

# Walid Mattar, rising film director, clinches Carthage festival top award

Roua Khlifi

Tunis

The 28th edition of the Carthage Film Festival marked the comeback of Tunisian cinema, with an unprecedented number of Tunisian films showcased at the event.

Tunisian director Walid Mattar stole the show with his latest film, "The North Wind," which won Best First Feature Award, Best Script Tanit and the TV 5 Monde Award.

The film, which explores the differences between the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean, received both critical and popular support at the event, which Mattar, 37, hailed as the birth of a new generation of Tunisian film-makers.

"The Carthage film festival this year showcased the works of many Tunisian film-makers, which revived the artistic vision," Mattar said. "After the golden age of Tunisian cinema, there was a lack of production and the quality of movies deteriorated. The new generation started off a while back with short films and now it has matured into creating their long features."

He added that a number of new film-makers, including Hedi Attia and Nejib Belkadi, had come onto the scene in the past decade, creating successful films that challenged "the stereotypical image we had in movies."

Mattar's own journey to becoming a film-maker was not easy.

"I grew up in a small town in the south suburbs of Tunis and I pursued an education in something that has no relation to cinema," Mattar said. "It was in 2003 that I produced my first short film with the Tunisian Federation of Amateur Filmmakers. I won a prize for the first short film and that sparked my enthusiasm as I realised I can make movies people appreciate."

He added: "The rest followed. I continued to work and learn. I learnt everything I know about cinema from field work."

After his first short film, "The battleship Abdelkarim" (2003), Mattar filmed his first short documentary



The show's star. Tunisian director Walid Mattar (L) receives the Best Script Tanit at the Carthage Film Festival in Tunis.

(Carthage Film Festival)

film, "Son of the Turtle" (2005). In 2006, he co-directed the short film "Good Morning" with Tunisian director Leyla Bouzid. This was followed by another film, "Condemnations," in 2010. His next film, "Baba Noel" (2012), won the jury prize in the Arab-Franco Film Festival of Noisy-le-Sec.

"My first short films were inspired by the people in my neighbourhood," Mattar said. "It was in a period of time that was critical so I started filming everything, including my childhood friends who later on illegally emigrated abroad. And that is how my short film documentary came about."

"I wrote 'Condemnations' and it was hard to get funding," he said. "It was a film that constituted a milestone in my career. There

● **Mattar's "The North Wind," set in France and Tunisia, centres on the issue of illegal immigration.**

was something about the mood of the country and it felt like an end around 2007 and I wanted to keep documenting that in my short films during that period."

Mattar's "The North Wind," set in France and Tunisia, centres on the issue of illegal immigration. He said completing it was a difficult, but worthwhile project.

"I had to take time making my first long feature. I didn't want to ruin this opportunity," Mattar said. "I had an idea of a movie taking place in two countries with an atypical structure and that posited many issues for the budget. We showed a lot of determination and we believed in the project we had. We had to apply three times to get funding as we got rejected one time after another."

Mattar stressed that being a film-maker is "not an inaccessible job," however.

"It is true that it requires a lot of determination and passion but it is not impossible. This started as a dream for me when I was a child

and now I have managed to make my first long feature film," he said. "I think that is the point. Unless you provide children with some things, they won't be creative. I was lucky I had the FTCA club."

Whether set in the popular neighbourhoods of Tunis or across the Mediterranean, Mattar's films often touch on the issue of illegal immigration.

"I am not really looking to find answers or solve the problem," Mattar said. "I just want to show the reality of things. People who immigrate have no hopes. It is a form of depression and it is the fault of both the person involved and the government and most of the time it is driven by the frustration of youth who feel life is wasted. I myself want to understand this. I still cannot understand the kind of despair to get there. What would drive a person who doesn't know how to swim to take a risky and dangerous journey in the sea?" Mattar said.

He added: "This is at the heart of humanity. I believe in this cause be-

cause this is one of the basic rights, the freedom of travelling. For Tunisians, it is a struggle to travel even legally. There is a feeling of suffocation that makes things difficult. Others travel freely while we struggle with all the restrictions. For some of these desperate youth, illegal immigration is about breaking those restrictions."

