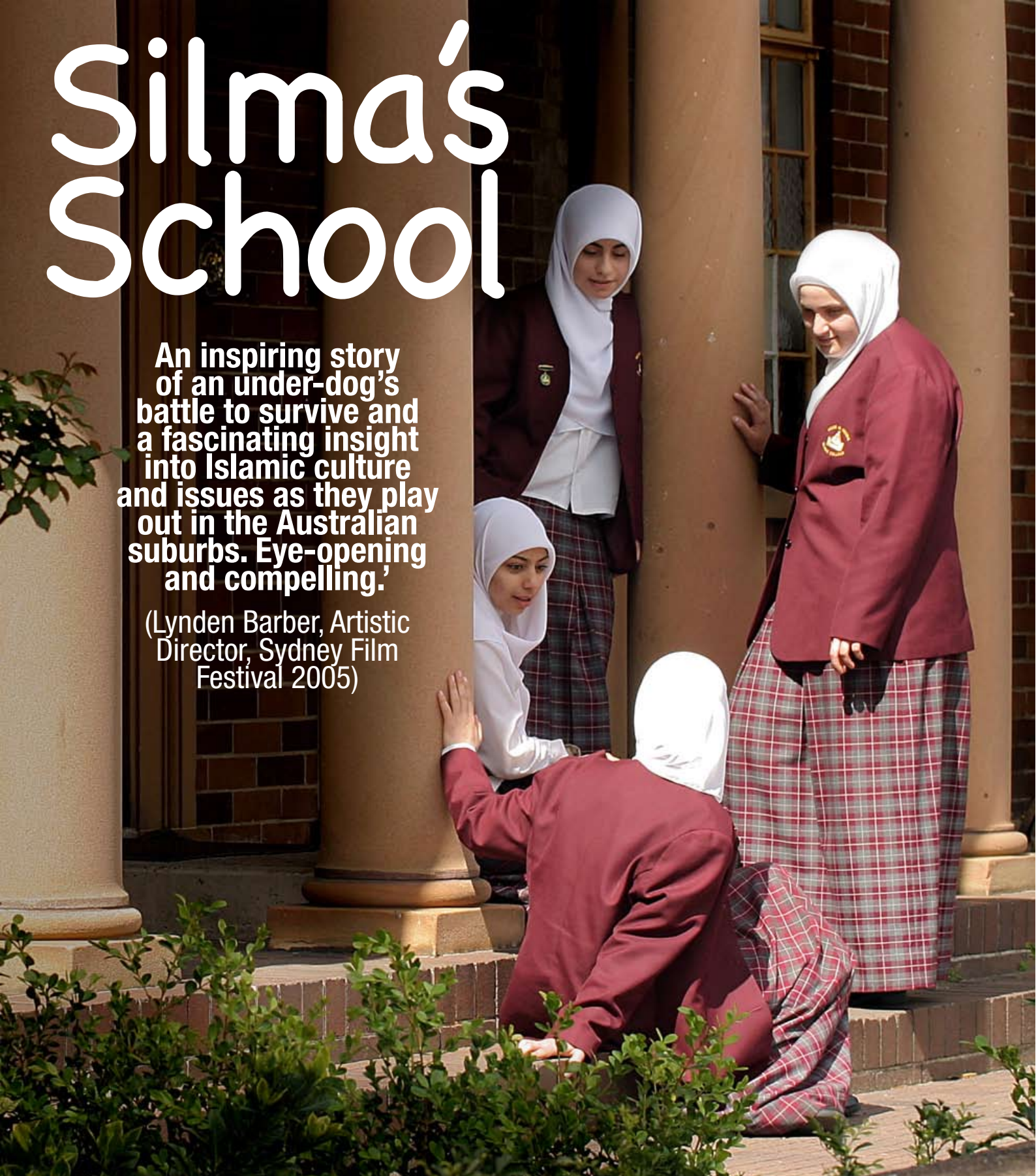


Silma's School

An inspiring story of an under-dog's battle to survive and a fascinating insight into Islamic culture and issues as they play out in the Australian suburbs. Eye-opening and compelling.'

(Lynden Barber, Artistic Director, Sydney Film Festival 2005)



A **STUDYGUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA

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Silma's School is an observational documentary directed and produced by Jane Jeffes (inset right). The story of one woman's struggle for the survival of her school – and for justice. It is the first documentary to take audiences inside the everyday world of Australian Muslims in the post 9/11 world.

INTRODUCTION > Silma and her husband Baheej risk everything to establish one of the first Muslim schools in Australia. Re-mortgaging their home, they lease a block of land from the Federal Airports Corporation in Sydney. Four years later, their dream turns into a nightmare. They discover the land is contaminated. They've built their school on a public tip. > Locked in a bitter legal battle, facing bankruptcy and the loss of all they've fought for, survival is a daily struggle – and a question of faith. > Silma is determined to fight for justice and compensation – but meanwhile, there's a school to run and the very real question is can the school survive while Silma chases her day in court ... > Moving, funny and suspenseful, *Silma's School* offers an important insight into the world of Australian Muslims and a generation of Muslims growing up in the West.



