

# Hollywood Unscripted Ep 005 - Hala

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**Scott Tallal:** Welcome to our latest edition of the Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. I'm your host, Scott Tallal with the Malibu Film Society. And joining me as co-host today is our producer, Jenny Curtis.

**Jenny Curtis:** Yes, hello, Scott.

**Scott Tallal:** Hi. And we also have the director, writer and star of Hala, a new film that actually started out as a short film and is now coming out theatrically on November 22nd on Apple TV. The screenplay was written by and directed by Minhal Baig and joining Michal is the lead actress in the film Geraldine Viswanathan. Thank you for joining us today.

**Minhal Baig:** Thank you.

**Scott Tallal:** Talk to us about this whole development process. I mean, a film that starts out as a Kickstarter \$35000 and then winds up on the screen is of a journey with this movie.

**Minhal Baig:** I remember making this teaser for the Kickstarter campaign with AFI graduates. I stole them because I didn't get into AFI's directors workshop for women. And instead of sitting on my hands and feeling sorry for myself, I just reached out to them. And a couple of the graduates, it was right around May or June, they were looking for something to shoot. I had a short script that was one of the subplots of the feature. And the intention was that the short would serve as a proof of concept for financiers and producers to come on board the project and understand not only what the story was, but why it was important. And the short was the first part of the process. And that, we shot this teaser, I remember, in a parking lot with the two hundred dollar **Hazar** that I paid for myself. We got kicked out because we didn't have a permit and then we had a teaser and we put it online and we put it as part of the campaign and we raised, I believe it was \$30000. And then there was more money that came in later to support the short. And we shot it in five days in 2015 and we edited it. I think it was like less than two weeks.

Did sound and color and released in 2016. And that short reached Jada Pinkett Smith, who came on board as an executive producer. She was really moved by the short film and wanted to put her resources behind me and my vision for the movie. And then when she came on board, it helped us secure financing for the feature. And then we were shooting in 2017.

**Jenny Curtis:** The plan was always to make it a feature? Did you have the script before you shot the short?

**Minhal Baig:** I had written a version of the feature script. It's actually quite different than the final version that we ended up shooting. But the skeleton was the same. It was about a young Pakistani-American Muslim teenager who's coming of age and she is navigating multiple identities in search of her true self. That was always the thrust of the story, and the feature sort of evolved over time to focus more on her family. And that was a result of things I'd learned from making the short film.

**Scott Tallal:** And from there, you wind up at Sundance, where you ended up nominated for the jury prize.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah, it was a very surreal experience because I remember submitting the short film to Sundance and we didn't get in and we didn't get anywhere. We submitted maybe four or five festivals and we didn't get in. And I felt that I still wanted to share the short film with people. And we put it online. We got recognition and that helped Jada find it. But to be at Sundance with the feature was super surreal and beyond expectations. And we had found out so early in the process, too. We found out in I believe it was July in 2018. So I just had to keep this secret for months and not tell anyone that we were in Sundance for the longest time until they made the announcement. And then to have our premiere at Park City in the Library Theater was amazing. It was like the best, warmest reception that we could have ever hoped for.

**Scott Tallal:** I'd imagine it was almost like an out-of-body experience.

**Minhal Baig:** It was oftentimes you read about what happens when directors go to Sundance and they write about how they had blacked out or they don't remember what happened because it was all so overwhelming. And I always found that to be a total

cliche and that that wasn't going to happen for me. And then it did happen. I remember going up to the podium and feeling like so much is happening and so much is going on. But this is a special moment to finally share this film that I've lived with for so long and that we had worked together on and put everything into.

**Jenny Curtis:** I saw this video that you called your mom from.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah.

**Jenny Curtis:** The front of the stage at Sundance to show her the audience. And she didn't even know you had created a movie.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah, I told my siblings that I had made a movie and they had some idea of what it was about. But my mom did not know that I had written a movie, that I directed the film that we had shot in Chicago and not even too far away from where I grew up. But I felt sort of scared to share that because it's such a vulnerable personal story. And I kept putting it off even during production. One of the line producers came up to me and she said, you should really call your mom. And so I would call her, but I wouldn't tell her about the movie. I would just tell her I'm working in film and TV. And then it was the day before our premiere. And I felt like if I don't tell her what's going on now, I will never do it. So I told my sister, like, can you make sure that Mom is available at this time? The screening will be over and I'll call her from the podium and show her because it's easier to explain what it is if I can just show her what's happening. Instead of explaining what Sundance is, a festival is. She's never been to a film festival, she doesn't know what that's like. So I went up to the podium and I face-timed her and I told her that I'd made a movie and that people had come to see it.

