

# ARABIAN SIGHTS

WASHINGTON, DC INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL • APRIL 16–26



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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Arabian Sights Film Festival Returns April 16–26 for Its 31st Edition

**(April 6, 2026) – WASHINGTON, DC** – The Arabian Sights Film Festival, one of the longest-running showcases of Arab cinema in the United States, returns for its 31st edition from April 16 through 26. This year’s program presents a compelling, curated selection of films offering powerful stories from across the Arab world.

#### A Legacy of Cultural Impact

Founded in January 1996 as a one-time series featuring just six films, *Arabian Sights* quickly revealed a strong and unmet demand for Arab cinema in the U.S. Sold-out screenings and nationwide inquiries about replicating the program signaled the need for a dedicated platform. Over the past three decades, the festival has presented more than 300 films and grown into a highly anticipated annual cultural event.

Arabian Sights has played a vital role in raising awareness of Arab cinema, challenging stereotypes, and fostering meaningful cultural dialogue. It continues to serve as an important platform for filmmakers, bringing diverse voices and stories to wider audiences.

Since 2020, *Arabian Sights* has partnered with the Washington, DC International Film Festival (Filmfest DC), expanding its reach and visibility. Several *Arabian Sights* selections have gone on to receive Filmfest DC Audience Awards, further underscoring the strength of its programming.

#### Commitment to Cultural Understanding

The festival remains dedicated to presenting thought-provoking films that explore the social, political, and cultural realities of the Arab world. By showcasing both established and emerging filmmakers, *Arabian Sights* highlights the region’s rich diversity while amplifying underrepresented voices. Over the years, it has earned a reputation as one of Washington, DC’s

most respected and anticipated cultural events, garnering widespread media and audience acclaim.

## 2026 Festival Highlights

This year's lineup explores themes of identity, immigration, resistance, and the complex political, economic, and social dynamics shaping the Arab world today.

Highlighted films include:

- *52 Blue*, from the director of *Captains of Zaatari* (Filmfest DC 2021), follows a young Indian man who leaves home for the World Cup in Qatar with the dream to meet Lionel Messi
- *El Sett*, a biographical drama about legendary singer Umm Kulthum, whose voice resonated across the Arab world and beyond
- *Happy Birthday*, a poignant coming-of-age story about an eight-year-old child domestic worker who forms an unexpected bond with her employer's daughter
- *Irkalla: Gilgamesh's Dream* by acclaimed Iraqi filmmaker Mohamed Jabarah al-Daradji, blending Mesopotamian mythology with a contemporary Baghdad narrative through a child's perspective
- *Once Upon a Time in Gaza*, directed by Palestinian brothers Tarzan Nasser and Arab Nasser, recipients of the Best Director award in the *Un Certain Regard* section at the Cannes Film Festival
- *A Sad and Beautiful World*, Lebanon's official submission to the Academy Awards

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

Tickets will go on sale starting April 3. The full catalog of films will be available online and as a 20-page insert in *The Washington Post* on Friday, April 10.

For more information and updates please visit: [filmfestdc.org](https://www.filmfestdc.org)

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INTERNATIONAL  
FILM FESTIVAL



## THE 31st ANNUAL ARABIAN SIGHTS FILM FESTIVAL

THE FOLLOWING ARABIAN SIGHTS FILMS WILL BE FEATURED:

### World Premiere

#### **52 Blue**

**Directed by Ali El Arabi**

*India/Egypt, 2026, 91 minutes*

Award-winning director Ali El Arabi returns to Filmfest DC (*Captains of Zaatari*, Filmfest DC 2021) with *52 Blue*, the story of Ashish, a young man breaking free into the big city to meet his idol, Messi, at the World Cup in Qatar. When he lies to his family, pretending that he was chosen as India's representative for the Soccer World Cup, he embarks on an initiatory journey that leads him from the peaceful and sheltered bubble of his small Indian city to a stadium worker job backstage, where he learns to face both himself and the world for the first time.

### North American Premiere

#### **El Sett**

**Directed by Marwan Hamed**

*Egypt, 2025, 162 minutes*

*El Sett* is a sweeping, emotionally charged portrait of Umm Kulthum, the iconic "Star of the Orient," whose voice defined a nation and resonated across the world. Directed by Marwan Hamed and anchored by a luminous performance from Mona Zaki, the film traces her extraordinary rise from humble beginnings to unparalleled stardom. Moving fluidly through

time, it captures both the strength and vulnerability of a woman whose artistry mirrored Egypt's turbulent journey—from monarchy to revolution and beyond.

With over 300 songs spanning six decades, Umm Kulthum's music—rich with longing, love, and poetic depth—continues to echo through generations. Her influence stretches far beyond the Arab world, inspiring legends like Bob Dylan, Robert Plant, Shakira, Beyoncé, and Maria Callas, who once called her "the incomparable voice." More than a biography, *El Sett* is an intimate exploration of legacy, identity, and the power of authenticity—an invitation to experience the voice that united millions.

*In Arabic with English subtitles*

## Happy Birthday

**Directed by Sarah Goher**

*Egypt, 2025, 95 minutes*

Sarah Goher's acclaimed debut feature is a tour (de force) of modern-day Cairo, from its upper-class enclaves, to its streets teeming with motor scooters and life, to the beautifully observed world of 8-year-old Toha and her loving family of fisherwomen. As Toha prepares for a day's work as an upper-class family's maid, she asks her "friend" and employer's daughter, Nelly, "What is a wish?" Having never had a birthday party, Toha wouldn't know. Nelly is not her friend, but Toha doesn't know that either, so she determines that Nelly will have the perfect birthday and latches on to her otherwise indifferent employer, Nelly's mother, Leila (Nelly Karim), to make it so. In portraying Toha, captivating child actor Doha Ramadan expresses both the naiveté of an unschooled girl who thinks wishing is willing, and the clever machinations of a native intelligence.

