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Arabian Sights Celebrates 30 Years!

(April 1, 2025) – WASHINGTON, DC – This year marks a momentous milestone for the Arabian Sights Film Festival, celebrating 30 years of showcasing the rich diversity and talent of Arab cinema. From April 24 through May 4, 2025, Arabian Sights presents a curated selection of powerful stories and films from the Arab world.

A Brief History of Arabian Sights

In January 1996, Arabian Sights presented 6 films in what was meant to be a one-time series. The overwhelming attendance and sold-out screenings underscored the strong interest in Arab cinema. As requests came in from across the U.S. asking for guidance on how to present Arab films in other cities, it became clear that Arabian Sights was filling a significant gap in the cultural landscape. Since then, the festival has presented over 300 films, becoming an anticipated annual event.

Over the past three decades, Arabian Sights has been instrumental in raising awareness of Arab cinema, breaking stereotypes, and fostering cultural dialogue. The festival has become an important platform for filmmakers, allowing their stories to be seen and appreciated worldwide.

Since the onset of the Covid pandemic, Arabian Sights transitioned from a stand-alone festival to presenting films in conjunction with its umbrella organization, the Washington, DC International Film Festival (Filmfest DC). This collaboration significantly broadened its reach with several Arabian Sights films receiving the Filmfest DC Audience Award.

Commitment to Diversity and Cultural Understanding

Arabian Sights continues to bring thought-provoking films that highlight the social, political, and cultural issues facing the Arab world. By featuring both established and emerging filmmakers, the festival creates a platform for stories that offer a deeper understanding of the region's diverse heritage while giving voice to underrepresented communities. Over the years, Arabian

Sights has become one of Washington, DC's most anticipated and respected cultural events, earning widespread media and audience praise.

This Year's Program

The 30th season features a compelling selection of films that address themes such as identity, immigration, resistance, and the political, economic, and social challenges of the Arab world.

Highlights include the Venice Film Festival award-winning *Aicha* from Tunisia, *Disorder* from Lebanon, and *Fez Summer 55* from Morocco. Two compelling films from Palestine are highlighted. *Happy Holidays*, a family drama set in Haifa, is directed by Oscar-nominated filmmaker Scandar Copti. *Yalla Parkour*, a documentary that recently earned an award at the 2025 Berlin Film Festival, is directed by DC filmmaker Areeb Zuaiter. In this film, Zuaiter explores her connection to her homeland while chronicling her friendship with a Palestinian parkour athlete in Gaza. Zuaiter will be present for one of her screenings.

A complete list of the featured films, along with additional related titles, is attached.

Tickets will go on sale starting April 4. The full catalog of films will be available online and as a 20-page insert in *The Washington Post* on Friday, April 18.

For more information and updates please visit: filmfestdc.org

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THE 30th ANNUAL ARABIAN SIGHTS FILM FESTIVAL

THE FOLLOWING ARABIAN SIGHTS FILMS WILL BE FEATURED:

US Premiere

Aicha

Mehdi M. Barsaoui

Tunisia/France/Italy/Saudi Arabia/Qatar, 2024, 123 minutes, in Arabic with English subtitles

In parched southern Tunisia, Aya (Fatma Sfar) still lives with her parents, whose debts she is forced to pay with a dead-end hotel job. Then a miracle happens: she dies. That is, she is assumed to have died in a fiery crash that kills her coworkers. Aya seizes the chance to escape to Tunis and a fresh start with a new identity. But freedom, and ultimately identity, prove elusive. Even in a city where young people can go clubbing into the night, where women hold the highest offices—judge, police chief—misogyny and corruption go hand in hand. After a fracas at a nightclub, Aya becomes a pawn in a police coverup. Director Mehdi M. Barsaoui, speaking for “Tunisian youth whose dreams are too often denied,” has presented us with “a paradox where true freedom for the protagonist can only be attained through her death.”