**Jenny Curtis:** How did she react?

**Minhal Baig:** She was very confused. And I think the first thing she asked me right after I told her this was that she wanted to know when I was going to visit home. I hadn't been home in a while. And she was just asking, when was the next time I was gonna be there? And so I had to quickly, like, tell her, like, yeah, I'm going to talk to you about it later. Okay. Bye.

**Jenny Curtis:** in front of a whole bunch of people.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah. Yeah. I had to speed out of that phone call because we had a Q&A. But she now knows that there's a movie and roughly knows what it's about, but she hasn't seen it yet.

**Scott Tallal:** And how do you feel about how your mom's going to react?

**Minhal Baig:** My mom doesn't watch American movies all too much. I was telling Geraldine that the last movie we watched together was All is Lost. There's hardly any dialogue in that movie. And I think she likes it that way. She watches Pakistani dramas and television from there. So she's not so keen on American film and TV. But I think this is different because so much of it is about our lives together. And I'm curious to hear what she thinks of it. She obviously would have a more complicated relationship with it cause she knows me and so much of me is in the movie. But it's something that I'm hoping that we can get to do together.

**Scott Tallal:** Now, originally, you were going to set this movie in France.

**Minhal Baig:** Oh, yeah, that was a long time ago.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** What?

**Minhal Baig:** Really good. Really, wow, deep cut. Very surprised.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Deep cut. I didn't even know that.

**Minhal Baig:** I liked the idea of it being set outside of America at one point. And then I realized I'd never been to France or Europe. And that was silly because that was not my experience. I think that the fact that I was trying to set it so far away was more just my trying to distance the story from my own life because it was too scary to make it too close to home. Like for a long time I was just keeping it at arm's length. I don't want it to be set in Chicago. I don't necessarily want them to speak this language. I was thinking maybe that they would be Muslim, but maybe of a different background. But then over time, it just became clear that, oh, it has to be Pakistani American family, it has to be set

in Chicago. And so much of the family dynamic that was in my own home ended up in the script. It was very much an effort to try to keep from accessing those fears of it's too close to home. And then in the rewrites, it changed pretty radically.

**Jenny Curtis:** What was the impetus to change your mind and make it more personal?

**Minhal Baig:** It was a process of approaching the fear instead of running away from it, including the scenes that I thought were too difficult to write about at first, because I felt if I make this movie and there's parts of it that are sanitized or feel that I'm not expressing vulnerability in making it, then I don't know that an audience is going to feel an emotional connection either. So I had to be very tied to it because I knew that if I was deeply emotional writing it, then hopefully that translates on the screen in the final movie and that people also feel that too. But they can't do that if the filmmaker themselves is not also putting themselves on the line.

**Scott Tallal:** So basically, write what you know.

**Minhal Baig:** I think it's right what you know, but also find interesting and that you deeply care about because there's things in the movie that didn't happen to me in my own life because the film is semi-autobiographical. Hala is not me. There's many ways in which we differ, but to live inside of a story and to really tell it authentically. That was a big process in rewriting the script and making sure that it felt real and lived in.

**Scott Tallal:** You're a long way, obviously from BoJack Horseman, but Ramy shares some of that same sensibility.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah, I.

**Scott Tallal:** You're a writer on Ramy.

**Minhal Baig:** I wrote on the first season of the show. It was a really interesting project to be a part of. I'd watch the pilot and it was such a specific world and it was so personal for him because he's also acting in it, which is a whole 'other level, which I never want to do. I trust the professionals.

**Scott Tallal:** So the professional you trusted to help tell your story is Geraldine?

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah, quite The professional.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** I don't know about professional.