SYNOPSIS > Silma Ihram is an Anglo-Australian convert

to Islam, mother of six and a pioneer of Muslim education in the West. She's dedicated her life to establishing a school which will produce the next generation of Australian Muslims, confident in their faith and in their place in the wider non-Muslim world around them. It's a dream she's given everything for – but the dream turns into a nightmare when she discovers her pupils are sitting on contaminated land. And the Government department in charge of the property knew of the danger.

Re-establishing her school in a run-down theological College in Sydney's inner west, Silma must battle her way out of the bitter legal struggle and the enormous financial difficulties which followed the school's move. Lawyers calculate the damages in excess of \$14 million and Silma believes the Australian system will deliver justice and re-dress.

A date has been set for the case to be heard in the Supreme Court but there's a lot at stake and Silma cannot afford to fail. The school is in voluntary administration and Silma herself facing bankruptcy. Meanwhile, there's a school to run and teachers and students to manage ... the increasingly pressing question is: can the school survive while its principal struggles for her day in court and the justice and reparation her students deserve?

Silma's passion, her dogged determination, and the school's precarious financial position put at risk all she has achieved. Now, a decade, two million dollars in legal expenses and 125 court appearances later, she and

her nervous creditors – family, friends, staff, parents, and lawyers – await the final verdict. The school's fate – and Silma's – hangs in the balance.

Silma must vindicate herself in the eyes of her community and family but the personal struggle also has wider implications. The fight is about everything she believes in, beyond compensation or pride it's a matter of faith and identity. It's a fight for the rights of the minority Muslim community to educate their children in accordance with their own religious principles; to show leadership and courage in her adopted community – and to prove they can get a fair go in Australia: that Muslims can find justice in a Western system.

Largely observational in style, *Silma's School* is a portrait of one inspirational passionate woman and the daily drama of her fight for her faith, her community and her dream. It's also a portrait of the school she is fighting for and a rare and intimate insight into a Muslim community living in the West. This is a classic David and Goliath story which taps into the

problems many Muslims face in finding their place in the West as well as an introduction to one group of young Muslims whose sense of identity is destined to play a key part in the success or failure of our multi-cultural democracy.

Against a local and international backdrop characterized by racism, suspicion and fear, Silma's struggle for justice and her students' teenage experience feed into the big issues that dominate our dinner tables and media: from big business and corporate responsibility, family, community, politics, the role of the individual and justice for the little guy ... to the threat of Islamic terror, the war on terror, the new cold war and a clash of civilizations, multi-culturalism and national and religious identity, the faith we can put in faith schools, what we can and can't expect from young Muslims and their leaders, the experience of being Muslim in today's western society and the climate in which Muslims in the west are forging their identity.

Director's Statement

Silma's School was created for a prime-time evening television audience: Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), largely middle class, white and Anglo-European, largely un-exposed to the everyday lives and experiences of ordinary Muslims for whom Australia is also home. Holding a mirror up to ordinary Muslims without the socio-political or religious labels has become increasingly important for our mixed democracy – particularly since September 11 – and I wanted to move on from the portrayal of Muslims as 'Other'. The histories and stories we had been offered placed Muslims at a distance overseas, or classified Muslims in the West as a marginalized under-class, refugees or immigrants, a threat to security or a new mafia.

I wanted to tell a story that could speak equally to a wide audience and to the Muslim community itself – a community which largely doubts that the media is capable of reflecting their stories without labels or pre-judgement.

In some ways, *Silma's* struggle is a drama of suspense which is almost incidentally Muslim – a classic *Erin Brockovich* story of a feisty woman who discovers contamination and goes out on a limb to fight the Corporation – for her own survival and to champion the under-dog who wouldn't otherwise have a voice.

But as principal of an Islamic school, the drama of *Silma's* particular 'jihad' unlocks the contemporary Muslim experience of living in the West and provides some compelling encounters with a generation of Muslims growing up on the other side of our 'multi-cultural' democracy. The story as it plays out in the school offered an engaging way to invite a wider audience into the largely unexplored world of everyday Muslim life in our own towns and cities and provided a microcosm for some of the major issues faced by young Muslims in countries like Australia – without the political rhetoric, stereotypes and firebrand mullahs which have characterized much recent media scrutiny.

The most heated debates of recent years have centred on the threat of Islamic terror, national security, national identity and national values. The relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim has become what author, Salman Rushdie calls 'the subject of our times'. But the lack of images of Muslim people in the context of everyday living has contributed to limiting public perception and reinforcing negative public attitudes.

As an open invitation into the Muslim community, *Silma's School* may offer a different perspective. It may provide valuable insights. It may also challenge our pre-conceived ideas and claims to multi-culturalism but I hope it does so as an entertaining and emotionally rewarding David and Goliath story and that the audience enjoys the rollercoaster ride with *Silma* and *Baheej*, their family, staff and students unencumbered by their attitudes to faith and culture.

My hope is that a broad audience identifies with much in *Silma*, her school (Noor Al Houda Islamic College) and her family but is intrigued to find itself somewhere it has not been before. I would prefer information and education seep out undercover of entertainment and that audiences lock into *Erin Brockovich-in-a-hijab* when they might otherwise shy away from a weightier treatise about Muslim life in the West.

