

A Palestinian Pavilion at Cannes



By Rana Anani

Each year, the Cannes Film Festival is transformed into an international film business center. A place to meet industry professionals, make deals, share views, and see projects forge ahead. The Marché du Film is the film industry's biggest annual get-together and a forum for over 12,000 professionals, including 3,200 producers, 1,200 sellers, 1,750 buyers, and 800 festival programmers.

Over the past three decades, Palestinian cinema has emerged as a major creative force both in the Arab world and internationally. During this period, Palestinian films have achieved unprecedented recognition. More than 20 Palestinian films have been screened at the festival over the years, and a number of them have received nominations and won awards. Nevertheless, there has never been a pavilion that bore the name Palestine.

In May 2018, for the very first time, a Palestinian pavilion was set up at the Cannes Film Festival. Visitors and industry professionals were able to pop by to learn more about Palestinian cinema, meet with Palestinian filmmakers and producers, and share views and collaborations on joint projects. The Palestinian Pavilion was a very special experience for the many Palestinian film professionals around the world and a milestone in the history of Palestinian cinema. It created a context in which the Palestinian story was told by Palestinian filmmakers themselves, those who believe in "stories that travel slowly," as renowned film director Jean-Luc Goddard says. Hundreds of film professionals visited the pavilion and joined events and discussions, turning the pavilion into a buzzing space throughout the festival.

On May 15, the Palestinian Pavilion at Cannes was transformed into a solidarity stand with Palestine. Palestinian Minister of Culture Dr. Ehab Bseiso and tens of filmmakers were present for the 70 seconds of silence, in addition to the Un Certain Regard Jury that included Palestinian director Anne-Marie Jacir. The sirens went off and the Palestinian flag was lowered as a sign of respect to the martyrs in Gaza. The atmosphere that was created as a result of this gesture in the middle of Cannes was magical and emotional, bringing to mind a past era of solidarity.

Seventy seconds of silence, May 2018. Photo © PFI.





The Palestinian team in front of the pavilion, May 2018. Photo © PFI.

Giving an address to Palestinian cinema helped to shape a context and a structure for the international film scene to deal and interact with Palestinian producers and filmmakers; it opened doors for wider collaboration with film institutes and bodies from around the world. The pavilion not only marked the presence of Palestinian cinema on the map of international cinema but also helped and improved accessibility for Palestinian filmmakers and producers. They were given the opportunity to present their film projects in front of a wide range of international producers and distributors who could form an idea of the upcoming film projects on Palestine, which in several cases helped secure the means and resources to finalize these projects and distribute them theatrically.

Behind the initiative that made this pavilion possible lie the effort and vision of a very small yet ambitious team of film professionals who conceived the idea, dreamt about it, and worked tirelessly to turn it into a reality. When just a few months ago Rashid Abdelhamid knocked on the doors of the Palestinian Ministry of Culture in Ramallah and the French Consulate in Jerusalem to rally support for this initiative, his idea seemed to be unviable and effectively impossible. This kind of participation requires considerable planning time and concerted efforts. Luckily, the proposal was received with the enthusiasm and interest it needed in order to be pulled off; when it teamed up with the producer and curator Mohanad Yaqubi, the endeavor was injected with tremendous energy and a hands-on approach that took it to an entirely new level. In February 2018, to give further institutional support and impetus to the collaborative preparations for the pavilion, the Palestine Film Institute (PFI) was established as an initiative. PFI serves as a platform that aims to support film productions from and for Palestine by providing development and consultancy, increasing accessibility for funding, and connecting film talents and experts. Rooted in the tradition of cinema history, independent film practices, and the commitment to cinema as a tool of social change, PFI enthusiastically supported the efforts to present a special pavilion at the Cannes Film Festival. The institute established connections and created networks, joining forces with Palestinian filmmakers and professionals in Palestine and beyond, to furnish the pavilion with essential information, trailers, posters, and other materials in almost no time.

In preparation for the festival, ten films-in-progress on Palestine and by Palestinians were chosen by a jury – formed by PFI in cooperation with the festival’s Producers Market – to participate in the festival’s Producers Network in order to promote Palestinian films and lend a hand to emerging producers towards getting ahead in terms of funding and distribution. The jury consisted of Adriek van Nieuwenhuyzen, head of the Industry Office of the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam; Rasha Salti, researcher and commissioning editor of La Lucarne at Arte France; Rula Nasser, film producer; Lina Bukhari, head of the cinema department at the Palestinian Ministry of Culture; and Mahmoud Abu Hashhash, director of the Culture and Arts Program at A. M. Qattan Foundation. Five fiction films and five documentaries were chosen. The fiction films are *A Respectable Family* by Ismahane Lahmar, *Barzakh* by Laila Abbas, *Desert Dogs* by Ihab Jadallah, *In Vitro* by Larissa Sansour, and *Where Did I Leave My Face?* by Ramzi Maqdisi. The five documentaries are *Displaced in Heaven* by Khaled Jarrar, *Mayor* by David Osit, *Stateless* by Mohammad Jabaly, *The Devil’s Drivers* by Daniel Carsenty and Mohammed Abugeth, and *Unbowed* by Nehad Khader.

At the pavilion, the Palestinian Ministry of Culture announced that it would delegate responsibility to PFI for building and managing the Palestinian film sector for the next three years. Thus, the institute now oversees the promotion of Palestinian cinematic production abroad through identifying key national collaborators. The institute will also focus on the establishment of the Palestine Film Fund in order to promote an independent production scene with the capacity to coproduce both Palestinian stories and projects of foreign origin. In order to establish a dynamic infrastructure for the distribution of Palestinian films, the PFI will collaborate with the network of Palestine film festivals around the world.

Being part of the team that worked on realizing the Palestinian Pavilion in Cannes was a fascinating experience for me. I hope that this participation will contribute meaningfully to shaping an annual setup at the festival that succeeds in promoting Palestinian cinema and talents, and at the same time encouraging Palestinian and international film professionals alike to engage in discussions and collaborate on new projects on Palestine.

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