**Jenny Curtis:** How did you guys find each other?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** I remember I found you on Twitter through a mutual friend, Kyle Allen, who you have worked with before. And I found you on Twitter and was like, who is this? And I asked my agent if I could meet you. And then we met. And then it was just perfect timing. You were like, I'm actually casting this movie right now.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah. Yeah. It was a summer before, right? I think it was. Or was it a summer before we were casting that we met?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Maybe.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah. And then you submitted a tape, several tapes. And it was really interesting. One of the tapes is with her skateboarding, which I requested of people who I was like, oh, I'm really interested to know if they can actually skateboard because if you hadn't we would have to teach you how to skateboard.

**Scott Tallal:** Which is a big part of the movie,

**Minhal Baig:** It is. It's a significant part. And I didn't want all the shots to be of a stunt double because I feel like that limits the kinds of shots you can get. So I at least wanted for her to be able to like skateboard down the street. And Geraldine could already do that, which is pretty great.

**Jenny Curtis:** Could you or did you practice really hard?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** To a degree

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah, you look pretty, you look like, you know what you are doing.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** I, in high school, I took up skateboarding in an effort to meet boys, and it totally worked. And I can stay on a skateboard, my skill stops at tricks and like the

**Minhal Baig:** half pipe and stuff.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Yeah. It was really fun. I love skateboarding.

**Minhal Baig:** Jack can actually skateboard.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** He's an incredible skateboarder

**Minhal Baig:** He's really good. I like actually.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** He did not have a stunt double,.

**Minhal Baig:** He did not have a stunt double. He was in the bowl. And I remember some of the crew asked whether that was the stunt double. And I said, no, that's Jack. He just knows how to skateboard. He is really good.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** He's just cool, he's a cool guy.

**Scott Tallal:** Yeah. But this was also a departure from you given a lot of your previous work.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Yeah, I was actually staying at Kay Cannon's house when I taped that who is the director of Blockers, which is a movie I did. Yeah. This couldn't be more different from anything I've done before.

**Minhal Baig:** I was actually surprised because I hadn't seen Blockers when I was.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** It wasn't out.

**Minhal Baig:** It wasn't out. It was being edited. It was in post. And then the movie came out after we were already working on the movie. So, you know, it felt , it was such a different character from Hala in this movie. I think that what was really impressive, You have such range and you were able to embody a character who's so quiet and internal. And there was so much emotional self-restraint in the performance.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Thanks.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah,.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** I mean, that was what was so exciting to me. It was just such a treat to play someone so different from me and any characters I've played before to just like sit in the silence and be an observer. I learned so much,.

**Scott Tallal:** But was there anything intimidating about that?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Absolutely. It was so scary. And I really had no idea. But we just kind of dove into it and held hands and hoped for the best.

**Jenny Curtis:** What was the process there to find Hala together?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** So after we had cast Geraldine. She was on another project and then she was sort of shifting gears really quickly, coming on board this film. We had about a week of rehearsals and it wasn't just with Geraldine, but also with Purbi and Azad and Jack and I did one on ones with them, but I also worked with them together to create this family and for them to feel like like they really knew each other and they were familiar with each other. So we did a lot of work there and we talked through the script and the emotional arc of this character and what she wants and understand someone who is very quiet and there's so much going on underneath the surface. The character also changed a lot from on the page. I do feel like when I was imagining Hala in my head, I had one idea of who she would be. And then when you submitted your tape and you were on set, it became clear that she was becoming fully realized in this way. There was another dimension to her which was like this lightness, which was not necessarily in the script itself because she's so self-serious in the story. And we needed that levity and charisma and a likability like she had to be someone that you rooted for. And I



really feel like that you brought that to this character. And also, like Purbi and Azad brought a lot to their characters to ,you know, Purbi was drawn to this story because she had met so many people like Eram in her own life and really related with that. And then Azad, you know, he's a very emotionally intelligent man in a culture in which it can be really difficult to be that expressive. And it was an act of vulnerability for him to play that part, too, and to embody a person who's quite different than who he is. And then when they were all together, it was very, it was very supportive. You were all so supportive of each other and looked out for one another on set so that you have the space to do your best work.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Yeah Azad would cook me Pakistani meals and we'd have little family dinners, plenty of bonding time.

**Minhal Baig:** Azad's great.

**Scott Tallal:** Are you both first generation?

**Minhal Baig:** Mmhmm.

**Scott Tallal:** First generation, Australian, first generation American

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah.