North American Premiere

Disorder

Lucien Bourjeily, Bane Fakh, Wissam Charaf, Areej Mahmoud

Lebanon, 2024, 91 minutes, in Arabic with English subtitles

Executive produced by renowned Lebanese director and actress Nadine Labaki, *Disorder* is a powerful anthology film featuring four darkly comedic stories exploring Lebanon’s modern-day struggles following the 2019 economic crisis and resulting political strife that continued after the enormous Beirut port explosion of 2020. “The Group” focuses on a meeting of would-be protesters discovering that their cantankerous planning sessions are being recorded by the government, “Motherland” finds a mother and three daughters arguing over almost everything as each tries to find a way to adapt to the current reality, “Don’t Panic” portrays a suicidal life coach who encounters a former patient who wants to help his old coach, and “A Piece of Heaven” follows a depressed standup comic who wakes up after a show to discover that his bleak joke about the end of the world might actually come true—and everyone starts blaming him.

East Coast Premiere **Fez Summer 55**

Abdelhai Laraki

Morocco, 2023, 114 minutes, in Arabic and French with English subtitles

In the summer of 1955, just months before Morocco's independence, 11-year-old Kamal lives in the vibrant Medina of Fez. Together with his older friend Aïcha and her fellow students from Qaraouiyyine University, he becomes drawn toward the fierce fight for freedom. This is Kamal's coming-of-age story, but it's also a passionate account of the rebirth of a nation. Set against the backdrop of Morocco's struggle against colonialism, *Fez Summer '55* is a vivid portrayal of a country reclaiming its identity and culture. Inspired by the memories of Moroccan resistance fighters, director Abdelhai Laraki brings to life extraordinary acts of patriotism, the quest for women's rights, and the pursuit for independence. The film also describes his personal search for emancipation from the weight of his own past. Through Kamal's eyes, we witness transformative moments that not only shape a young boy's growth but also the future of a nation.

Happy Holidays

Scandar Copti

Palestine/Germany/France/Italy/Qatar, 2024, 123 minutes, in Arabic and Hebrew with English subtitles

This intricate family drama set in Haifa centers on the secrets young people keep from their parents and each other. Rami and his sister, Fifi, each have relationships and indiscretions best kept from their long-suffering but canny mother (the wonderful Wafaa Aoun). But as the secrets spiral out in wide-reaching ways, so does the drama. A look at contemporary life for a well-off family of Arab Christians in Israel, with a sidelong glance at the larger society in which they live, the ironically titled *Happy Holidays* reveals how even the most modern relationships are in the grip of ancient assumptions that hold women and men back from their futures. Oscar®-nominated Palestinian director Scandar Copti (*Ajami*) has created a narrative structure in the manner of an arabesque, with intertwining story threads that both explain and add to the plot's mounting mysteries.

Yalla Parkour

Areeb Zuaiter

Palestine/Sweden/Qatar/Saudi Arabia, 2024, 89 minutes, in Arabic and Swedish with English subtitles

When filmmaker Areeb Zuaiter lost her Palestinian mother, she lost her connection to Gaza. In pursuit of a memory that reinforces her sense of belonging, Areeb sees a video of a parkour team that uses the ruins of Gaza's bombed buildings as obstacle courses, laughing for joy against a background of explosions. Longing to reconnect with her past, Areeb contacts the team and befriends teenager Ahmed Matar, who believes that parkour will be his route out of

the prison their shared homeland has become. Together, they navigate what is left of Gaza. Ahmed's desire to escape triggers conflicting feelings in Areeb, who understands the emotional void that such a departure can bring. At this time when Gaza and its people are being devastated every day, *Yalla Parkour* (winner of the Grand Jury Prize at DOC NYC) is a portrait of a tormented city and the perseverance of its people.

FILMS OF RELATED INTEREST:

Black Tea

Abderrahmane Sissako

France/Taiwan/Luxembourg/Mauritania, 2024, 110 minutes, in Mandarin, French, English, Portuguese with English subtitles

This exquisite tale of friendship and forbidden love unfolds in Chocolate City—the nickname for the part of Guangzhou, China where exiled Africans gather, live, and connect. At its center is Aya, a young woman who, after astonishing everyone by saying “No” on her wedding day, leaves the Ivory Coast for a new life in China. There she finds a job in a tea boutique owned by Cai, a Chinese man, who initiates Aya into the Chinese tea ceremony. As he teaches her this ancient art, their relationship slowly grows into one of tender love. But for their burgeoning passion to be supported by trust, both must let go of their burdens and face up to their pasts. *Black Tea*, the first film in a decade from veteran Mauritanian auteur Abderrahmane Sissako, is a remarkable, observational, and sensual work that premiered at Berlinale earlier this year.

