

The Prophet Speaks

Salma Hayek had a mission: to find just the right images and music to bring Kahlil Gibran's inspiring poems to life for a new generation

BY CAROLYN GIARDINA

FOR SALMA HAYEK, the Oscar-nominated star of 2002's *Frida*, the idea of creating an animated movie around *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran's famous collection of philosophical poems, was a project — however improbable it might have seemed at first — that was somehow inevitable. As Hayek, who was born in Mexico, tells it, she was about 6 years old when she first saw a copy of the book belonging to her maternal grandfather, who was Lebanese, like Gibran himself. As a teenager, she picked up the book and began reading, and rereading, and fell under its spell.

Since its first appearance in 1923, Gibran's slim volume has attracted plenty of readers; it has been translated into more than 40 languages and sold more than 100 million copies worldwide. Hayek, who had begun to develop a second career as a producer (with *Frida*, in which she played artist Frida Kahlo — and received SAG and Golden Globe nominations, along with her Oscar nom, for best actress — and with the TV series *Ugly Betty*), became convinced Gibran's book also could be successfully adapted into an animated feature.

Her conviction turned into what would become a four-year quest to make *Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet*. First, she enlisted the aid of Roger Allers, a former Disney animator who worked on the stories for *Beauty*

and *the Beast* and *Aladdin* and went on to serve as one of the directors of *The Lion King*. Gibran's book only offered the barest hints of a story: Its main character, Al Mustafa, is leaving the city of Orphalese, where he has spent 12 years, to return to his home when he is waylaid by a group of townspeople with whom he begins to discuss his thoughts on life and love. Allers found himself asking: "Why couldn't Mustafa leave? There's no explanation in the book."

The director credits Hayek with developing the idea of the movie's framing story, which Allers then wrote. In the film, Mustafa (voiced by Liam Neeson) is a suddenly freed political prisoner who is making his way to the town's port to board a ship home. Along his route, he's trailed by a mischievous young girl, Almitra, voiced by Quvenzhané Wallis

(*Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *Annie*), whose mother, Kamila (Hayek), has been preparing his meals while he's been imprisoned. Says Allers of Hayek's contribution, "She thought if there was a stronger narrative holding it all together, it would help audiences make their way through." He explains that the book, mostly devoted to philosophy, didn't offer much in the way of specific guidance, "so I had to choose which pieces to use. And at the same time expand his story but not let the story overpower the philosophy. It was a balancing act of trying to balance the poetics and the storytelling. I wanted to make it entertaining so that it appeals to a broad audience but at the same time allow us to dive into the philosophy and get deep."

Allers drew inspiration from the life of the Burmese opposition

leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who spent nearly 15 years under house arrest in Burma (and who just led her party, the National League for Democracy, to a parliamentary election victory). "There was a person who was a proponent of democracy," says Allers. "I thought that bit of the story seems relevant. It's true now; it's always true that philosophers and poets often can find themselves on the wrong side of governments. Also, part of the idea came from a poem by Gibran: 'Pity the Nation' was his criticism of the Ottoman Empire, of which

Lebanon was a part. The creation of the girl [Almitra] was for children, to help take them through the story, and also to give us a character who has to go through some changes. I knew Mustafa would not go through many changes; he already had a certain amount of wisdom."

To bring the poems to life, Hayek and Allers decided they would invite other animators to direct the individual segments devoted to specific poems so that each would have its own unique style. And while Neeson reads each poem with his reassuringly distinctive voice, each was

interpreted with a different visual look, using techniques ranging from hand-drawn animation to CG. The directors who took on the individual assignments included Oscar nominees such as Ireland's Tomm Moore (*Song of the Sea*, *The Secret of Kells*) and the U.S.' Bill Plympton (*Your Face*, *Guard Dog*).

For the main story's color palette, Allers says his goal was to keep it simple. "I wanted it to be an earthy, warm, soft, simple place to come back to from the dreamlike excursions into what I knew were probably going to be very colorful ideas in the poems."



