

Get Your Kit Out For The Jordan Film Festival

Words Jackie Oweis Sawiris



The Amman Filmmakers Cooperative, founded and headed up by Hazim Bitar, has perhaps been the most significant element in providing and perpetuating the first and foremost component needed to make films in Jordan – enthusiasm. Working from a work-with-what-you-got perspective since 2003, the AFC have been training filmmaking wannabes into award-winning filmmakers, without leaving them hanging without a light at the end of a very long tunnel. Now in its second year, the AFC-established Jordan Short Film Festival continues to fill the gaping hole that digital story-tellers have been gagging for.

To date, AFC-trained filmmakers, all of whom have had little or no prior cinema education or filmmaking experience before completing the cooperative's training programme, have produced over 30 short films, many of which were showcased at film festivals all over the world. By setting up Jordan's very own festival, the AFC has provided filmmakers in the country with an immediate accessible venue to do what every filmmaker ultimately wants to do - show his or her film.

The festival, which this year includes Jordan's first Mobile Movie Competition in association with Toyota Yaris, offers up the usual festival activities aside from film screenings – workshops, lectures and of course award ceremonies. What is also provided is the legitimisation filmmakers have always had to look abroad for ... until now.

As this year's Jordan Film Festival wraps it up, Hazim Bitar – in his own inimitable manner – waxes lyrical on the slate of things to come.

On the current state of Jordanian cinema

There are two yardsticks to measure cinema: commercial and artistic. On the

commercial front, there is not much happening in Jordan. But on the artistic front, Jordanian cinema is alive and kicking. Commercial cinema is measured through box office success. Artistic cinema is measured through film festival visibility. 2006 and 2007 have been great years for artistic Jordanian cinema and we are still riding the wave of that success as we expand our presence from the short film into feature films with at least eleven feature projects that I am aware of by Jordanian filmmakers slated for production. The reason some will not acknowledge this progress is due to an interesting phenomena in Jordan in which cinema has become a spectator sport, with each «cinema team» having its own fans and each film critic claiming to represent Jordanian cinema, each ignoring any development not related to its own club. It's a rather hilarious situation. I can see a scenario where a Jordanian film may go to the Cannes or

Our mission is to provide an independent platform for (while trying to stay out of

Locarno but no one will recognize it in Jordan except members of the director's clique. This is silly of course, considering Jordan hardly has a significant cinema industry.

One of the growing pains of Jordanian cinema is the local cinema intelligentsia. The fact is, with few notable exceptions, most Jordanian film critics cannot cope with new cinema. They see it as a disadvantaged form of cinema for the amateur and the misguided, but not a legitimate form of artistic expression.

Since 2003 Jordanian films have been accepted into the competitions of world-renowned film festivals, but that did little to convince the local intelligentsia that times have changed and they must too. The net result is that the up and coming generations of Jordanian filmmakers are looking outwards for validation of their

filmmaking talents, hence the emphasis in Jordan on festival performances as the most objective yardstick for a filmmaker's worth.

On the pitfalls of the evolution of Jordanian cinema

For cinema to thrive, it needs responsible and expert public sector support. In Morocco for example, we witnessed one of the most successful public sector support stories for Arab cinema, and it should serve as a model for other Arab countries who are hoping to build an industry. The Moroccan Cinema Centre is led by some of the most dedicated and committed people I have ever met, all steeped in the traditions of cinema, in addition to being talented leaders who managed to transform a vision into action. What is interesting about Moroccan Cinema Centre productions is that they enjoy an amazing space of freedoms of

filmmakers with the least amount of censorship and control (trouble with the authorities)

ideas, including ideas harshly critical of government. You can tell when a cinema is made for propaganda purposes or if it's more organic and sincere. If Jordan is to succeed in removing obstacles to the growth of its cinema industry, it needs to learn from the Moroccan experience.

On hopes for the future of Jordanian cinema

These are interesting times for Jordanian cinema. I hope we can develop a strong independent cinema that can explore hard hitting subjects, led by Jordanian filmmakers who are willing to take risks for what they believe in and to tackle subjects, both social and political, that speak to the concerns of the vast majority Jordanians, not just the funders or sponsors - an indie Jordanian cinema movement that can find a niche for itself with a unique style, much in the same way Iranian cinema has found a niche for itself. Its mind-over-matter. Always has been and always will be.

On the Jordan Short Film Festival

The Jordan short film festival came about in 2003 as a reaction to concerns over the lack of venues for independent Jordanian films. True, some indie Jordanian films were present at key film festivals, yet many Jordanian films were not receiving the exposure they deserved, including first-time films, which are very special ones. The competition is helpful in the sense that it creates excitement and anticipation, but we consider any film submitted to the festival to be a winner. The whole idea behind the festival is to provide a venue for filmmakers to showcase their work. As with most other film festivals, we wish to support the filmmakers on multiple levels: first, the exposure and second, the recognition of special filmmaking talents. The competition allows filmmakers to distinguish themselves and gives others incentive to excel. But the criteria used by juries of

the festival for the film competition is driven by originality and creativity and not by technical superiority, which is

influenced by money. And money in the Arab world does not always gravitate towards talent. So we are very sensitive to this issue.

On the Jordan Mobile Movie Competition

The primary purpose of competition is to help discover hidden filmmaking talents, and to give shape to an organic independent movie-making movement that eventually will dominate the filmmaking scene as more and more young members of the audience receive their entertainment via mobile devices. A mobile movie by definition is an indie movie. The freedom associated with making a mobile movie and the sort of topics that are often selected by mobile movie makers ironically show more courage and more creative freedom than traditional Arab filmmakers. ●

more info @ www.jordanfilmfestival.com and <http://ammanfilmmakers.alif.com>

