

Press Release

Qumra projects aim to build bridges through intensely personal stories and political commentaries

- *Feature narratives and documentaries nurtured at Doha Film Institute's talent incubation event stand out for bold themes of catharsis, healing and strong political statements*

Doha, Qatar; March 22, 2022: Feature narratives and documentaries from the Arab world nurtured at Qumra, the Doha Film Institute's annual talent incubator event, are building bridges and connecting global audiences to their bold themes, many underpinned by the searing pain of civil and political strife.

At a media briefing, filmmakers associated with the projects shared their cinematic experiences, and highlighted how the Doha Film Institute's support helped them to fine-tune their works and hone their cinematic instincts to depict their stories with conviction and confidence.

Karim Bensalah, director of ***Blacklight*** (Algeria, France, Qatar), who currently lives in France, says he carries stories of his homeland and uses cinema as a medium to address personal and political connections. "Through film, I am trying to express my own identity, to depict what I really feel strongly inside and put it before the world. I try to open spaces from the mixed cultures I see and create bridges of understanding with people across the world."

He presents this through his protagonist, Sofiane, an Algerian student in France, who suddenly falls victim to an administrative decision and becomes illegal. In order to legalize his situation, he finds a job in a Muslim funeral home which turns out to be a life-changing experience. "The journey of my character is defined by elements of spirituality, his relationship with death, and through it all, I try to present the universality of human suffering."

Karima Saïdi, the director of ***Those Who Watch Over*** (Belgium, France, Qatar) was inspired by her grandmother, a first-generation immigrant in Belgium. "The story of our ancestors who lived in this country and how perceptions have changed and evolved over the past three generations are intriguing. By setting my story in a multi-confessional cemetery, I am presenting another aspect of immigration – of those who have passed away far from their homeland, and about their loved ones who developed a new relationship with them."

Al Baseer – The Blind Ferryman (Switzerland, Iraq, Qatar) by Ali Al-Fatlawi, is as deeply political as it can get yet no heavy-handed. Ali said the story of a blind man who finds his way around the southern Iraqi marshes and his tryst with a mysterious woman is deeply inspired by his own life experiences. "Two of my aunts were blind and I lived through the wars in Iraq as a child in the 1980s. When I left Iraq and moved to Zurich, the civil war of 2007 made me very angry. I wanted every Iraqi to be like my aunts so that they would not shoot each other. That was the starting point of the film." He went back to his own 'memory box' to create a film that is not only political, but also surreal and presents the ethereal beauty of his country that is less depicted in cinema. "I want people to understand us better through our original stories – about the simple things we love and cherish; I wanted to convey things we see through our hearts not our eyes."

Similarly personal is the feature documentary, ***My Father Killed Bourguiba*** (Tunisia, Qatar) by Fatma Riahi. For Fatma, the coup of 1987 was not only a political event in Tunisia but also a personal family event that turned her and her family's lives upside down. The film depicts her search of her father's story, which began 15 years after his death. She said working on the project was "very difficult, as it is not easy to put one's own life in the quest for truth. But I believed it was important to tell my story, as it also reflects the psychological aspects of the political experiences in Tunisia."

Taking real-life incidents to create a work of fiction is ***The Photographer*** (Syria, Qatar, Germany) by Anas Khalaf, who is based in Qatar. The film narrates the story of a photographer working in a unique position at the heart of the Syrian government during the revolution in 2011, who decides to defect, smuggling out with him the evidence he believes will bring down the regime of Bashar Al Assad. Anas said he drew on intimate personal experiences, especially after witnessing the misconceptions and misinterpretations on the ground "because of the lobbies and propaganda, with many people in the Arab world, continuing to defend the regime. Similar to my previous film, *The Translator*, my mission is to inform audiences across the world about what really happened in Syria."

Filmmaker Asmaa Gamal presents a deeply inspiring theme with her project, ***A Dream to Fly*** (Egypt, Qatar) about a group of young people from the crowded slums of Cairo who escape their daily hardships on motorcycles by night. "I was raised in a slum in Cairo and I was interested in the lives of the young people who had a passion for motorcycles. Cairo is made of blocks and highways, and behind them, you enter the world of slums. My film shows how these young people in the slums create a life parallel to their reality in pursuing dreams led by passion. I try to link the two worlds of people who fly with dreams of simple things, such as a means of transport."

The filmmakers said the Doha Film Institute's initiatives, especially Qumra, plays a central role in bridging cultures through cinema and providing greater visibility to film projects from the Arab world.

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