

## Interview: Julian Schnabel, Rula Jebreal Explore the Perspective of 'Miral'

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CHICAGO – Julian Schnabel's controversial new drama, "Miral," tells a tale both sprawling and intimate. On one level, the film is about the titular Palestinian girl (Freida Pinto), and her coming of age during the Arab-Israeli war. On another level, the film is about a movement for peace, and the several generations of women whose acts of independence eventually set it into motion.

Acclaimed journalist and first-time screenwriter Rula Jebreal adapted her semi-autobiographical book for the big screen, while Schnabel utilized his immersive stylistic techniques to visualize the psyche of his protagonist. Each character in the film is viewed through Miral's perspective: Hind Hussein (Hiam Abbass), founder of the Dar Al-Tifel Institute, an orphanage and school for Palestinian children that Miral joins in 1978; Nadia (Yasmine Al Massri), Miral's abused and self-destructive mother; Fatima (Ruba Blal), the woman Nadia befriends in prison; Jamal (Alexander Siddig), Miral's devoted father; and Hani (Omar Metwally), Miral's love interest, whose violent activism clashes with Hussein's belief in the transformative power of education.

Hollywood Chicago was joined by Leila Diab of the Global Communications Network for a candid interview with Schnabel and Jebreal about their new film. Since the filmmakers discussed various plot details at great length, moviegoers unfamiliar with the story may want to see "Miral" prior to reading the following.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You recently appealed the R-rating for "Miral" and got it changed to PG-13. What cuts had to be made?

**Julian Schnabel:** I didn't cut anything from the film. I just had to reason with the people. I watched the movie with fourteen people, exhibitors and parents, and essentially there were two scenes that were problematic. One is the rape scene and one is the scene where the girl is being beaten. If you look at the rape scene, you never see the girl being raped. You see a piece of metal moving [in front of her], you see a guy pushing off the bed and you see a girl looking scared. You never see anybody's body.



Freida Pinto stars in Julian Schnabel's *Miral*.  
*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

I was absolutely concerned about the rating when I made the movie because I wanted as many people to see the movie as possible. When the girl is being beaten, you never see her back and you never see her face. I pointed out to people that her toes were actually on the ground, and even though her wrists were tied around a pole, there was no duress on them, so it wasn't hurting her in any way. And that was basically it. I think the preconceptions people had about the movie motivated them to give it an R. It wasn't about those scenes. It was the preconception and superimposition of this narrative that they didn't want to deal with. They wanted to dismiss it, perhaps unconsciously. But then, after spending time watching the movie and talking with them, twelve out of the fourteen people voted to make it PG-13.

When I cut the movie and made it shorter, it had nothing to do with that. It had everything to do with a moment at the end where I had images of Palestinian flags and Israeli flags. There was too much information that was outside of the story of the people. There was also something I



took out of the beginning. It was a very beautiful scene and you can actually see it if you get the English version of the DVD. You see people wrapping Hind's body and putting it inside of a yellow Volvo. The car drives off and then we go back in time. At the end of the movie, we cut from Hind to the body in the car, and you go, "Ah, that's what I was seeing at the beginning of the movie." If you don't have that at the beginning of the movie, you just go, "Gosh, she's dead." You're more surprised and shocked and I thought that was more powerful. So I accepted that change, even though I liked the original scene. But it had nothing to do with the MPAA ruling.

**GCN:** How did you go about choosing the actors for these roles, particularly Hind Husseini?

**Schnabel:** Well, first of all, I knew Hiam. She had worked with me when I made "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," and I had seen Alexander Siddig in "Syriana." I thought he was great in that film. I had seen him in other things too, but I especially loved him in that movie. Then I saw Omar Metwally in "Munich." I thought the scene with him and Eric Bana in the stairwell was the best scene in the movie. My film is all about characters and humanity, and the people I chose for each role have a lot of feeling. Freida looks a lot like Rula, and Rula and I actually did the casting together. I always knew that Hiam was going to play Hind. There was one moment where Ali Suliman maybe could've played Hani, but he looked too much like Alexander Siddig. So there was sort of a pedophilia thing happening, where he looked too old to be with Freida, who needed to look like she was 16. I love Ali Suliman. I think he's a wonderful actor, but I didn't give him the job. We became friends anyway.

But we always knew that Alexander was going to play Rula's father. We both agreed that he had the sensitivity, the gentleness and the depth of character. He did an amazing job. We had seen Ruba Blal in different movies. She was pregnant, and we had to pay fifteen thousand dollars insurance because she was getting bigger all the time and they kept having to change her clothes so she would appear to be the same size. Yasmine Al Massri is Lebanese but of Palestinian descent. And then we just saw a lot of people in Israel and Palestine. Obviously, I thought Freida would be great, and I think she really is. I don't understand when people ask, "Why did you have an Indian play a Palestinian?" Why not? She's an actress, for god's sake, and I think she did a great job.