(The initial feature length cut received a standing ovation when it screened in the Contemporary World Cinema strand at last year's Sydney Film Festival. Reviewers and audiences used words like warm, funny, suspenseful, nail-biting, passionate, and inspirational. They laughed and cried and cited echoes of *Erin Brockovich* in *Silma's* passion and struggle – and of *Julia Roberts* and *Albert Finney* in *Silma's* relationship with her husband *Baheej*!)

The Muslim community is understandably wary of the media and on first screenings has been surprised to find their story told in a way that accepts and honours their trust. If the film prompts interest and discussion in the wider community and attracts a Muslim audience, it will have done a valuable job.

Jane Jeffes



USING SILMA'S SCHOOL IN THE CLASSROOM

This documentary should be of specific interest and relevance to teachers and students of:

- Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE/HSIE)
- Values Education
- Religion and Society/Comparative Religions
- Cultural Studies
- Political Studies
- Legal Studies
- Media Studies
- English

Apart from its entertainment value, if teachers need any other reasons to show *Silma's Story*, the results of a recent survey of student attitudes towards Muslims may be enough. As reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 6 February 2006, more than half of 551 Year 10 and 11 students surveyed in Victoria in late 2005 believed Muslims are terrorists, while

forty-five per cent said Australians do not have positive feelings about Muslims. While the way in which surveys are conducted can skew results, many of the reported results suggest a mix of intolerance and ignorance about the beliefs and lives of a diverse group of the Australian community. The full text of this survey can be accessed at <http://smh.com.au/news/national/schoolchildren-cast-judgements-on-muslims/20> and may make for some lively discussion in connection with the film.

Learning Outcomes

The themes and activities developed in this study guide will have interest and relevance for students from junior (Year 7) to senior years of secondary school and relate to the following learning outcomes:

- Explain the similarities and dif-

ferences between students from diverse cultural backgrounds and beliefs

- Consider the personal consequences for individuals pursuing justice through legal processes
- Understand the values and aspirations of different groups in Australian society

Suggestion to Teachers

While Silma's legal battle against the Airport's Corporation is the backbone of this film, the lively picture presented of an Australian Muslim school may be of more interest to some students. Teachers may choose to encourage students to focus more closely on one or more of the sets of questions later in this guide, each of which deal with a different aspect of the documentary, e.g., The daily life of the school, the long legal battle, Silma and her family.

Afterword > The school's case against the Airport created a new legal precedent and changed the law with regard to caveat emptor (buyer beware): land-owners will now be deemed negligent and misleading if they fail to disclose every problem with their land > For Silma and Baheej, it was a moral victory. They proved an important point but the compensation awarded was not enough to pay off their debts and the school remained in financial crisis. Ten months after the damages were paid, the school again faced closure > Noor Al Houda was taken over at the end of June 2006 by AIA, the Australian International Academy, formerly known as King Khalid Islamic College of Victoria in Melbourne, the oldest Muslim school in Australia. Silma has been retained as Principal.



BEFORE WATCHING *SILMA'S SCHOOL* >

Students will need to have some basic understanding of:

1. How independent (non-government) schools in Australia are funded
2. Particular aspects of Muslim life, beliefs and practices that may make some aspects of schooling a bit different.
3. Key terms and acronyms used in the program.

These three aspects are briefly explained below

1. The way independent (non-government) schools in Australia are funded.

The principles that govern Federal

Government assistance to Islamic schools are exactly the same as the principles that govern assistance to other religious schools such as Christian and Jewish schools. Islamic schools, such as Noor Al Houda Islamic College are accountable to the same audits, standards and evaluations set out by state education departments. Funding is dependent on enrolments. So, apart from parent's fees, governments assist schools financially from taxes. In New South Wales thirty per cent of students attend religious schools, Christian, Jewish, Islamic and a number of others such as Seventh Day Adventist and Scientologist.

2. Particular aspects of Muslim life, beliefs and practices that may make schooling a bit different.

- *Assalam 'alaikum* – Islamic greeting used by students and teachers when meeting each other. It means 'peace be with you'.
- *Insh'allah* – an expression of acceptance and hope, literally meaning 'as God wills it'.
- Hijab – headscarf covering worn by females, expressing modesty
- Ramadan – a lunar month in the year when Muslims are expected to refrain from eating and sexual relations between dawn and dusk.

- Daily prayers – Turning towards Mecca and praying five times a day (Salat), wherever you may be.

3. Key terms, and acronyms used in the program.

- VA – Voluntary Administration. Legal term where an independent administrator is appointed to sort out financial difficulties a business may be having and assess how best to pay creditors while the business continues to operate.
- BAL – Bankstown Airport Limited
- FAC – Federal Aviation Corporation
- HSC – Higher School Certificate Exams. Final Year 12 exams, called VCE in Victoria
- Pro-bono – lawyers taking a legal case without expectation of up-front fees; rather, payment is made if and when the case is successful.
- Mediation – meeting between parties and people in dispute, designed to settle matters before proceeding to a court case.
- Beslan Siege – school siege in a Russian town in 2004 that ended in tragedy when 344 people were killed, including 186 students, when security forces stormed the school to free hostages. Those holding the children hostage were believed to be Chechen separatists from neighbouring Chechnya, some believed to be Muslims.

