

Some might say he's demanding, he says he's determined. However you describe him, in his dogged pursuit of quality, director Omar Hilal will hound clients out of their comfort zones, battle 'tired' ideas and turn down shabby scripts. And he's got award-winning work to show for it

THE ENFORCER

June 2002. Rubber touched down on tarmac and as the plane slowed to a halt Omar Hilal looked out of the window at Saudi Arabia and thought to himself, 'what the fuck have I done?' Three weeks later he'd quit his new job as associate creative director at Leo Burnett Riyadh and begun the pursuit of his dream - to become a commercials director.

Blowing trumpets and fresh air

Hilal was no stranger to Saudi. Though he was born in Egypt, from the age of one to 14 he lived on a Saudi compound that was inhabited mostly by Westerners, while his father, a professor of chemical engineering, taught at the nearby University of Riyadh. While the compound's walls kept out many of the country's cultural conventions and laws such as the wearing of burqas, it was still a liberating, refreshing experience to move to Canada, where he finished high school. He then moved back to Cairo where, at the American University, he studied a combination of film, journalism, photography and, at his brother's advice, advertising.

A year directing TV shows in Italy followed, Hilal then did the same back in Egypt, until he met the MD of Leo Burnett Cairo in 1998, who offered him a job as a producer. While in that role he took two creative ideas to the regional CD, who told him, "You're not a producer, you're a writer."

An impressive period at the agency ensued where Hilal and his friend and colleague

Mohamed Hamdalla, "changed the [tone of Middle Eastern] advertising and paved the way for others to come in and start doing more interesting work," says Hilal, who remembers that before then most of the region's ads were simple, archaic jingles.

"I hate to blow my own trumpet, but we were passionate about advertising and we hated the status quo of ads in Egypt. We were inspired by the award-winning work we saw on reels circulated inside the Leo Burnett network. Backed up by a strong account team, we fought hard to create ideas such as those. We gradually convinced our clients to get out of their comfort zone, even in difficult marketing cultures such as P&G's." "The early work we did wasn't exactly award winning," Hilal admits, "but it was a breath of fresh air compared to the tired jingles that were common practice. The whole industry took note and with time the concepts got better, the executions were more international and Egyptian advertising positively changed."

Refreshing Coke deals in Cairo

Hilal won a slew of regional awards and five years after being given a creative role at Leo Burnett, he was associate creative director at the agency and one of the region's top talents, but he wasn't doing what he had wanted to do since childhood, when he would visit his grandparents in London and tape the adverts on TV. Taking the aforementioned job in Riyadh and realising he didn't want to go back to "claustrophobic"

