

Emerging filmmakers find their voice in cinema through DFI despite the pandemic

- *Directors of shorts and TV/web series mentored as Qumra Projects share their passion for the medium and highlight the support of the Doha Film Institute*

Doha, Qatar; March 16, 2021: When the pandemic nearly shut down the global film industry, emerging filmmakers in Qatar and the region received a rare opportunity to continue to move their projects forward, with the support of Qumra, the annual talent incubator for Arab cinema of the Doha Film Institute (DFI). Their journeys navigating the last year's new format of virtual mentorship sessions were shared at this year's expanded edition, where participants were able to see these projects continue to come to fruition.

Presenting a diverse selection of stories, some inspired by the pandemic, many other narratives that have evolved over years, the Qumra Projects shorts and TV/web series reflect how emerging filmmakers view the medium of cinema.

Mohamed Berro, the director of *A Tarmac Year* (Qatar/Arabic) about two Lebanese cousins who hijack a plane demanding the release of political prisoners, said he was inspired to make the dark comedy series after "finding dark funny elements in the hijackings. What started as a research for a documentary became compiling a list of odd occurrences in these incidents and high-tension political events." He said there is growing interest in the region in web series, which are also increasing in quality and number.

Meshaal Al Abdulla and Ibrahim Al Abdulla, two Qatari entrepreneurs, aim to expand their web series, *The Rise of the Mad Cat* (Qatar/English), "into many seasons to reach various media channels and penetrate the US box office as a movie." About the 3D animation project, Ibrahim said: "We have been in the gaming and animation industry since our childhood. The project is derived from a game we are working on, which will hopefully be released soon."

Meshaal added that they have tried to "make this comedy in a way that we wanted the viewer to have a different perception of comedy itself. Some people may perceive it as just comedy or nonsense comedy; others may see it as being born in the wrong place at the wrong time and some may feel there are different things that can happen, which can change your lives."

Another key project in development in the genre of TV series is independent filmmaker Ahmad Samara's *Oddity Tales from a Strange Land* (Jordan, Qatar/Arabic). The coming-of-age story that follows a girl named Aya, who leads viewers through a collection of stories that present ancient historical tales and mythologies from the Arab world, also shows the eclectic nature of filmmaking by young Arab talents.

Abdulla Al-Janahi, a Qatari filmmaker, who co-directs *Revenge Knows Nothing* (Qatar/English/2021) with Abdulaziz Khashabi, a Qatari engineer and filmmaker, combines two stories in a creative manner showcasing the horrific effects of human injustice and selfish actions on its victims - humans and otherwise. He said the approach in making the short film was to bring a 3D Disney style: "We wanted to deliver a new experience that reminds viewers of classic Disney films," while telling a riveting tale. "That one of the consequences of cruel actions of humans on others, the animal kingdom and the environment

is revenge. While we do not promote revenge, we believe it was important to present this very sensitive topic.”

Qatari filmmaker Abdulla Alhor brings *The Experiment* (Qatar/Arabic), a short narrative about a bullied 30-year-old researcher who must prove that his prisoner rehabilitation experiment works, or risk being fired and losing face to his nemesis. Having worked on other projects, mainly in the cinematography, Alhor said his first film as director is a “comedy of sorts set in an imaginary world. It presents serious social and universal concerns in a funny way. At Qumra, it was great to have the feedback of my mentors, which was a motivational boost for me, especially since it was my first project. The support they show added to my confidence.”

A Yemeni-Kenyan visual storyteller based in the GCC, Shaima Al-Tamimi presents her short documentary *Don't Get Too Comfortable* (Yemen, USA, The Netherlands, Qatar, UAE/Arabic, English, Swahili/2022), in which she shares a heartfelt multimedia letter addressed to her paternal grandfather reflecting on her family's journey of migration and resettlement. She described it as a deeply personal project, which embodies all her feelings for her grandfather. She said the pandemic was a blessing in disguise enabling her to concentrate on the project, as she traced her ancestral path through a series of interviews and research.

Qatari filmmaker Ali Alhajri's *Kinship* (Qatar/Arabic (Qatari Bedouin)) is a short narrative in which a shadow emerges with the birth of his newborn and Khalid, the protagonist, must come face to face with his past to live his future. He said the film is a simple premise of parenthood but explores deeper into the personal angishes people store in their minds and how they find cathartic relief.

Aisha Al-Muhannadi, a Qatari filmmaker, whose work is influenced by cultural experiences, presents her short *Al Fanar* (Qatar/Arabic) about a young woman who is left alone in her neighbourhood after her father ventures to sea and finds her life suddenly takes a tragic turn. She said the film, with a bold topic on abuse, is important as the subject is regarded by many societies as a “taboo to discuss.” This is an ode to such victims, who go through mental trauma through no fault of their own.

A Simple Cut (Qatar/Arabic) by Qatari filmmaker Maha Al-Jefairi is about a young girl who goes to ridiculous lengths to hide her haircut from her overbearing mother. The film shows everyone from teenagers to adults that life is not a fairy tale. Other shorts in the Qumra Projects includes *Let's Play Soldiers* (Qatar/Arabic/2021) by Mariam Al-Dhubhani about a 16-year-old child soldier who follows in his older brother's footsteps.

The role that the Doha Film Institute played was best summarised by Ali Alhajri, who said: “The Doha Film Institute was nothing but helpful. They created the opportunity for me to write the film through the pandemic, paired with a scriptwriter to mentor the script. Now in this year's Qumra, I have people coming forward to say they will produce the film. Qumra is a very collaborative venture and the kind of forum where people give you time to talk about your projects.”

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.

-END-

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.