Before watching the film

Read the following questions and record your responses. Class discussion of the following questions will help prepare students to understand and respond to some of the issues explored in this documentary. It may be useful to re-visit them after they have watched and discussed the film.

1. Do you think religious schools teach the same, or a different curriculum, to government schools?
2. Why do you think parents choose to send their children to religious schools?
3. What do you think might be the difference between a 'core' and 'hidden' curriculum in a school?

4. Should parents who choose to send their children to non-government (religious and independent schools) be fully responsible for funding the running of the school? Why or why not?
5. What difficulties might people face, particularly young people, when their cultural and religious traditions, including aspects of dress, are different to those followed by the majority of people in the society in which they live?
6. Do you think perceptions about the nature of Muslim practices and beliefs can be unfairly negative and indiscriminating as a consequence of the acts of some extremists who use violence to achieve their ends?
7. What are the costs, both financial and personal, in taking legal action to redress wrongs and achieve what you believe to be justice? Have you or people you know, ever taken on a difficult legal battle?
8. How difficult would it be for you to move to and live in a country with a religion, language, culture and traditions unlike those you are used to? What difficulties might you encounter?
9. Which countries do you think the students or/and their parents come from who choose to attend Muslim schools in Australia?

Who's who in the film?

Silma Ihram – founder, Principal and director of Noor Al Houda Islamic College ('The Guiding Light'), a Muslim school in Strathfield, a Sydney suburb. Before the school's move, it catered for 750 + students, from Primary to Year 12, both boys and girls. The new site only accommodates 420. Silma was born Frances Beaumont. Her adopted name 'Silma' is an anagram of Islam. 'Ihram' means 'pilgrims' clothing'.

Baheej Adada – Silma's husband, a



co-director of the school and a builder by trade

Makeen, Omar and Haneefa – three of Silma's five children from her first marriage

Adam – her nine-year old son with Baheej

John Beaumont – Silma's father

Rana – Silma's personal assistant

Clive Miles – the English teacher who speaks at the school formal and teaches the Year 11 students *Romeo and Juliet*.

Osman Karolia – young male teacher who wants to get on with teaching his students and put the legal case and its consequences behind the school.

Bedrieh Kheir – the Girls High School Coordinator, a confidante who offers to establish whether the teachers will support extending Voluntary Administration and deferring their superannuation payments

Yasmin Gamiieldien – Deputy Principal and Head of Primary, she cautiously supports Silma's idea to ask the wider Muslim community to invest in the school's assets

Style and content

The way in which a film is put together is important in shaping viewers' responses to the story being told. In *Silma's School* the structure, including visual and sound editing, and the cutting between the daily life of the school and Silma and Baheej's ongoing legal battles, reveals parallel but closely related stories, the success of each dependent on the success of the other.



AFTER WATCHING SILMA'S SCHOOL

Deconstructing a film

Watch the opening sequence of *Silma's School* (the section showing the official opening of the school in 2004) and fill in Table 1 to see one example of how the film is constructed to convey a complex sense of the personal and the public.

In this documentary sounds and images are sometimes overlaid and intercut in the editing process to convey complexity without too much detail, e.g. when the legal arguments are being summarized.

Soundtrack

Listen carefully to the music played

in this film and think about how it enhances and reinforces both images and narration.

The sound of Christian church bells is interspersed with the sounds of Muslim calls to prayer. What does this suggest about the filmmaker's intentions?

What musical influences do you hear in the composed music? What does this say to you about the world Silma and her students live in?

Further notes on musical influences and composition can be found on the film's web-site:

<http://www.silmasschool.com>

Student Activities

These three sets of questions ask students to focus their attention on a particular aspect of the documentary.

- A. The school
- B. The legal battle
- C. Silma and her family

Depending on the students' level and particular interests, it may be valuable for teachers to choose Group A, B or C, or divide the class into three groups, each with a separate set of questions to answer, discuss, debate and/or write about.

SCENES AND KEY IMAGES	SOUNDS, INCLUDING: VOICEOVER/NARRATION/COMMENTARY/BACKGROUND NOISE, MUSIC AND SINGING
E.g. Baheej up a ladder	Official speech of Governor of NSW