**Scott Tallal:** So you have a little bit of that shared experience. Talk to us about that.

**Minhal Baig:** For me, it was I was dealing with the coming of age that any teenager goes through when I was Hala's age, but also wanting to keep part of my culture and keep my faith, too, because I don't want to lose those things. Those are important things. When people would just ask me questions like, well, why don't you just forget about them or forget about your culture. Forget about your faith. I feel like that's a very dismissive way of looking at something that does mean a lot to a lot of first generation young people is that they're not looking to abandon these things in favour of a different set of values or a way of life. It's about navigating who you are and making sense of that identity while also keeping the things that are important to you. You are influenced by the country you're raised in and immersed in in that culture. But then there's also just

things about what you want and who you are as an individual. And that's sort of separate from the fact that you're living in the Western world, gets more complicated. And as I'm getting older, I'm starting to appreciate my culture, my faith more because I grew up with my parents telling me that they didn't want me to stand out and they don't want me to feel ,like ,too othered. And then as I was getting older, I realized that these parts of myself that I was suppressing are really important to who I am. And I don't need to push them down to make other people feel comfortable or to make myself feel more the same as everyone because everyone has their own identities to navigate, whether it's their culture or background or faith, regardless of that. I think everyone is going through it

**Scott Tallal:** Did your parents push back against the cultural assimilation as you're growing up?

**Minhal Baig:** One aspect that's reflected in the movie is that I spoke English at home. Specifically my father was very adamant that we speak English at home because he didn't want us to feel like immigrants. And I think that was just because of his own difficult transition of being an immigrant and having to feel othered, even as he had been living in America for such a long time. But he didn't want us to stand out. And so we did speak English. And my mom would speak Urdu with us and they would speak Urdu with each other. And that's the dynamic in the movie itself. I felt more comfortable speaking English. We just used it more frequently. But now I kind of mourn the loss of this language that my parents spoke and that I revisited when I visited Pakistan and I heard everyone speaking this language. And the moment that I opened my mouth, people know that I'm American because of the inflection and because of the accent. So I think that they very much wanted us to assimilate. But then they also wanted to keep the culture and keep the faith. I don't think that the Pakistani culture and the Muslim faith are at odds with Western culture. I think that they can coexist. It's just about each individual figuring out what's right for them.

**Scott Tallal:** Does this resonate with you, Geraldine?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Yeah, my parents are both immigrants. My mom is from Switzerland and my dad is from India. But they moved to Australia. So I definitely identified with Hala's straddling the two cultures and the kind of duality of that. But my

parents are quite like rebels. They're like go be an actor, like, drop out of college, you know? They're like,

**Scott Tallal:** That's not exactly something you hear from a lot of.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** No, but I would say my grandparents, I feel, are a little more similar to Hala's parents in they're a little more conservative. They speak Tamil to each other. So that's kind of where I relate in that sense.

**Scott Tallal:** And did you did you speak English at home or did you?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** We spoke English. But my mom, I speak Swiss German because we lived there for a while when I was a kid. So we would sometimes speak Swiss-German at home. But my dad, yeah, I never learnt Tamil. I felt quite disconnected from that side of my heritage, which is kind of a shame. And I'm trying to make up for lost time now because my dad moved to Australia when he was a kid, when he was six. So it was.

**Scott Tallal:** So he's not quite old world?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** No. He's very Australian. Has Australian accent. He's quite assimilated in his mindset is very much like we're Australian. It's so nuanced, which is what I related to in the story. I think any first generation situation is so complicated.

**Scott Tallal:** What did you learn from Hala?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** From the making of it or.

**Scott Tallal:** Just from the character.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** From the character? Sometimes it felt like a meditation or like a meditative experience because there was so much space and silence and we were just really sitting in the emotion and the relationships. And I felt really calm sometimes just from the practice of doing that instead of, you know, feeling like you need to be on or like it was just a completely different experience and it felt very

therapeutic in a way. The goal was to be as connected to your emotional self and as present. Just listening as much as possible. So I feel like I really want the sort of power of that and the power of silence, that sounds so cheesy.

