

Making film in the time of pandemic: Lessons from Doha

- *Mentored by acclaimed Cambodian-French filmmaker Rithy Panh, projects by emerging filmmakers from Qatar and the region evolved from the Doha Film Institute's Short Documentary Lab despite the pandemic*

Doha, Qatar; March 13, 2021: It was a new experience for all: Making films despite lockdowns and pandemic protocols. What we learned was that what mattered was the will to learn and to keep the passion for cinema alive.

The triumph of three young filmmakers in making cinema amidst the pandemic, under the mentorship of Oscar-nominated Cambodian-French creative documentarian Rithy Panh, was highlighted on the opening day of Qumra 2021, Doha Film Institute's annual talent incubator for Arab cinema.

Addressing the media, Rithy Panh commented, ultimately, making cinema is about looking into yourself, your past, our future, the world around us and our memories. "All your stories are inside your body," said Rithy, who tutored filmmakers as part of DFI's Short Documentary Lab. The sessions were virtual, including group discussions and several one-on-one sessions. He said the external challenges do not limit your ability to "narrate your story or point of view."

Joining him were the directors of the documentaries selected for the Doc Lab: Majid Al-Remaihi (*And Then They Burn the Sea* – Qatar/Arabic, English/2021); Maysaa Almumin (*...And I Was Left Behind* - Qatar, Kuwait/Arabic/2021); and Suzannah Mirghani (*Virtual Voice* – Qatar, Sudan/English/2021).

The overarching sentiment of the directors was that the experience of making the films during the pandemic made them more self-reliant. Despite the lack of crew and other support systems, they said the sessions with Rithy helped them finetune their work, especially as they looked further inward to find solutions for their creative challenges.

Al-Remaihi said his documentary was an extension of what he was doing at the Doc Lab, which he was attending for the third time. He said the key learning from Rithy, "vague and cliched, as it may sound, is to trust your intuition. The confidence as a director is not something you earn at once. It is a process. The tonality and positioning also do not come in an instantly; you need to act on it and continue to affirm it, which is something I learnt – and continue to learn – from Rithy. The Doc Lab new what was needed in terms of a toolkit and helped us in achieving our vision and the direction we were exploring."

Filmed on an abandoned fishermen village of Northern Qatar, his film, *And Then They Burn the Sea* is an ode to the filmmaker's living mother whose memories abruptly left her during the making of the film. It mirrors a history of maternal mourning rituals that lament their loved ones who may never be returned by the sea.

Mirghani said the experience of making her documentary was totally different as it is "technically made online. Mine is the quintessential quarantine film, and I was inspired by the films Rithy showed." She said that working remotely had its pros and cons. "While we missed the closeness of having your cast and crew, [we must realise] this is the reality. We have adapted, learnt new skills, particularly the skill of relying

on yourself. And we had all the help we needed. The lab changed my traditional idea of documentaries, and what my documentary tries to explore is how we are as humans because we are socially distant.”

Shot entirely on a mobile phone or through Zoom, her short *Virtual Voice* is a digital satire in which Suzi doll is an ego-warrior. A next-generation activist avatar, marching to the algorithms of social media, she is lit by temporary outrage. She copies and pastes and forwards blame that are sometimes uplifting and sometimes bandwagon bullying.

Almumin said the strange, unusual circumstances “called for us to be innovative and creative. I don’t think I have had so much control over my film as I had now, and by doing things oneself, comes self-reliance, which leads to a learning curve. There is a lot more ownership to my film. It was wonderful to be a student once again, and it was great to make a film exactly like a designer.”

Her film, *And I Was Left Behind* emerged from the lockdowns following the pandemic. In her note, Almumin observed: “Physical distance became unbearable during the travel band, as was the uncertainty of when and if we would ever see each other again. Unable to bid goodbye to relatives who succumbed to the coronavirus brought back memories of my grandmother telling us stories of family members who travelled, never to be seen again, the perils of travel and the emotional pain she endured.”

Rithy Panh has directed several internationally acclaimed films, including *The Rice People*, which was selected for the Official Competition of the Festival de Cannes in 1994; *The Land of Wandering Souls* (2000), which won several awards. In 2013, Panh directed *The Missing Picture*, which was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and won the Grand Prix in the Un Certain Regard section at the Festival de Cannes. He is a principal founder of the Cambodian Film Commission, an industry development organisation that includes the CFC Film Lab, a professional film training programme for Cambodians.

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.