TABLE 1: OPENING SCENES

A. The School

- The opening scenes centre on the school's official opening which precedes the final court case and judgement. Describe the mood and explain the different tasks allocated to students and staff. What songs do the students sing at the opening?
- Early in the film, Silma says setting up the school was 'the vision of a mother who wanted children to be able to build their lives and contribute.'
What do you think she means?
What are the values your school is trying to teach?
- How is Silma's school, Noor Al Houda Islamic College, different from and similar to, your school? Consider such things as dress codes, division of the school day, curriculum, staff/student relations, sporting activities, celebrations, discipline.
- What is happening in the scene where the Year 9 boys are fooling around? How do Silma and the staff respond to this behaviour?
- Describe the discussion the group of girls is having about whether Islamic dress codes are oppressive to women. What is your opinion about this question?
- Girls and boys are taught in separate groups in years 7-9. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of such separation?
- Do the Year 11 English students seem to be enjoying their study of *Romeo and Juliet*? What is the teacher's approach? Is there any parallel between the scene they are enacting and the discussions Silma and her husband Baheej are having?
- What are the teachers dressed in school uniform trying to demonstrate to the students? What do they say? Do you think appearances are important in how a school is regarded in the community?
- What do the students have to say about the siege of the school in Beslan? Summarize the major points they are making. Are they given a chance to express their views?
- What is the mood at the school photo day?
- Describe the student preparations for their Year 12 social. How are their preparations similar to and unlike those of students from other schools?
- How long has Mr. Miles, the English teacher who speaks at the formal, been teaching at the school? What are some of the things he especially likes? What does his story about his introduction to the school tell us about both his and the students' sense of humour?
- What happens to upset Silma so much as the Year 12 boys are leaving school on the last day of school before their HSC exams? Do you think her response is justified?
- How might the restrictions on eating between dawn and dusk affect the students who are sitting their HSC exams during Ramadan?
- What impression of the students do we get from the final scenes of the film?
- How do you think teachers at your school might react to not being paid for some months so the school can stay open?
- Do you think students in Islamic schools are under more pressure

than other students to present a good impression to people? How might the terrorist bombings of 9/11, Bali and London, as well as the more recent Cronulla beach riots, affect students' sense of what it means to be a practicing Muslim in a non-Muslim country like Australia?

18. Write down three questions you would like to ask Silma about how she runs the school, and three questions for a student of your age at Noor Al Houda Islamic College about their school.

B. The legal battle

Much of the film and Silma's time and energy are taken up with her ongoing battle for fair compensation from the Federal Airports Corporation. While the legal fight has been going on for several years, the film deals principally with the final year of this case. As Silma continues to run the school, she also has to deal with the possibility that she may not win the case and faces bankruptcy and the closure of the school she has fought so hard to establish.



1. Describe the early days of the school's establishment in 1995? Where was it set up and how was it funded?
2. When did Silma discover that the land was contaminated?
3. Who else knew that the land on which the school was sited was polluted?
4. How many children attended the school when this was revealed?
5. How many children remained after the 2002 eviction?
6. Where and when did they re-establish the school?
7. Without council approval, what is Silma dependent on to keep the school operating?
8. What legal mechanism was put in place in 2004?
9. How does this situation make it impossible to apply for government grants?
10. What happens at the mediation hearing at the National Dispute Resolution Centre? Outline Silma's

- case for compensation from the Federal Airports Corporation. How much is she asking for and how much is being offered?
11. Silma claims 'the issue is about justice' and does not accept the offer made at mediation. Who wants her to settle rather than proceed to the court hearing where she still may lose the case?
12. Debts to creditors need to be paid, but Silma doesn't want to accept the Airport's offer for an out of court settlement. Why does she reject this option?
13. Who are the main creditors waiting to be paid?
14. What are some of the things Silma does to stave off the school's commitments under the terms of its Voluntary Administration?
15. How much is owing to the lawyers who have been running the case and how much more money is needed to take the case to court?
16. Silma hopes her barrister will run the case 'pro bono'. What does this mean? And why do you think the new firm of lawyers they engage are prepared to take the case 'on spec'.
17. The court case, the HSC exams and Ramadan all happen at the same time. What extra pressure does this place on Silma and Ba-heej?
18. As they enter the court, is Silma the only person dressed differently?
19. After the case has ended, what does Baheej think might be the outcome? Does Silma share his view?
20. How much time passes before the legal judgement is handed down?
21. In winning their case, Silma and Baheej are awarded three million dollars in compensation and legal costs, far less than they applied for. Is Silma's quest for justice only



about money?

22. What ongoing legal action is now being undertaken by the lawyers?
23. Some people say that even when you win a legal case you lose. What might this mean in the case of Silma's school?
24. Do you think this legal fight was ultimately worth pursuing for seven years? Would you have had the energy and conviction to go on?
25. Do you know the legal term 'caveat emptor'? Latin for 'Let the buyer beware'. (The idea that buyers take responsibility for the condition of the items they purchase and should examine them before purchase.) Silma's case against the airport set a new precedent which imposes a strict duty of disclosure on landowners in their dealings with their land. Do you think this is appropriate?
26. The NSW Supreme Court deemed Silma's case against the Airport to be 'in the public interest'. Why do you think this was?