Mattar said the main focus of his films is to accurately portray human beings in the world they inhabit, whether that is to the north or south of the Mediterranean.

"This is my message: Try to see the human in others," Mattar said. "There are so many similarities between these main characters in the film even though they are from completely different worlds. Despite the fact one is from France and the second is from Tunisia, both share the same pain by the end of the day. Both are victims."

Roua Khlifi is a regular Travel and Culture contributor to The Arab Weekly.

## Beirut's Francophone Book Fair, a landmark of Lebanon's cultural scene

Samar Kadi

Beirut

First held in the early 1990s, Beirut's Francophone Book Fair is an annual event featuring prominent authors, lectures, discussions and signings that has gained popularity in Beirut's cultural scene.

In its 24th edition, this year's event honoured the late Lebanese journalist, writer and politician Samir Frangié, whose works were published under the title "La Révolution tranquille" ("The Peaceful Revolution"). More than 130 French and Francophone writers and 57 exhibitors and publishing houses participated in the event.

French Minister of Culture Françoise Nyssen stressed the importance of their shared language in an address opening the fair.

"It does not only bring down a barrier but the Francophonie builds bridges among peoples and countries because it favours the circulation and exchange of knowledge, ideas and projects that help us overcome the big global challenges that we are facing today," Nyssen said.

She stressed that "the exchange" should be in both directions and required more translations from French to Arabic and vice versa.

"Lebanon is already a major partner of France in the field of translation. More than two-thirds of books translated into Arabic are handled by Lebanese editors," Nyssen said, adding: "We are planning to develop translation projects in other Arab countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco."

With 200 round tables, lectures and debates taking place, the ten-day event is the third largest francophone fair after those in Paris and Montreal. It was organised by the Institut français, the French Embassy's cultural agency in Lebanon, and supported by Lebanese francophone book stores and publishers.

One of the fair's highlights is the Choix Goncourt de l'Orient, an award in which students at Arab universities choose a French novel, which is then translated into Arabic.

"This year, it is the sixth edition of the Choix Goncourt de l'Orient, which has become an integral part of Beirut's Francophone Book Fair," said Hervé Sabourin, regional director of the Agence

universitaire de la Francophonie, which organises the award under the sponsorship of the Goncourt Academy.

"It is a landmark event because it promotes contemporary fran-

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French Ambassador to Lebanon Bruno Foucher

cophone literature in many universities in the Arab world and, through it, intellectual, cultural and human values of our francophone space are disseminated," Sabourin said.

"It is an event that targets the youth, the university students who are the main actors of this prize since they are the jury. They will read the qualifying books with the support of their teachers and it is they who will decide... the winner."

The jury includes 39 students from 33 universities in the region. There was one university from Iran, two from Jordan and two from Iraq, including Mosul University, also participated.

"It is a big literary francophone event in the Middle East," Sabourin said. "It is important because of its growing regional dimension. In 2012, only five countries participated in the Choix Goncourt de l'Orient; in 2015, the number climbed to ten; in 2016, to 11 countries; and in 2017, the number is 12."

Other participating countries included Lebanon, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Sudan, Yemen and Djibouti in addition to the Palestinian territories.

French Ambassador to Lebanon

Bruno Foucher described the fair as "a great moment for freedom of expression in the region."

"Books are the expression of cultural diversity, which is a shield against the single thought. They have an essential role as carriers of dialogue between cultures and ideas, and it is no coincidence that this book fair is held in Lebanon, where freedom of expression remains the strongest in the region," Foucher said.

Highlights of the fair included cartoon and calligraphy exhibitions, theatrical performances in tribute to the late Mounir Abou Debs, founder of the first contemporary theatre school in Lebanon, and concerts by students in the national music conservatory.

This year's event also featured a cinema corner, which displayed a feature film, a short movie and two documentaries about the reinvention of agriculture, energy, economy, democracy and education.

Randa Imad, one of the attendants, said the Beirut Francophone Book Fair was a gathering she made sure not to miss. "This year, I have an additional reason to visit since one of the guests is Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, one of my favourite French authors," Imad said.