**Minhal Baig:** But there's so much there were so many scenes that were dialogue-less and yeah, just a lot of shots were we're resting on Hala's face. And the reason why we do that is we want to stay with her to really understand her perspective and how she's reacting to the things that are happening around her. Even when we were casting, we needed to find somebody who could project that emotional depth without saying anything. Sometimes it probably felt like you weren't doing anything or you were in a shot and you're reacting and you're like, is this translating visually? Is the audience going to understand what's going on in her head? And I feel like it works. It's a very quiet form of acting instead of expressing outward.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Yeah,.

**Minhal Baig:** It's sort of like inward. I even remember this note that on that day that we were shooting and Jada was on set, she said it's like she's smiling on the inside.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Oh that's really cute.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah, she had that note and she wanted you to know that. Like it's like Hala is smiling on the inside. And that's a very hard note to translate visually because it's not like a physical thing that I'm telling Geraldine to do. It's just a mind-state and it's really challenging to hit that mark. But when it happens, you just know it right away. Like I could tell from the monitor when there was a moment where you might not have felt like you were doing anything but or you might have felt like you're completely in the moment, but you're very still. And that translates emotionally because we're like sitting with her and we're not asking the audience to focus on what the other person is saying. We're just staying with her and her reactions.

**Scott Tallal:** But then you also have voiceover and that's tricky in a movie.

**Minhal Baig:** Yeah.

**Scott Tallal:** I mean, did anybody ever say, don't go there?

**Minhal Baig:** Actually, no. I think that. When I screen a cut of the film with a couple of close friends and filmmakers, one of the producers who was there really responded to the poetry in the movie and he said, I wish I'd heard more of it. And that was really motivating because I wanted to put more of it. But I was holding myself back because I felt like that was a trope. And to like avoid that trope of it, just feeling like Hala's directly talking to the audience. We wanted it to be more elliptical than that. And it's not that she's commenting directly one to one with what she's experiencing, but doing in a way that's artistic. And there's room for interpretation. There's maybe things that she's not literally talking about her own life, but maybe her mother's life. And that made it easier to incorporate because I didn't want it to feel like she's talking at the audience. I wanted it to feel like she's writing to herself. These poems are for her. And I wanted to set up that we see her reading from her notebook once and then we don't revisit it, but we just assume that these are things that she's writing down.

**Scott Tallal:** But it really does advance the story.

**Minhal Baig:** Thank you.

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**Scott Tallal:** Talk to us about how the movie opens and how the movie closes, because it's.

**Minhal Baig:** Right.

**Scott Tallal:** They're bookends to this story.

**Minhal Baig:** The movie opens on a shot at the table with Hala reciting a passage that sort of refers to the afterlife and all fire, which is kind of a maybe a dark way of opening a movie. But I think I just wanted us to sit in the feeling that she is thinking about who

she is and doing good and living a good life. And then the next shot is her in the bathtub. And, you know, I wanted to show that these two things can co-exist. And like, the movie is going to explore that conflict because at first she believes or she's being led to believe that those two things can't be in one person at once. And then at the end of the movie, she's returning to prayer a lot. And she does the prayer before she leaves the dorm room. And I wanted to set up in the beginning of the movie, she's missed her prayer, and her mom is reminding her to do that. And then at the end, she's coming to do it on her own. It always made sense to me that we would return to that in some way. The prayer that was forgotten is the one that's remembered at the end. It felt like a real way to end the story. It's a journey of the inner life. It's about self-actualization. And so those two scenes really felt like they belonged with one another.

**Scott Tallal:** The issue of female sexuality in certain cultures is certainly taboo.

**Minhal Baig:** Well, I think that one of the things that I'm exploring in the movie is not an Islamic patriarchy, but a cultural patriarchy. So Hala's father is someone who loves her very much, but in some ways is using cultural traditions to box in his wife and his daughter. And he is also living a double life. He has one that he's presenting at home to his family. And then there's another one that he's leading off screen that we don't get to see, really. And I'm interested in cultural patriarchy, because the West and Western media can sometimes conflate cultural patriarchy with Islamic patriarchy, which is to say that the patriarchy that we find in Muslim majority countries can be attributed to Islam itself. And that's not accurate. It's a reflection of those cultures being patriarchal and boxing women in and perverting the original intentions of Islam itself. So we don't get into all of that in the movie because I don't want to be that didactic. But there's a moment where he's asking her to swear on the Koran and he's using that as a weapon when he's trying to chastise her because he's concerned about her chastity. Hala is discovering her own sexual agency and becoming her own person. And to me, that's the reflection of cultural patriarchy. I like to make this distinction because we've seen so many representations of Muslims leading sort of what people would deem backwards lives and backwards existences where there's outdated traditions. And what I would say is like the Muslim diaspora is very vast and diverse. And this movie is about one family living in America. It's a Pakistani American family. And they're very specific. Their dysfunction is specific. It's not at the end of the movie some kind of condemnation of Islam or Pakistani culture. I think it's just that patriarchy is everywhere. It's in every