C. Silma and her family

1. What are your impressions of Silma at the start of the film when she is organizing the opening ceremony?
2. What are your impressions of Baheej and his role in the school? Is he of a similar temperament to Silma?
3. What do we learn of Silma's background and relationship with her parents? Do you think that being a convert to Islam makes her task any more or less difficult for her in the community in which she lives and works?
4. How many children does Silma have? Are they shown to have the same commitment to her cause as their mother?
 - a) What does Baheej claim have been some of the more positive effects on the family of the long struggle?
 - b) What does Silma's daughter, Hanifa, have to say about her mother's fight for justice?
 - c) In what situations are the family shown together at home?
 - d) What impact do you think Silma's struggle has had on different members of the family?
5. How do you think Silma's commitment to the school affects her life and her ability to look after her children? How would you feel if your mother's work took so much of her time? Should women who have a family commit to such large tasks as running a school? Or taking on a big court case? How can a mother balance a family and a job? And how does that affect her children?
6. Make two lists, one of Silma's best qualities and the other of aspects of her that may not be so admirable. Some words may be repeated in each list, as sometimes people's best and worst qualities are what makes their personality, e.g., determined.
7. Provide examples from the film that illustrate Silma's management

style at the school.

8. At what times in the film are Silma's feelings and emotions most evident?
9. Which of the children says, 'I want the court case to be over so my mum can stop stressing and relax'?
10. Silma says, 'I've caused a lot of people difficulty....the outcome of the case may affect my standing in my community.' What do you think she means by these remarks?
11. Does Silma and Baheej's marriage appear to be in any way unusual to you in terms of roles each take? Is this what you expect of a western marriage or a Muslim marriage?
12. Is there any evidence in the film that males at the school are resentful about having to defer to a female Principal?
13. What sort of role model is Silma to her children, students and women generally?
14. To what extent do you think Silma's religious faith kept her going or is she just a very determined individual?

Extension activities

1. Investigate whether there is an Islamic school near your school or in a neighbouring suburb. Try to organize a visit and invite a group of students to spend time at your school. You may be able to establish email contact with some students to chat and exchange views about life. There are at least thirteen Islamic schools in NSW and thirty across Australia.
2. Some politicians have suggested Australian Islamic schools do not focus enough on Australian history and values and that in some, un-Australian activities are taking place. Read the following statement and then conduct a class debate on why Islamic schools are sometimes regarded with suspicion by some people.

In my role as Multicultural Affairs Commissioner, Islamic schools surpassed most others in their open days, har-

mony projects, inter-faith activities and inviting public, Catholic, Jewish and Aboriginal students for dialogue and sharing.¹

Joseph Wakim, Commissioner for Multicultural Affairs.

- You may consider looking at the ways in which some parts of the media involved themselves in and reported on the recent Cronulla 'riots', as well as looking at other aspects of press coverage of racial, religious and multicultural issues in Australia, particularly on television.
3. Australia's school system was founded on three principals, that it be 'free, compulsory and secular'. Are these principles compatible with the growing number of publicly funded religious schools throughout the country, reflecting the many different faiths practiced in Australia? What do you think is the role and place of religious schools in a multi-cultural society like Australia?
4. '... and justice for all'. Any individual or group that believes they have been disadvantaged through the deliberate withholding of information by another individual or government department should be able to have their day in court. Legal costs and delays often make the fight for justice too difficult. Suggest ways in which the resolution of such disputes can be improved?
5. *The histories and stories we had been offered placed Muslims at a distance overseas, or classified Muslims in the West as a marginalized under-class, refugees or immigrants, a threat to security or a new mafia.* (Jane Jeffes, Director of *Silma's School*)
Do you think personal stories such as the one told in this film will help in changing some of the negative attitudes towards Muslims evident in parts of Australian society? Explain how you believe such attitudes can best be changed.

References

Useful websites

<http://www.silmasschool.com>

Film website includes additional website links, historical background, anecdotes and events that happened during production, festivals and screenings, reviews, notes on music, further reading and viewing, production stills. (Site under construction – Completion due 31 Augst 2006)

<http://www.nahic.nsw.edu.au>

Noor Al Houda Islamic College official website providing information about the school's policies and curriculum (Accessed 18 April 2006)

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/schoolchildren-cast-judgements-on-muslims/2006/02/05/1139074109950.html>

Results of survey of student attitudes to Muslims (referred to earlier in this guide) (Accessed 16 April 2006)

http://www.brisinst.org.au/resources/brisbane_institute_kabir_moore_muslim.html

Brisbane Institute article entitled 'Muslims in Australia: the new disadvantaged?' Provides clear overview of the domestic and international political events which have contributed to anti-Muslim prejudices in Australia in the last fifteen years. (Accessed 2 May 2006).

<http://www.pm.gov.au/News/speeches/speech92>

Transcript of John Howard's address to the 39th Annual Congress Federation of Islamic Councils, Sydney in 2003 (Accessed 18 April 2006)

<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1446736.htm>

Transcript of ABC radio program from *The World Today*, August 2005, explaining the ways in which Islamic schools are responding to Government calls for more emphasis on Australian values. (Accessed 16 April 2006)

http://members.iinet.net.au/~asmaazam/misconcept_1.htm
Lecture delivered at the University of Western Australia by Yahya Ibrahim in February 2003, addressing Misconceptions about Islam: how women are viewed, polygamy for men/monogamy for women, Muslim attitudes to other faiths, Muslims are from over there – and all Arab, Jihad, attitudes to western law ... (Accessed 2 May 2006).

