecracker Films.

Director, Producer, Editor *America: Up in Arms*.

30 min video on gun violence. Moxie Firecracker Films, for the Alliance for Justice.

Producer *Children First*, ABC.

1-hour public service program about children's rights. Globalvision

Producer Bio

Nigel Noble is an Academy award-winning producer/director of film and television, whose work for more than 20 years has been characterized by a sense of compassion and a keen eye for the telling moment. His work in documentaries, television specials and series, music videos, industrial films and television commercials has earned him many awards as both a director and producer, including an Oscar for *CLOSE HARMONY*, an Oscar nomination for *A STITCH IN TIME*, two Emmy Awards, two ACE's, five CINE Golden Eagles, and two NATPE Iris Awards among others.

Recently Noble has been working as a producer on the documentary, *DRAG KINGS ON TOUR*, an Alliance Atlantis co-production, about a group of drag kings touring North America and performing. This documentary will premiere at The San Francisco Gay & Lesbian Film Festival. In 2002, he completed two one-hour specials for television: *PORTRAITS OF GRIEF* based on *The New York Times* award-winning column of the same name. The documentary pays tribute to 22 individuals who died on Sept. 11, 2001; and *GANGS, ESCAPING THE LIFE* a one-hour documentary that embraces the struggles young people face as they try to leave neighborhood gangs. His film *VOICES OF SARAFINA!* produced in association with Lincoln Center Theater was invited to The Cannes Film Festival, "Un Certain Regard", and won the Prix Amnesty Award, Amnesty International, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Award and Best Arts Documentary at Banff TV Festival in 1989. The feature length film was released by New Yorker Films and is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Broadcasting. For Rio de Janeiro's Zazen Productions, his feature documentary film, *OS CARVOEIROS - THE CHARCOAL PEOPLE OF BRAZIL*, represented Brazil at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2000, was presented by Conservation International at the Environmental Film Festival in Washington DC in March 2000, and had its European premiere at the Amsterdam Film Festival. The film looks at the appalling conditions and child labor in the Amazon rain forest from the point of view of the charcoal families whose job is to cut down the trees and burn the wood for use as charcoal used in the manufacture of pig iron. Best Documentary at Los Angeles Latino

International Film Festival, and the People's Award, It's The Truth Film Festival. **PORGY & BESS: AN AMERICAN VOICE**, a 90 minute docu-drama Noble directed for Mojo Working Productions, recreating the sources of this controversial opera and telling the story of its unfolding cultural and parallel social history, was broadcast on **GREAT PERFORMANCES**, February 1998. Noble was nominated for directing this film by the Directors Guild of America. The film has won Best Educational Film at the Montreal Film Festival and the Silver at the US International Film and Television Festival.

Educated in England at Clifton College, Noble began his career as Stage Manager at the **ROYAL SHAKESPEARE THEATRE**, 1962 to 1964. Noble spent the years from 1965 to 1979 as a recording engineer in both film and music, recording such musicians as **THE GRATEFUL DEAD**, **SANTANA**, **HOT TUNA**, **JOE COCKER**, **REUBEN BLADES**, **LIONEL HAMPTON & BOB DYLAN**.

CREDIT LIST

Director & Editor	Liz Mermin
Producers	Nigel Noble & Liz Mermin
Director of Photography	Lynda Hall
Associate Producer	Marcella Steingart
Sound Recordist	Anna Rieke

Featuring the Music of Ahmad Zahir

Produced in Association with Wellspring Media
Executive Producers Sheri Levine & Linda Saetre, for Wellspring
Produced in Association with the BBC
Executive Producer for BBC Nick Fraser

A Noble Enterprise Production

In English and in Dari with English subtitles.