Julian Schnabel directs Freida Pinto on the set of *Miral*.

*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

**GCN:** Why was the decision made to have Vanessa Redgrave play a small role in the opening moments of the film?

**Schnabel:** I remember when she was getting an Academy Award, and she said something about the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict. Paddy Chayefsky said, "Well, just because you're an actress doesn't mean that you have to have political opinions." But that being said, I swear to god, I couldn't find a woman in that town that had the qualities that Bertha Spafford needed to have. We looked around at different people, and I thought if I could get Vanessa Redgrave to do this, it would be like having David Bowie play Andy Warhol in "Basquiat."

For me, life and art are inseparable. I think that this movie is a living, breathing thing, and it engenders anger, curiosity, pride for some people, tears. I think it's got a lot of stuff going on, and it's not about something that happened thirty or forty years ago that doesn't have an effect on us now. I think the whole point is that this is about something that was not solved in 1993. One [Palestinian] character says, "We'll take 22 percent of the land." Well, there's no 22 percent of the land left. Hind says, "I never thought I'd see this in my lifetime." Well, she didn't see it in her lifetime. The whole point is that things have gotten really bad since then, and I didn't want the film to stop then. I wanted to show that the peace process stopped and we need to restart it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What was the challenge like of balancing the narrative between these four women? It seems as if *Miral* is present in the film even before her entrance, and there are hints that we are indeed viewing each of these women through *Miral*'s perspective.



**Schnabel:** Yes, it's a psychogenetic film, so you see the antecedents and the precedents of when that girl finally goes to that refugee camp and sees that building get knocked down. By then, you know what makes her tick. First of all, you know the setting. You know where Hind was coming from, the world that she created, and the kind of influence she would have on that girl. You see Fatima, her temperament, and the kind of response she had to her moment in the conflict. You know that she is Jamal's sister. She's the blood relative of Jamal, even if Jamal wasn't the blood relative of Miral. Then you see Nadia, who is volatile and defiant and also the recipient of the collapse of society, in some way.

So it's really about picking these moments: what was important about Nadia in regard to Miral; what was important about Fatima in regard to Miral. When someone tells me that they wanted to see more of a particular character, I say that it wasn't important for me to show things such as Hind reading a book to Miral. There was actually one scene when Miral is really little that's not in the movie. One girl's crying in the dormitory and she says, "I want to go home." Another girl says, "I'll take you home." The actresses couldn't speak English, so we kept saying, "Let's go," and the girls kept repeating the line. The girls run down the stairs and out the door just as Hind is coming in with a bunch of children on another bus. One of the girls runs back up the stairs, while Miral stays there stuck.

**Rula Jebreal:** And Hind sees the girl's suitcase and says, "Oh how nice of you, Miral. You brought more clothes for these kids."

**Schnabel:** So she starts giving her clothes out.



Miral opens in Chicago on April 15.

*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

**Jebreal:** This film is structured in the same way as the novel. My publisher came to me and said, "Let's write a book about you." I told him, "No, let's write a book about these great women who were really effective in my society." I ended up writing about Hind and the story of my mother, but I didn't do it consciously. I was writing about myself, even before I existed. The story begins in 1948, and the sense of that place, that school in East Jerusalem, is in me. There are many other stories in my book about many other girls, but if I included them in the script, it would end up being a six-hour movie. The stories of these women are all connected, their destinies intertwine with each other and lead to another character. When Fatima introduces Nadia to her brother, she knows what she's doing. She's taken [Nadia] to a different stage in her life, and you even see Miral in that look between Jamal and Nadia at the prison.

**Schnabel:** When we were doing the research, the movie that was playing when Fatima put the bomb in the theater was "El Dorado," and it was very boring. There's no sex in that movie.

**Jebreal:** Julian, of course, wanted some action.

**Schnabel:** But a different kind of action, a psychological action that had to do with rape, and certainly relating it to Nadia's rape and also the notion of a demolition of a building being the rape of a home, rape of a family. Also the connection with "The Battle of Algiers," in a way, where you've got that clock ticking and people who don't know that they're going to be the victims. So you have people in the theater who are participating as voyeurs and victims at the same time. The particular scene we used is from ["Repulsion"], a movie that I've always loved. I know Roman Polanski and Catherine Deneuve pretty well, so they gave me the permission to use it. Even Chico Hamilton's music is in there. The bomb didn't go off, so I didn't need to explode the bomb and then reveal that it didn't go off. Most other movies would have a bomb go off, but I thought, "Well, it's in your head." It's also interesting to me how at the beginning of the movie, you're watching a scene with Hind, and all of a sudden you see this piece of metal going [up and down] in the middle of the screen, and you go, "What kind of movie

am I watching? What is this?" I think that it's a very impressionistic and subjective movie, so instead of being very didactic about the whole historical issue, it's really very, very personal. I think that's the only way I could make it as my version of her story.