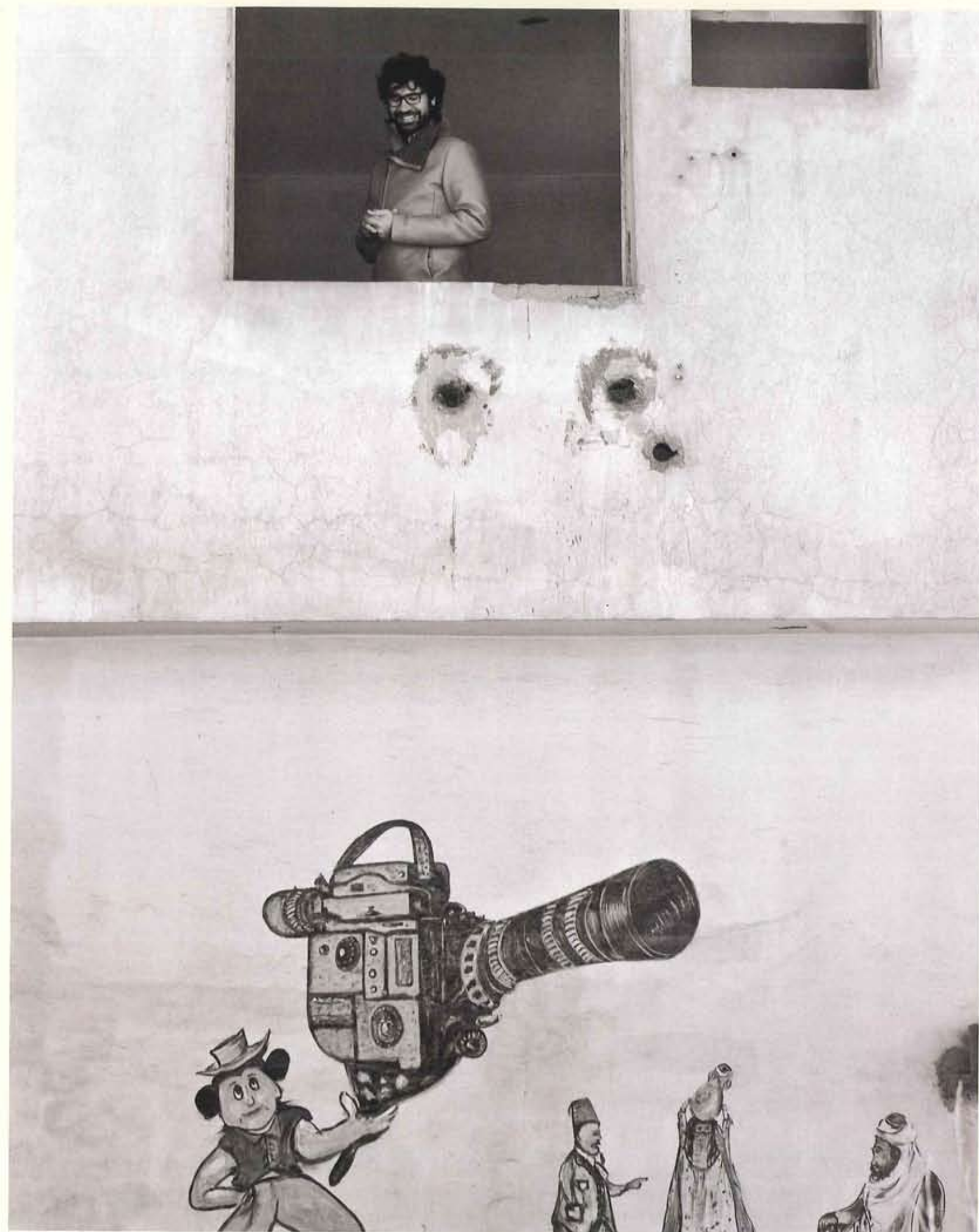
Saudi, he went to FP7 Cairo (part of the McCann Worldgroup), striking a deal to oversee the Coke account and direct their commercials. Within six months he was getting so many offers to shoot spots for other agencies he was able to quit the 'day job' and direct full time.

No dialogue, no can do

Since then he's compiled a body of work that would make most Middle Eastern directors nauseous with envy. Not only has he directed films for the biggest brands in the business - names such as Vodafone, McDonald's, Coke, Nestlé and Batelco - but he's also kept his reel free from the ubiquitous non-dialogue spots that allow for voiceovers in multiple languages and can hence be aired in several markets. "I often get those [non-dialogue] scripts and the client will want the same film shot in two Arabic dialects and again with an Indian casting to do an Indian version. There's no way you're going to get three great films out of that. I find that frustrating," says Hilal, who simply rejects the offers and takes on the projects that he believes can become great films.

"People come to me because I do very well with actors and dialogue," he says, and while he admits that most of his work is performance-based comedy, he looks up to diverse directors like Frank Budgen and would rather not be pigeonholed. From the faux behind-the-scenes look at the making of a spot in *Big Bad Ad* for Derayah Financial Consultants, to the mockumentary featuring Richard Gere for Etisalat, spanning even puppetry in Vodafone's *Mesaharaty* - all executed with panache - diversity abounds on Hilal's reel.

