

Culture

Arabian Sights director delivers milestone films for 20th anniversary

Najwa Saad

Washington

Thousands of Washingtonians have been introduced to Arab films because of one woman's passionate commitment. Shirin Ghareeb, deputy director of Filmfest DC, launched the *Arabian Sights Film Festival* in 1995 to showcase contemporary Arab cinema. It is one of only a handful of such festivals in the United States. This year's 20th anniversary festival featured ten films, including two US premieres.

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First, the story behind the story: Shirin Ghareeb is a quietly dedicated Arab-American and the ultimate practitioner of cultural diplomacy. Her father, Majid Khadduri, was a prominent Iraqi-born scholar of Islam and the Middle East who founded the Middle East Studies Department at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced In-

ternational Studies. Her husband, Edmund Ghareeb, is a scholar of the Middle East.

She recalls an idyllic childhood. “I grew up in an incredibly loving household,” she said, “surrounded by the best of Arab culture... My parents loved to entertain so there were always interesting people around.”

Ghareeb earned graduate and undergraduate degrees in Middle East studies. Reflecting on her career, she said: “I had no idea that this was how I would use my education, but now it all makes sense.”

Ghareeb attends the major international film festivals in the United States and overseas and “probably watch[es] 1,000 films a year. I always select new films that I believe are really good and important. I also know what will resonate with my audience. They are always honest. They don't hold back on opinions.” Patrons cast ballots after each screening.

The 2015 edition of the festival included two US premieres within documentary, thriller, drama and historical fiction genres from Egypt, France, Jordan, the Netherlands, the Palestinian territories, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Yemen. Five directors attended the festival: Palestinian Najwa Najjar (*Eyes of a Thief*) Syrian-Ameri-



(L to R) Shirin Ghareeb, founder and director of the *Arabian Sights Film Festival*, moderator Colin Brown, Khadija Al Salamim, director of *I am Nojoom, Age 10 and Divorced*.

can Abe Kasbo (*One Thousand and One Journeys*), Yemeni Khadija al-Salami (*I am Nojoom, Age 10 and Divorced*), Jordanian Majid Al Ansari (*Zinzana*) and Egyptian Sherif Nakhla (*Les Petits Chats*).

Kasbo's sweeping documentary about the history of Arab-Americans prompted one viewer to say: “I'm 64 years old and this is the first time in my life that I've truly felt proud of my heritage.”

Kasbo told *The Arab Weekly*: “Arab-Americans have been in the weeds of American history for too long and it's time for the flower to blossom.”

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Kasbo said: “I saw how incredibly important it could be to bring a really important story to the public about our shared values and the remarkable contributions made by Arab-Americans in all the professions over two centuries.” After the film's debut, it opened in New York and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) television network is planning to air it nationwide.

Salami's film tells the true story of a Yemeni child bride. Watching it requires grit and enduring moments of gut-wrenching revulsion.

Salami overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles to make this film. The director with 25 documentaries to her name doubtless battles demons from her own child bride experience and that of her mother, who was married off at age 8, two years younger than star character Nojoom, who falls asleep in her new husband's bed holding her doll.

With her documentarian's eye, Salami's cinematography delights with rarely viewed landscapes and scenes of village life but the film inexorably returns to the plot's brutal essence: the horrid abuse of young girls.

To her credit, Salami does not broad-brush men as consummately evil but lends them miserly empathy as ignorant victims of entrenched cultural predation. Nor does she hide the complicity of older women, who – also victimised – force the bride-slaves to clean and haul water and encourage beatings.

In real life, Nojoom's remarkable victory in court gives a glimmer of hope for change, while 15 million girls are married off before the age of 18 every year, many before puberty. Salami took home the Audience and Jury awards to add to many others garnered worldwide.

A panel discussion highlighted the dramatic evolution in the Arab film industry. Nakhla described

the impossibility of conquering the “three major production companies” in Egypt but his success proved their irrelevance. The trend is clear: old rules don't apply. Young directors are going it alone. They are digitally savvy, confident and creative. Younger film-makers are discovering new funding models, training indigenous actors and demanding location authenticity.

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Promotion budgets continue to limit distribution success but there's a growing recognition of the importance of “American-style marketing”. Surely, these new cinematic wizards will stretch their resources by innovating ways to reach audiences. There's a thriving “Arab spring” in the film industry. Known for its big push in the arts, the United Arab Emirates was the lead Arabian Sights sponsor and is investing heavily in film financing, capacity-building, marketing and production, besides having developed successful Abu Dhabi and Dubai festivals.

Najwa Saad is a Washington correspondent for *The Arab Weekly*.



Arabian Sights festival banner

First Visual Arts Festival held in Rabat

Saad Guerraoui

Casablanca

Morocco marked the 40th anniversary of the “Green March” with its first Visual Arts Festival in Rabat. The event looks to commemorate the march for future generations through the arts.

The festival, held November 3rd-15th, was organised by the Higher National Council of Green March Volunteers, referred to by its French initials HCNVMV, at the headquarters of the *wilayah* of Rabat.

Moulay Abdel Moughit Lahjomri, HCNVMV general coordinator, said the festival's aim was to emphasise late Moroccan King Hassan II's historic speech in which he called on Moroccan citizens to go on a “Green March” to claim Spanish Sahara.

“The festival boasted 37 artists showing 35 paintings and three sculptures.”

On November 6, 1975, about 350,000 unarmed volunteers from across Morocco responded to the king's call. Undeterred by the Spanish military and brandishing Moroccan flags, Qurans and portraits of the king, the marchers crossed

into Sakia Lhamra, forcing Spain to agree to cede the colony to Morocco and Mauritania.

The festival boasted 37 artists showing 35 paintings and three sculptures. Festival curator Najoua Hassouni said the artists are from different Moroccan cities, including Laayoune and Boujdour.

Malian artist Dialo Mamari, who has fond ties with Morocco, also participated in the festival.

Perhaps the most striking artwork was a huge sculpture by Abdellah Boukil. The 3.5-metre-tall and 1.9-metre-wide work is a *chef d'oeuvre* that took Boukil three months to develop. It is constructed of Saharan desert sand as a sign of his love to Morocco.

Abdel Ilah Sakhi said the sculpture was strongly noticeable and very symbolic.

“It is an abstract piece of art which is quite schematic. We can feel the presence of nature in the sculpture,” said Sakhi, a professor of visual arts.

“This sculpture is the fruit of three months of work. Every sand grain represents every single volunteer motivated by their faith and patriotism who avidly marched in the desert to free the Sahara from the Spanish colonialists,” said Boukil, adding that the marchers believed that the Sahara is part of Morocco.

Unlike previous sculptures, Bou-

kil's artwork is particularly symbolic because the Moroccan artist recalls very well the day of the Green March, which he said he would have participated in had his age allowed him. “We can see the structure of a standing lion who withstands all sorts of aggression,” he stressed.

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Boukil wanted to offer the sculpture to Sweden following the political crisis between Morocco and the Scandinavian country over Stockholm's plan to recognise the chimerical Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

“It's with culture and arts that we can disseminate the message to Sweden that the Western Sahara is an undisputed part of Morocco,” noted the artist, who said he came up with the idea for the sculpture before knowing about the festival.

Hassouni said: “We seek to highlight the profound meanings of the Green March and the union between Morocco's north and south throughout the exhibition.

“It is also an opportunity to instil this historic event into the memory of the coming generation through arts.”



Sculpture by Boukil.