Alexander Siddig and Freida Pinto star in Julian Schnabel's *Miral*.

*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

**GCN:** Out of all the people in your book, who was the person that had the most tremendous impact on your life?

**Jebreal:** My father was not even my [biological] father. He loved a woman who was really broken and destroyed. She had so much pain inside of her and she thought she could heal herself through alcohol. In order to escape her pain, she had to drink. She started being abused at the age of fourteen and it went on until she was almost 18. Jamal used to tell her that she didn't have to drink outside, and that he'd bring her the alcohol himself. He used to humiliate himself by going to the bar to get a bottle of wine, while she would stay home. People at the bar would recognize him and make fun of him. It was very hard for him, and his unconditional love for that woman made me fall in love with him. When I understood that I wasn't even his daughter, and he gave all of his life for us, it made me think that he was a saint. Some people in my community thought that I portrayed him as a weak man, but for me, his weakness is actually his greatest part. I was educated in a tolerant Islam. I used to challenge [my father] sometimes and talk to him about extremists. He said, "You know, the real danger is in the minds of the people who interpret these books." I thought he was such a wise man. He had a deep affect on me.

On the other side is Hind Husseini, of course. She was a strong women and very determined. She told me that I could achieve anything in life through education, and she made me feel confident at the age of seven. I remember at the age of 13 when I started being more aware of things. I started going to my aunt's house in Haifa, and I ended up creating a revolution inside of her house. My cousins, who were males, didn't help around the house, and I wanted to challenge them to help. I was dissatisfied with my surroundings, so I started being a rebel and questioned why they didn't help. I started going to the refugee camps and screaming in the streets for democracy and freedom and dignity. Hind was not happy with that. At the same time, she closed her eyes so many times. She knew that I was jumping the wall and escaping. I often would come back gasping and entering the dining room a little bit late. She knew what I was doing. Sometimes she would catch me, but most of the time, she would ignore it.

**GCN:** Your love interest in the film was killed...

**Jebreal:** Well, this is something that happens a lot in Palestine, unfortunately. One of our colleagues in this film [actor Juliano Mer-Khamis] was killed five days ago, and it's not a personal tragedy anymore. It's a collective tragedy on both sides. We need to understand that if the circle of violence continues, it will affect everything. The trauma of being harassed, of living in an insecure area, makes both sides so unstable psychologically. The movie portrayed violence as negative no matter where you come from. Whoever kills a child is a murderer. I don't care about his reasons, whether he is Palestinian or an Israeli. This circle of violence has to stop because it is destroying the future.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In a PBS interview, Juliano was asked about his thoughts concerning the people who found his Freedom Theatre to be controversial. His response was, "Lucky me." Do you feel the same?

**Jebreal:** You know, if everyone had embraced [the film], I would've been worried about it. Every time I did any kind of work in television that not only questioned people's beliefs but made them open their eyes or their heart, it had value. I feel blessed to have this [opportunity].

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The murky visual flourishes in Nadia's scenes seem to be emblematic of Miral's own murky memory of them. The audience experiences Nadia's rape and suicide from Nadia's own perspective.

**Schnabel:** Yes, definitely. And that is inside of *Miral*. It's as if those things had happened to Miral. I used this swing and tilt lens to make it look as if [Nadia] saw everything in a fog, so even after she wasn't there, the fog of her lingered. So you have a lot of things happening at once. Also, the compression of time. If you blink in this movie, you will miss [a lot]. From the time Nadia's sitting in the cell and agrees to go back with Jamal, they get married, she walks away with some other guy to have sex, and she's got a five year old kid—and it all happened in a couple of seconds. So there's a lot of information in there, but I like the way the storytelling works. I think it's radical for people and some people don't understand it. But I've been getting some incredible letters from other filmmakers, actors and artists, and they get it. Some people don't. You do.

*'Miral' stars Hiam Abbass, Freida Pinto, Alexander Siddig, Omar Metwally, Yasmine Elmasri, Ruba Blal, Willem Dafoe and Vanessa Redgrave. It was written by Rula Jebreal and directed by Julian Schnabel. The film opens in local theaters April 15. It is rated PG-13.*



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