Proudly fluent in four languages, Hilal has lived and travelled around the world and believes this experience informs the diversity of his work. "You can't tell a commercial is by me by the look of it - which I think is a success," he says. □



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It's ironic that Hilal is concerned by the number of creatives in Egypt who are turning to directing, seeing as he admits, "I probably started this trend." This year seven CDs in Cairo left their agencies to work behind the lens. "Everybody seems to think it's the natural development for creative directors to direct," says Hilal, "but we're losing the creatives," he laments. "I think the creativity is suffering because the young people who are taking the [new directors'] places aren't developed enough. I end up having to improve their scripts - or I just don't take them on."

"Some directors feel the need to leave their mark on each script but I only do it if I need to. If I receive one that's excellent then all I have to do is breathe life into it and start telling the story, and they're the kind of commercials I like to make - stories. I don't feel the urge to change them, but sometimes I have to rewrite them and because people respect me, they trust what I can do."

Yellow bellies and short deadlines

While the challenges faced by directors in the Middle East would be familiar to their international counterparts; too-small budgets, too-cowardly clients and too little time, the anguish is exaggerated here. Two-week turnarounds for shoestring-budget TVCs are far too common and in 2012 Hilal shot a job for telecoms company Etisalat, through BBDO/STRATEGIES Cairo, that aired eight days after the agency sent him the script. "We shoot a lot

of commercials out here. I'm extremely picky and I end up doing 15 jobs a year, but I know directors who do 30 to 40 jobs a year."

The biggest barrier to creativity in the region though is the clients' yellow bellies. A three-film job for a big brand was recently "ruined" by the client, says Hilal. "I wrote three scripts that were very 'out there' for Saudi, in a very slang Saudi tongue, and they loved it. They signed up to it in the PPM, we shot it, made a director's cut and then somebody high up in the company looked at it and said, 'this is too daring. We're not doing it,' and they ended up only airing one out of the three films - and they'd really chopped it up."

Even when he does manage to push a creative idea through and is proved right, Hilal can still feel a backlash. In 2008 a creative from FP7 came to him with an idea that Hilal helped to shape into four spoofs of national anthems, poking fun at the fortunes of teams competing in the European Championships that summer. They recorded the audio and pitched them in the PPM to Coca-Cola who applauded but then took from 6pm until 4am to be convinced to green-light the new idea. The films were hugely popular with the public and won the TVC Grand Prix at the 2009 Dubai Lynx. "The client hates me still," sighs Hilal. "We've worked together several times since on Sprite and Fanta jobs that did really well but we don't get on great. Because I was so determined and tough about selling something more creative he took a dislike to me. Some people do say that

I'm quite demanding, but I think of it as being determined to make something good."

Having shot a film for the Kingdom of Bahrain, via seven cities in 10 days, through M&C Saatchi London in 2013, Hilal has his sights set on making more English-language films for Europe, The US and South America in the near future, and has recently been in talks with a global production company about representation. As Middle Eastern directors are generally not repped by any company and work with whoever has the scripts, he's free to set up his own production house, and will soon be launching GOAT, with his business partner Hossam Fawzy. "We're starting with ads but hoping to branch out into films and TV shows," he says. "I want to produce and help others make great films. I love collaboration. Don't think for a second that I like to rewrite scripts. I love it when a script is good and that's why I'm upset that creatives become directors - because you lose a partner you've been building a relationship with for months or years."

Omar's fantasy Balinese curry house

Despite his aspirations to produce, it's hard to imagine Hilal losing his creative drive. Last year he won a gold in Design at Dubai Lynx for *The Comb*, a campaign for the American University in Cairo, which came up while he was teaching there. Aged 38 and living in Cairo with his wife - herself a producer - and young daughter, Hilal is a huge Roma FC fan and a passionate cook. His speciality is Indian cuisine but he apparently makes a beef wellington that "Gordon Ramsay would be proud of". With two features in development his ultimate goal is to "make films and open a restaurant - preferably located in Bali - where I can cook every day." No doubt he'd be happy to cook someone else's recipes, but if they needed a little re-writing, Hilal would be the ideal chef to do it. [8]