US Premiere

Confidante

Çağla Zencirci and Guillaume Giovanetti

Turkey/France/Luxembourg, 2025, 76 minutes, In Turkish with English subtitles

Following on the success of *Anora*, *Confidante* focuses on another woman struggling in a high-pressure, male-dominated environment. In 1999 Turkey, Arzu (Saadet Aksoy, in a mesmerizing performance) works at a busy sex hotline where multiple phone lines are labeled with callers' particular kinks. After Arzu endures many calls, each more explicit than the last, an enormous earthquake hits a distant part of the country and she finds herself trying to rescue over the phone a young boy trapped in rubble. That he previously prank-called her is now beside the point. At the same time, a regular customer might have revealed himself as part of a secret government operation and now agents are closing in on him. Arzu is also struggling through a bitter divorce, and if the nature of her job were known, she could lose custody of her son. With each ring of a phone, Arzu must decide whether to keep the lines open or hang up.

Monsieur Aznavour

Mehdi Idir and Grand Corps Malade

France, 2024, 134 minutes, in French with English subtitles

Monsieur Aznavour is a rise-to-stardom biography of a man who became one of France's best-loved entertainers and personified French culture to the rest of the world. Born into poverty to Armenian parents, Charles Aznavour was deeply shaped by his Armenian heritage and his parents' passionate love for music. Ridiculed for his short stature and raspy tenor voice, his early attempts at a showbiz career falter. His material often finds success in the hands of others, including his friend Pierre and the imperious Edith Piaf, who becomes a highly influential mentor and supporter. Through hard work, perseverance, and sheer willpower, Aznavour finally realizes his own ambitions; his empathetic *chansons* about the heartbreaks, confusions, and passions of the common man catapult him to global attention. Led by Golden Globe-nominated actor Tahar Rahim's astonishing performance and stunning vocal prowess, the film is a true tour de force that serves as a triumphant reminder of the power and impact of music.

Reading Lolita in Tehran

Eran Riklis

Italy/Israel, 2024, 108 minutes, in English and Farsi with English subtitles

In a much-anticipated adaptation of Azar Nafisi's best-selling memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Golshifteh Farahani (*About Elly*) shines as a professor of American classics in post-revolutionary Iran who must resort to teaching her female students clandestinely at home. In the warm light of her living room, they shed their hijabs and explore the power and nuance of literature, while outside, fundamentalists suppress and even attack women both publicly and privately. To give them the strength they need, their teacher brooks no simplistic readings, either of the novels or the regime they all struggle under. Israeli director Eran Riklis (*Lemon Tree*), with an expert cast of Iranian actors, created a Tehran so real, so beloved, and yet so frightening you would never know he shot the film in Rome. With the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement not yet in the rearview mirror, this impressive story wants our active attention.

US Premiere

Seven Days

Ali Samadi Ahadi

Germany/Georgia/Iran, 2024, 110 minutes, In Farsi with English subtitles

In his newest film, Ali Samadi Ahadi (*The Green Wave*, FFDC 2011) delves into the personal sacrifices that are made in the fight for human rights. After six years in prison, Iranian human rights activist Maryam is granted seven days of medical leave. In secret, her husband and brother plan a risky escape over snow-capped mountains to reunite her with her family in Germany. But along the way, Maryam is forced to choose between a life of safety with her loved ones or returning to her prison cell and continuing her uphill battle for equality and democracy. A gripping portrayal of resistance, sacrifice, and the power of family ties that bind us, *Seven Days* is a testament to the enduring spirit of those brave individuals who fight for a better future, even at the expense of their own freedom.