

Find your own voice and be confident in what you are doing, Qumra Master James Gray tells young filmmakers

- *World-renowned director, screenwriter and Cannes veteran shares his cinematic journey highlighting the need to be personal and expressing oneself through cinema*

Doha, Qatar; March 17, 2021: Qumra Master James Gray, the director of acclaimed films such as *Little Odessa*, *The Immigrant* and *Ad Astra*, walks the talk, when it comes to advice to young filmmakers. Speaking from the experience of carving out his own niche in the industry, not chasing numbers or money but focusing on making films that truly mattered to him.

At Qumra 2021, the Doha Film Institute's annual talent incubator for Arab cinema, Gray concluded his masterclass with straight-forward advice to young filmmakers: "Be confident in what you are doing. There will be a lot of people ready to second-guess you. It will take time to find your own voice; strip away all the attempts to be something else. There is only one of you and if you are true to your experience, that will come out and your voice will speak to people."

It took Gray up to the fourth film, *Two Lovers*, in which he had total creative control, to find his own voice, he told the audience in the session moderated by Richard Peña, the Programme Director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Director of the New York Film Festival from 1988 until 2012.

But with an oeuvre of just seven films from his debut with *Little Odessa* in 1994 to *Ad Astra* in 2019, what he has religiously maintained is to make the films that truly mattered to him and are his personal statements. He said the frequency with which a filmmaker makes films does not necessarily mean they are all high in value. "If you look at some of the filmmakers we admire, who made films out of the studio system, how many are really great?" His advice is not to make films with financial motives but to do work, "good or bad that reflect your voice. It is better to be me and all the flaws and wrongs [in the film] are mine."

Gray offered generous insight on how he worked with actors: "Directing actors is in a sense 'political': You have to surround them with love and from my perspective, make them feel that there is no wrong decision. If they are in character, everything is right."

As a 23-year-old directing acclaimed actors such as Tim Roth and Vanessa Redgrave for his first film, his ability to bring out the best in actors has been an ongoing learning process. But then, much of his learning about cinema, he says, comes from reading and watching films rather than from film school *per se*. "I created my double major at film school – one about film production, the nuts and bolts, and the other critical studies in film and literature. Seeing all those movies and reading everything opened a whole new window into the world for me and that was of great value. I am in favour of college [formal film education] but the nuts and bolts of filmmaking is not so important [as reading and watching films]."

He said he was lucky to get his first film made for little money, "at a time when there seemed a lot of money flowing," and having Tim Roth and Vanessa Redgrave associated gave the film its own life. For Gray, who says he didn't get paid, the film also opened to a new reality. "I was shooting as if I was the greatest guy but when I watched the editor's assembly of the footage, I felt I was watching the worst movie I'd

ever seen. I realised that every scene was about context: The scene you spent 20 minutes on becomes the most important [not all the elaborately planned ones]. I learnt how difficult it is to tell a story on film with elegance and emotion and my ego has never fully recovered.” He returned to the film in the edit suite later, and Little Odessa won a Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival.

Gray’s advice on locations and set décor is to ensure that “you obsess about the layers of history of the place.” This extends to how he fleshes out his characters too, stating, “the history of the person matters.” He tries to understand the background of the actors he works with, how much training they have received and want. “My job is to help them to be as confident as possible, process how to support the actor from inside out and don’t worry of being on set – learn the process that the actor goes through. And always remember that every actor must listen to the other actor in the scene.”

Quoting Gabriel García Márquez, Gray said going into the specificity of story-telling – characters and places – “is key to conveying the surrealness of the moment with authenticity. Specificity allows for a kind of authenticity to flourish.” He reinforced the need for “rigour and repeated efforts in cinema, which are sort of underrated, and genius is overrated. Cinema doesn’t work like that. The filmmakers we love have all been reliant on collaboration. Collaboration is everything and you have to listen.”

Gray said while he has interest in making a series, “it is not the same thing. My training is for a 2 to 3-hour format film; an 8 to 10-hour series is a different medium. I have my own sets of questions about that. The thing about cinema that I love most is that it is like a blunt force instrument that can devastate or enthrall you. Cinema is like a dream; you cannot pause it [as you can with series].”

Public can access Qumra online by purchasing a Qumra Pass that offers the full Qumra Screenings and Qumra Talks programmes. Qumra Pass is open to all citizens and residents of Qatar and the MENA region, and applications will be processed on a first-come first-serve basis. The Qumra Pass is priced at QAR 500; students and Culture Pass by Qatar Museums holders can purchase it for a discounted price of QAR 350.

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About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

About Qumra

Directors and Producers attached to 48 projects in development and post-production are invited to participate in the event. They will include a number of emerging filmmakers from Qatar, as well as recipients of funding from the Institute’s Grants Programme. The robust programme will feature industry meetings designed to assist with propelling projects to their next stages of development, including master classes, work-in-progress screenings, bespoke matchmaking sessions and tailored workshops with industry experts. This creative exchange will take place alongside a programme of public screenings curated with input from the Qumra Masters.

The event is organised in three main sections: The Qumra Master Classes are daily sessions; each led by one of the Masters. The participating filmmakers have full access to these sessions, which are also open to accredited industry guests to attend in an observational capacity.

The Qumra Meetings are a series of one-on-one meetings, workshops and tailored mentoring sessions between representatives from the selected projects and seasoned industry experts.



The Qumra Screenings are open to the public and feature projects funded by the Institute through its grants and co-financing initiatives, as well as a series of films chosen by the Qumra Masters accompanied by Q&A sessions. The Arabic term 'qumra' is popularly said to be the origin of the word 'camera', and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.