culture. In some cultures, it's more insidious. In others, it's less overt. But what I'm dealing with in this movie is that sometimes they can be conflated by people inside of the culture. Sometimes it can be used as a tool to sort of keep women from self-actualizing, from becoming their own people and Hala is recognizing that her father is fallible and she has to strike out on her own and do what she needs to do.

**Scott Tallal:** So when you're doing the script, how much of a battle is with yourself?

**Minhal Baig:** A lot. In writing this movie, I knew that it would be controversial for some. I knew that for some folks watching a young Muslim woman have sexual agency is disturbing. But I like to think of the movie as a good place for people to start having those conversations, productive conversations. Because I do know that in many families, even in America, where we believe ourselves to be free of a patriarchy, which could not be further from the truth, but we believe ourselves to be living in a free society, that these kinds of stories couldn't exist here. And I actually think that's wrong, because I know that there's many families that have this kind of dynamic and writing it was really painful and vulnerable because I know that in some ways I'm presenting a representation of this family and of members of this community that are quite complicated. It's not so simple. They're not all good or bad. Like, I find that when I'm casting judgment on my characters that I'm not really doing them justice. I want to give dignity to their problems and I want them to feel like real human beings. So I don't think about good or bad so much. I don't engage with art in that way. And I don't think about my characters that I write in that way. I like to think of them as ordinary people in sometimes extraordinary circumstances and everything that they're doing is just reactions and a reflection of their inner desires and needs, and sometimes those things are not what other people want or would do in the same situation. It's highly specific. It was painful and it's vulnerable to put it out there. And I think that there will be a varied response and a lot of it will just depend on how much people relate with that story.

**Scott Tallal:** Does this leave you with mixed feelings? Talk to us about what your take away is.

**Minhal Baig:** From screening the film at festivals we've had an overwhelmingly enthusiastic and emotional response. People have really sat with the movie and considered it and really thought about it. Understand there's a lot of things going on. It's

a complicated movie. It is in some ways on the surface a simple coming of age story. But there are a lot of things that Hala's navigating that all teenagers navigate. And I'm exploring that in different ways with her relationship with her mom and her father and her and Jesse. But they're all pieces of a story and they're all complicated. There's layers to them. I have a lot of conviction. Like I have to have that conviction when I'm writing a story. I have to believe that it's something that should exist and deserves to be told. You have to have that when you're making a movie.

**Jenny Curtis:** Having it be basically, you're sharing your inner soul with your cast and crew. What was the atmosphere like on set?

**Minhal Baig:** It was really warm. It was very supportive. The crew in Chicago was amazing. But also all the women that were working in the movie were wonderful. All the department heads were women and they were people I chose because they were the best candidates for the job, but also because I wanted other female perspectives at the table and not just mine. Like I wanted people who really resonated with the story and wanted to bring something to it in whatever aspect of production they can. You know, in the cinematography, which Carolina did so beautifully and in the costuming, which Emma really thought so deeply about all of these people and how their clothes reflected who they are. And then in the editing, which Saela and I spent quite a long time trying to figure out how do we really access the psychology of this character? Every one of those things was really crucial in making the film what it is. It was very warm and welcoming. I've never been on set like that. It was quite cool.

**Jenny Curtis:** So, Geraldine, what does the responsibility feel like knowing how personal it is to the director?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** At first it was incredibly intimidating and I felt this huge responsibility to do justice to Minhal's story that I know has just spilled out of her heart and has been brewing in her mind for a long time. But I feel like as we went and as I was kind of finding the character and where she sat in me, because I think for a second I was kind of trying to find her outside of myself or something. But I think as we went along and I felt that it clicked. Then it just became fun and I just felt like we were working together on portraying this thing. And it felt really vulnerable and really delicate. There was so much thought that was put into it. And a lot of big discussions. Minhal and



I spent a lot of time in my apartment in cold Chicago, just mining our emotional experiences and things that overlapped in our lives. And just each time we met, I felt closer and closer to the character. There was a process, but it was in the end very rewarding.