<http://www.islamaustralia.net>
Islamic site offering information about the Islamic religion, about Islam in Australia and trying to answer the question 'What is Islam all about?'. Islam Australia operates in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne, Australia. (Accessed 2 May 2006).

<http://afic.com.au>
Official web-site of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, includes details of Islamic schools and mosques across Australia (Accessed 2 May 2006)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2005/08/31/do3102.xml>
Opinion piece from the daily Telegraph, London arguing Muslims must follow the Irish example of integration and assimilation in the UK – and that faith schools are not the answer 31/8/05 (Accessed 2 May 2006)

<http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/scjudgments/2005nswsc.nsf/66950614059df523ca25673900081e8e/037bfd73ca15f233ca256f9b008244c4?OpenDocument>
NSW Supreme Court Judgement in the case of Silma Ihram and Noor Al Houda Islamic College versus Bankstown Airport (Accessed 2 May 2006)

<http://www.pwclegal.com.au/legal/pwclegal.nsf/0/29d670dc5251d8e1ca256fd50017b482?OpenDocument>
PriceWaterhouseCooper Legal: Legal Talk Newsletter: Managing Environment Law Risk – Recent Judgement Delivers New Warnings, March 2005. Outlines background to case findings in

negligence and misleading conduct. Precedent set as warning to land-owners with regard to their legal responsibilities. (Accessed 2 May 2006)

Further Reading

Caravanserai – Journey Among Australian Muslims

By Hanifa Deen, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2003. (First edition 1995, Allen & Unwin)

In 1993 Hanifa Deen travelled across Australia to show the human face of Australian Muslims: ordinary people from diverse backgrounds and cultures, people who mow their lawns, worry about their mortgages, love their children. In the wake of September 11 and the Bali bombing, she revisits the same people and finds them living in the shadow of the wider community's hostility.

Bin Laden in the Suburbs – Criminalising the Arab Other

By Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar, and Jock Collins, Institute of Criminology Sydney / Federation Press, 2004.

This accessible book shows how media and political response to recent global and local events has led to the demonization and exclusion of Arab and Muslim youth in the West – and explores the threat this represents to the future of multiculturalism. Reporting Arab and Muslim crime as young men 'lost between two cultures' and blaming the 'failure' to assimilate is creating a 'pre-eminent "folk devil" of our time – a negative image in the popular definition of national belonging and identity ...' The authors also argue how wiser words can foster inclusion.

This is an empowering book because it gives readers the skills to overturn such shrill nonsense. It moves between global and local events to show how news reports and political reaction misrepresent and mislead, demonize and distort, and how wise words from the well informed can foster not exclusion of the other, but

its embrace. Robust, fair and accessible, Bin Laden in the Suburbs is an excellent source book to pull the plug on the media bile of otherness. (George Fisher reviewing *Bin Laden in the Suburbs* in *New Internationalist* Jan/Feb 2005. It received 4 stars.)

Does My Head Look Too Big In This?

By Randa Abdel-Fattah, Pan MacMillan, Australia.

If you like *Bend it Like Beckham*, *Looking for Alibrandi* and even *Bridget Jones Diary*, you'll like this story of a 16-year-old Muslim girl in a Catholic private school – and you'll relate to the problems that beset Amal and her friends.

(Also published in UK, Germany, Norway and Sweden)

The Glory Garage

By Taghred Chandra and Nadia Jamal, Allen & Unwin, Australia.

Collection of true stories offering a fascinating insight into a culture that remains mysterious to many non-Lebanese Australian Muslims. Warm, provocative, funny and poignant, these tales of family and community life, contradictions and customs, reveal the dilemmas of young people trying to be true to the values of their parents and also be true to themselves.

Teach Yourself Islam

By Ruqaiyyah Maqsood, Hodder & Stoughton, 1994.

Accessible, short but comprehensive guide covering all aspects of Islam, Muslim culture, ceremonies, diet and moral views as well as beliefs and attitudes. Distinguishes between Islam as revealed in the Qur'an and in the teachings and life of the Prophet Mohammed – and the different social and cultural practices of Islamic society around the world.

Islam for Dummies

By Professor Malcolm Clark, Wiley Publishing Inc.

Easy to read, insightful, friendly guide introduces the origins, practices and beliefs of Islam as the world's second

largest religion. Explores Islam's long and complex relationship with Christianity and Judaism and puts Islam in perspective as a major cultural and geopolitical force.

The Trouble with Islam – A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith

By Irshad Manji, Random House, 2003.

Blunt, provocative and deeply personal, Manji asks pointed questions about mainstream Islam and the troubling cornerstones of Islam as it is widely practised and proposes a practical vision for how Islam might undergo a reformation that empowers women, promotes respect for religious minorities and fosters competition of ideas. A refugee to Canada from Idi Amin's Uganda, Irshad Manji has a vision of how the West can help.

Further Viewing

Erin Brockovich (Stephen Soderburgh, 2000) (USA)

Hollywood's treatment of one woman's fight against contamination and injustice. Julia Roberts (Erin) is the under-dog who takes on the bad guy, and with the help of a major law firm, and her boss Ed (their relationship not unlike Silma and her husband Ba-heej's) pulls off the largest settlement ever paid in a direct-action lawsuit in U.S. history.