*In Arabic with English subtitles*

## East Coast Premiere

### Irkalla: Gilgamesh's Dream

**Directed by Mohamed Jabarah Al-Daradji**

*Iraq, 2025, 109 minutes*

Beneath Baghdad's bridges and bustling streets, nine-year-old orphan and dreamer Chum-Chum and 13-year-old rebel Moody navigate the city's unforgiving reality with youthful determination.

Chum-Chum (Youssef Husham Al-Thahabi), inspired by the legend of Gilgamesh, clings to the belief that he will be reunited with his beloved parents in the blue-black waters of the Tigris. Moody (Hussein Raad Zuwayr), by contrast, survives through cunning – plotting and stealing to secure safe passage to the Netherlands for Chum-Chum and his sister Sarah (Lojin Star Naimal).

As Chum Chum's mythic vision deepens, it collides with a dangerous truth: a pact with a violent militia leader and a world shaped by adults consumed by militant grief. In Mohamed Jabarah Al-Daradji's soulful approach, ancient Iraq—birthplace of the world's oldest known written work

of literature—echoes through the present, shaping an epic and deeply moving story of loss and resilience.

*In Arabic with English subtitles*

## Once Upon a Time in Gaza

**Directed by Tarzan Nasser and Arab Nasser**

*Palestine, 2025, 90 minutes*

In 2007, Gaza, Yahya works at his friend Osama's falafel shop – a modest storefront that secretly doubles as a hub for drug dealing. Drawn into the operation, he becomes an unwitting witness to a brutal crime that will haunt him for years.

Years later, in a twist of fate, Gaza's Ministry of Culture selects Yahya to star in a TV series celebrating martyrs and heroes of the resistance. As tensions simmer and conflict looms, the line between performance and reality begins to blur – especially when Yahya is unexpectedly handed real weapons. Suddenly, he is faced with a dangerous opportunity – to confront the man responsible for the violence that altered the course of his life.

Winners of the Best Director award in the *Un Certain Regard* section at Cannes, twin Palestinian filmmakers Tarzan and Arab Nasser craft a bold fusion of dark comedy and political satire, delivering a searing critique of the cycles of violence that shape life in Gaza, both personal and political.

*In Arabic with English subtitles*

## A Sad and Beautiful World

**Directed by Cyril Aris**

*Lebanon, 2025, 110 minutes*

Lebanon's official submission for the 98th Academy Awards for Best International Feature Film, *A Sad and Beautiful World*, spans three decades of passion, loss, and hope. It centers on the magnetic bond between Nino and Yasmina, born on the same day amid a tragic massacre in Beirut, their lives bound by fate from childhood. United by hardship — Nino's loss of his parents and Yasmina's fractured family — they form a deep connection. Yasmina dreams of escape, imagining a magical train journey to a distant island, a plan Nino eagerly embraces. Yet their dream is cut short when she moves away. Reunited 24 years later, Yasmina returns disillusioned, yet is drawn to Nino's unwavering optimism. As love rekindles, she abandons her plans to leave, choosing instead the fragile, powerful bond they share.

A tender meditation on longing, love, and destiny, the film is elevated by performances that reveal the quiet beauty of life.

*In Arabic with English subtitles*

*Of related interest:*

## Diya

**Directed by Achille Ronaimou**

*Chad, 2025, 96 minutes*

Achille Ronaimou's electrifying debut feature tells the story of Dane, a driver for a humanitarian NGO, and the whirlwind moment when he runs over a young schoolboy. Accused of killing the boy, he is forced to pay a blood debt, the payment of an unthinkable sum he doesn't have. Cleverly orchestrated, *Diya* puts us right at the heart of his torment: repaying an impossible debt or languishing in prison far from his soon-to-be-born first child. Twisting through the roads of N'Djamena all the way to the north of Chad, Dane's desperate search to save his family and himself takes him down a dangerous path. This relentless thriller weaves an intense tale of sacrifice, morality, and impossible choices through the lens of Chadian society. *Diya* is a suspenseful and beautiful surprise not to be missed.

*In French with English Subtitles*

## East Coast Premiere

### Spices and Lies

**Directed by Amine Adjina**

*France, 2025, 104 minutes*

Acclaimed actress Hiam Abbass shines in this comedy about young chef Medhi, who is struggling to launch a restaurant with his French girlfriend Léa while dealing with his long-suffering mother, who is trying to set him up with a proper Algerian wife. Adding to the tension is the fact that Léa has yet to meet Medhi's mother, though her parents are putting up most of the money for the restaurant. As temperatures rise inside and outside of the kitchen, Mehdi comes up with a plan that leads to even more comic chaos. He enlists the extravagant Souhila (Abbass) to pretend to be his mother to impress Léa and her folks. As Souhila becomes more enamored of her role, she takes everyone on a most unexpected journey. As things boil over, Mehdi must learn that his Algerian heritage is a strength, both in the kitchen and at home.

*In French and Arabic with English subtitles*

*Short film:*

## Words of Power: Mastering the Art of Calligraphy

**Directed by Zackary Tamimi**

*USA, 2025, 12 minutes*

Follow master calligrapher Josh Berer through the creation of a piece of Arabic calligraphy as he discusses the trials he went through to perfect his craft, why he pursues his passion, and how others can ultimately push themselves to master an art.

## THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS



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