**Jenny Curtis:** It's so personal. As an actress, to be completely vulnerable on screen. What was that like?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Oh, my gosh. The first screening that I saw of the movie was at Sundance in a room of my friends and all our crew and a lot of strangers. And it was really intense. Having a background in comedy, it's so much clearer to clock when something is working because people laugh. So this was a really different experience and I feel like we were surprised by the responses. There were laughs where we didn't expect them to be. And there were moments in the room that felt really tense and emotional. There was some people kind of exclaiming at the screen at one point. It was really intense and I felt extremely vulnerable. And then afterwards we had to do the Q&A and I really felt so naked because there was a room full of people that had seen me at my most vulnerable. So it was really intense, but a very valuable experience in the end. I never experienced anything like that.

**Minhal Baig:** It was very cathartic.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** It was.

**Minhal Baig:** Watching the movie there was a release of tension.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Yeah,.

**Minhal Baig:** Because there was a lot of anxiety going into the screening and I couldn't sleep very much the night before. You know, there was the fear of we came to Sundance to sell the movie and to set it up. There was that business part of it. But there was also just the creative and emotional part of sharing the film with an audience for the first time. I'd only shared it with small test screenings before, which were just like really close filmmakers and people whose opinions I trusted. We had never seen it with a larger audience. So I was sitting next to Geraldine and it was very anxiety inducing for

me. And it's still hard for me to watch some of the scenes of the movie, not because of the craft, but because of just how vulnerable and emotional it is. And obviously having seen so much of the film over and over again in the editing process, it was a bit like exposure therapy, but now I'm like over that stage and the film is now being released in the world and hopefully will touch people. But that experience in Sundance was very surreal. I had never experienced anything like it before. I genuinely don't remember a single question that someone asked because it was so overwhelming and it was such a warm response. And there were people that were in tears and like very enthusiastic about the film. It was validating but also cathartic because it was just like a long release of a movie that had taken so long to get here

**Jenny Curtis:** What was your favorite day on set?

I actually really like the last day that we shot the school, the last day we were in the gym, that last day was fun because everyone was like shedding anxiety for me. It felt really good because everyone could be a little looser, because when you're shooting a movie like that, you have so much to do every single day that everyone is just worrying about the next thing and the next thing. And it was nice that it was like the final day we've got through this. We went through this together. And I remember there was this moment where I believe it was Sue, who is a production designer came up to me with a yearbook as a gift. And I opened it up because it was just like the outside was of the fictional high school we'd created. And then I flipped to the inside and it was actually a yearbook of my high school. And then it was like the yearbook of my year when I graduated. And then they had found my picture and had written all these messages to me. It was so.

**Jenny Curtis:** That's really sweet.

**Minhal Baig:** And I was actually genuinely surprised. I didn't know that they were gonna find that because I knew that there was something being passed around on set but I just thought it was a card. It was really nice and just wonderful to be there at my old high school and kind of feel like a cool kid amongst the 18 year olds that were there. I guess you've achieved like high school Celebrity status. That's kind of neat I guess.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Yeah.

**Jenny Curtis:** Geraldine, did you have a favorite day?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** The only thing I can remember, because I was looking through my diary entries from that time not long ago, and I think one of the early days we had was that scene with me and Purbi in the car after we went shopping. And I remember doing that scene and she was speaking in Urdu and I was replying in English and I was quite nervous about that. At first, I didn't know how that would go down because I didn't speak Urdu, but I really enjoyed it. I really enjoy speaking different languages, but speaking to each other. So I feel like that's, that was a moment early on where I was like, oh, this is really fun. And I'm doing something different. That's exciting.