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On
FREEDOM



7

6



On
WORK

8

1. Mustafa (voiced by Neeson) contemplates leaving for home as Almitra looks on.
2. From left: Segment animator Joan C. Gratz, Allers and segment animator Mohammed Saeed Harib at the Toronto Film Festival in September.
3. Kamila tries to restrain her daughter, Almitra, in the film.
4. Wallis (left), who voiced Almitra, and Hayek, who voiced Kamila, at the film's U.S. premiere in July at LACMA.
5. Mustafa raises a toast before the admiring townspeople as he prepares to depart.
6. A scene from the poem "On Freedom," designed by animation director Michal Socha.
7. One of the storyboards from the movie's framing story, which was written by Allers.
8. The poem "On Work," which Gratz designed and animated.

"Everyone had absolute freedom in the way they did the poems." HAYEK

The animation directors “come from different countries, religions and age groups,” says Hayek, and each was given a lot of creative freedom. “The film is about freedom, and in the spirit of the film, it was important that everyone had absolute freedom in the way they did the poems.”

If the talent came from around the world, so did the money behind the modest \$12 million project. There was an investment from the socially conscious U.S. production company Participant Media as well as organizations in Lebanon, Qatar and France. “I didn’t want all the money to come from one place; I didn’t want the film to have a country,” says Hayek. “I wanted to not just make a film but make the film in the spirit of the kind of film that I was making.”

The Prophet had its debut at this year’s Cannes Film Festival, where it appeared as a special screening. And Hayek since has taken her passion project to festivals from Annecy to Toronto. Released in August by the indie animation distributor GKids, the film collected \$340,540 in exclusive runs to date.

Despite the philosophical elements, Hayek says that her goal with *The Prophet* was always to make a film that appeals to both children and adults. “We have a story that is very amicable for children, and it’s interesting for adults because it’s about freedom of speech. And it’s done in very simple animation. For the children, they understand the poem through the visuals, so it’s very easy for them.” **THR**

Love, Marriage, Work, Freedom

All of life’s key elements get their due as top animation directors from around the world pitched in to create a fresh fantasia out of Kahlil Gibran’s celebrated poems



Composer Gabriel Yared

Hayek turned to French-Lebanese composer Yared, who won an Oscar for *The English Patient* and earned additional nominations for *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Cold Mountain*, to create the eclectic score. For *The Prophet*, his music ranged from a slow waltz with a solo by cellist Yo-Yo Ma for the poem “On Death” to a “kind of Oriental tango” for the poem “On Marriage.” The music was recorded at London’s Abbey Road Studios with musicians of numerous nationalities, which Yared says “perfectly reflected the universal harmony described and so desired by Kahlil Gibran.” Yared, notes the film’s co-producer Clark Peterson, “was born and raised in Lebanon, and when he was 17, he was hired by Gibran’s village to compose music to Gibran’s poetry for the Sound and Light Show in honor of Gibran. He’s had these melodies in his head.”



Animator Bill Plympton

The poem “On Eating and Drinking” was created by award-winning illustrator and animator Plympton, whose credits include the Oscar-nominated animated shorts *Your Face* and *Guard Dog* and features like *Idiots and Angels*. Of his work on the poem, he says he wanted an impressionist “art gallery look. It could be 2,000 years ago or 20 years ago; it’s timeless.” Says Peterson, “Bill hand-drew every frame himself and does this incredible hand-drawn morphing style.”



Animator Tomm Moore

Ireland’s Moore — a two-time Oscar nominee for *Song of the Sea* and *The Secret of Kells* (both of which, like *The Prophet*, were distributed by GKids) — animated the poem “On Love” with a hand-drawn style. “[Moore’s Cartoon Saloon] did the project at the same time as *Song of the Sea*, so we used a similar technique, but the look was different,” he says, noting that there’s a progression in the segment’s love story that starts with a style of geometric Islamic art, then moves toward more organic images inspired by artist Gustav Klimt. Klimt, says Moore, “is associated with images of lovers and had that kind of exuberance we thought was needed.” — C.G.