Against all odds, her passion, tenacity and steadfast fight for the rights of the voice-less brings a community to its feet, and a corporation to its knees. In a world short on heroes, it's a funny, moving and inspirational reminder of the power of the human spirit.

Facing The Music (Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, 2001) (Australia)

Professor Anne Boyd is fighting to save her university music department after nearly ten years of relentless funding cuts. Forced to drop staff and courses and to pick up the phone and plead for private and commercial sponsorship, she must fight for what she believes in. She needs more than a miracle ... but how long can she

continue and at what cost?

There are clear parallels in Silma and Anne Boyd's rollercoaster journeys: each an eye-opening look at contemporary pressing issues told through the compelling story of one person's choices.

Yasmin (Kenny Glenaan, 2004) (UK)

Yasmin's story explores what it means to be Asian, Muslim and British in post-9/11 Britain. It uses humour, irony and understatement to address the hard realities of prejudice and discrimination, poverty and fear. Rebelling against her Pakistani upbringing, Yasmin juggles her westernized work and social life with her family's more traditional culture at home. Rejecting an arranged marriage to her Pakistani cousin, she rips off her hijab veil and traditional pyjama suit to wriggle into tight jeans and drive to work in her own GTi. But after 9/11, she is ostracized at work, increasingly subject to overt Islamophobia and forced to re-examine her faith, culture and relationships.

Wanting the voice of their film to come from within the Muslim community, the film-makers cast people from the community alongside professional actors – and incorporated scenes which happened spontaneously during filming. Archie Panjabi (whose previous films – *Bend it Like Beckham* and *East is East* – deal more jauntily with the experience of Asian families living conflicted lives in modern Britain) is fantastic as Yasmin.

What is so admirable about Yasmin is that it goes beyond blaming September 11 as the cause of alienation but rather exposes it as the catalyst for reinforcing existing resentments.

Matched by the resentments of the host community are those of disenfranchised Muslims. What Yasmin demonstrates is how some western Muslims have become radicalized not so much through a positive endorsement of their religion but rather because life in the west has so little to offer.

(Alan Docherty, Culture Wars, reviews website of the Institute of Ideas. <http://www.culturewars.org.uk>)

Researched and filmed in Keighley, one of the most racially sensitive towns in West Yorkshire. Two years later, the 7 July London bombings were carried out by young men from the same area.

The Castle (Rob Sitch, 1997) (Australia)

Humorous family story of under-dogs fighting their corner and winning through dogged determination – and a bit of help from lawyers who believe in their case.

The Kerrigans' world is running along happily until they receive a letter stating that their house has been compulsorily acquired to make way for airport extensions. The head of the family, Darryl is not at all happy – 'his house is his home, his castle', and he decides to fight the decision ...

The Kerrigans – for all their amusing faults – are an ordinary family of Australian battlers with a sense of pride and prepared to stick up for what they believe in.

North Country (Niki Caro, 2005) (USA)

Charlize Theron portrays Josey, a woman breaking the gender barrier, laboring in hazardous Minnesota iron mines. Faced with continuous abuse and sexual harassment, Josey struggles against the odds for what in Australia would be called 'a fair go'. She takes on the male establishment, and files and wins the landmark 1984 US lawsuit, breaking legal ground with the nation's first class-action sexual-harassment lawsuit – and protecting the rights of female workers to come.

Recommended Listening

John Farnham's 1980s Australian rock anthem *You're The Voice*.

The track is not used in the film but expresses Silma's belief that individuals – and a generation – can make a difference, and bring about change. Lyrics can be found at <http://www.stlyrics.com/songs/j/johnfarnham2054/yourethevoice98162.html>

'Cos I'm Free by Christine Anu:

A tattoo on the shoulder of Australian Olympian Cathy Freeman inspired this song by the same title. The lyrics speak equally to Silma's dream as they do to Cathy Freeman's.

Silma's School is available on DVD and video via mail order from:
Ronin Films
PO Box 1005
Civic Square
Canberra ACT 2608
Australia
Phone: (02) 6248 0851
Fax: (02) 6249 1640
Email: orders@roninfilms.com.au
<http://www.roninfilms.com.au>

For additional reading (growth of Islam, brief history of Muslims in Australia, multiculturalism and racism in Australia, social-political background to current Muslim /non-Muslim relations, effect of recent events on public attitudes, history of the school, facts and findings of Silma's legal case), Please contact Firefly Productions
26 Hale Road, Mosman NSW 2088
Telephone: (02) 9908 3467

Production Credits

Producer / Director – Jane Jeffes
Directors of Photography – Kathryn Milliss, Tony Wilson, Erika Addis
Editor – Harriet Clutterbuck
Original Music – Nicolette Boaz

Duration – 83 minutes & 55 minutes
Year – 2006

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Financed by Film Finance Corporation Australia

Marguerite O'Hara is a freelance writer from Melbourne.

Endnote

- ¹ *The Age*, 29 August 2005. Full text of article can be accessed at <http://theage.com.au/news/opinion/why-muslim-schools-what-about-the-rest/20>



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