**Scott Tallal:** When you started out and aspired to be an actor and now you look at what you've achieved, thoughts?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Oh, it's really trippy. It's quite overwhelming because you have to match your perception with what you think it would be, with what it is, and then you just kind of leave your body and shoot up into the sky. I can't believe my life. I am the happiest little girl in the world. I love this job. I couldn't imagine doing anything else. So I just feel really grateful

**Minhal Baig:** Now this is for my own curiosity building. When you were acting in Australia, do you know that you would be acting in American movies? And was that the goal?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** It was. I always was drawn to America. It just felt like there were more opportunities, especially as a woman of color. And I was really inspired by the industry here, but truly thought I was like, yeah, I'll get like a guest star on a TV show. I'll play like a young lawyer, play like a student. I was excited to just be consistently working. I really didn't even dream. I didn't go as far to be like, Oh yeah, I'll be the lead or something. So that's a pleasant surprise. But yeah, really stoked to be in the States, especially in this moment in time. Like it's unbelievable the changes that are happening in this industry. And it's so overdue and I'm so excited.

**Jenny Curtis:** And to be a part of it.

**Minhal Baig:** I think what's also cool is with what you've done is that you've also accepted some pretty cool roles, like roles in and of themselves that are interesting, inherently interesting. There's always like layers of steps to being more inclusive in our industry. And part one is like people telling culturally specific stories where it's about the identity and then it's about just that character is like living their lives. And then it's like the third stage is like where it's quite complicated and kind of related and connected to each other. And you've been able to do a lot of things where it's like your identity is not called out in the story itself, which is really cool and not something that everybody experiences like there are lots of people, women of color, who get cast in the same part over and over because they are put in a box. And I think that you have chosen roles that are uniquely different and bring out things that you love to do as an individual,.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Totally. I got really lucky straight out the gate working with a bunch of female directors and people that can identify with the story that telling. That's a pretty recent thing and it's really cool to be a part of it and to work with so many incredible female filmmakers.

**Minhal Baig:** You've probably worked with more female filmmakers and people twice your age.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Yeah,.

**Minhal Baig:** Three times your age.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Like the majority, I think I've worked with one or two male directors.

**Jenny Curtis:** And what is that like? Do you find a difference in the way people approach the work?

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** It's usually related to the nature of the story and the script. I think in many examples, Blockers, Hala. I don't know if it would have existed in the same way that it did with a non female director. Like it just is so clear that it's a female centric story and you just need to have a woman leading, especially when you're talking

about sexual liberation and agency and all these kind of things that you need that kind of personal experience with it. And I definitely, I mean, I just feel very comfortable around women. Of course. It's not that it is preferred but it's definitely,.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** It's nice,.

**Minhal Baig:** It's nice sometimes it's nice.

**Scott Tallal:** Parting thoughts?

**Minhal Baig:** I'm really excited to share the movie with people. I hope that people come to it with an open mind and are excited to go along on this journey with her. And they can extend some compassion and form a human connection and hopefully feel a little less alone if they are going through what Hala is going through. Because I do feel like that coming of age is universal. So it's really a secret sort of missive to young women, but not specifically just for women. But I do think that the intention was to reach women who are feeling unheard and misunderstood and figuring themselves out. So I'm excited for them to watch it.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** Yeah. Watch the dang movie, support it!

**Scott Tallal:** Well, the dang movie is Hala, which goes into limited release or may already be in limited release by the time you hear this, it's November 22nd and will be available on streaming media Apple TV plus starting on December 6th. Want to thank today's guests and also our co-host, Jenny.

**Jenny Curtis:** Yes. And thank you guys so much for coming in. This has been just absolutely wonderful.

We've been speaking with Minhal Baig, the screenwriter and director of Hala, along with Geraldine Viswanathan. Thank you so much for joining us on Hollywood UNSCRIPTED.

**Minhal Baig:** Thank you so much.

**Geraldine Viswanathan:** This was nice. Thank you.

**Jenny Curtis:** Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is created by Curtco Media and presented in cooperation with the Malibu Film Society. This episode was hosted by Scott Tallal, co-hosted by Jenny Curtis with guests Minhal Baig and Geraldine Viswanathan. Produced and edited by Jenny Curtis and Sound Engineering by Michael Kennedy. The score from Hala featured as the music in this episode was composed by Mandy Hoffmann and provided courtesy of Apple TV. The executive producer of Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is Stuart Halperin. The Hollywood unscripted theme song is by Celeste and Erik Dick. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate review and subscribe for more conversations with top industry professionals discussing the movies you love.

**Announcer:** Curtco Media, Media for your mind.