

**GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY**  
**VISITING FILM SERIES**  
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I am pleased to be here to talk about my role as Deputy Director of the Washington, DC International Film Festival, more popularly known as Filmfest DC, and as Director of the Arabian Sights Film Festival.

I would like to start with a couple of statistics:

We all know that Hollywood films dominate the world's movie theaters, but there are thousands of other movies made around the globe that most of us are totally unaware of or marginally familiar with.

India is the largest film producing nation in the world, whose films we label "Bollywood". India produces around 1,500 to 2,000 films every year in more than 20 languages. Their primary audience is the poor who want to escape into this imaginary world of pretty people, music and dancing.

Amitabh Bachchan is widely regarded as the most famous actor in the world, and one of the greatest and most influential actors in world cinema as well as Indian cinema. He has starred in at least 190 movies. He is a producer, television host, and former politician. He is also the host of India's *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*.

Nigeria is the next largest film producing country and is also known as "Nollywood", producing almost 1000 films per year. That's almost 20 films per week. The average Nollywood movie is produced in a span of 7-10 days on a budget of less than \$20,000.

Next comes Hollywood. Last year, 786 films were released in U.S. cinemas. The average budget was \$6.7 million per movie and a one year production time.

South Korea is emerging as a major film producing country. Their film production has increased by 81% in the past six years. They produce over 300 films per year.

South Korea's film **Parasite** by Bong Joon Ho is the first foreign movie to take home the Palme d'Or, the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival last May (2019). In January, it won Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best International Feature Film. Receiving the Best Picture award marks the first time in the Academy's 92-year history that a foreign language film has won the biggest prize.

Filmfest DC, along with hundreds of other film festivals throughout the world, strives to present some of the best in new international cinema to an interested population, not only from the countries I just mention, but from any film-producing country.

Filmfest DC is the oldest and only international film festival in Washington DC. This year will mark our 34th edition. Every year we present 70 – 80 feature films, plus scores of shorts, from at least 35-45 countries to an audience of 16,000 people.

Our aim is to bring quality international cinema to the DC audience, to celebrate storytelling and the various ways to see the world. We want to bring the best and most exciting cinema to film lovers of all kinds. And it's also a way to celebrate DC's rich and diverse population. Our audience reflects the cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic nature of our city.

In addition to a diverse mix of film lovers, our audience also reflects all walks of life, including academics, students, professionals from the private, public and federal sectors. Our festival attracts individuals who are curious, well-read, well-traveled, follow current events, and are not psychologically land locked.

In addition to the films, we also present opening & closing night events, embassy receptions, and filmmaker Q&A's. Films include comedies, thrillers, music, and social justice themes. I think our audience appreciates the cultural richness of the films, the topics and depth of the films, and they welcome the occasion to see these films in the proper setting – inside a dark movie theatre with a live audience.

- Foreign films, especially, are best experienced in a movie theater where every detail can be appreciated on a large screen.
- Foreign films tend to focus more on human drama and emotions and less on special effects.
- Foreign films tend to offer intriguing and often challenging plots that unfold in many layers. A dark movie theatre, with no outside distractions, offers the viewer an ideal setting to appreciate every aspect of the film.
- There's really no other setting that can replace a movie theatre, not a TV screen at home, or a computer, and certainly not a cellphone.

The movie theatre experience, especially during a festival, may allow you to discuss the film with colleagues and other members of the audience, to exchange opinions and interpretations of the film.

The organizing of the festival is a year-round process. For us, the new film year begins in May – immediately following the conclusion of Filmfest DC at the very end of April. The Cannes Film Festival take place in mid-May, and that provides us with a very broad window of the films for the year ahead.

We continue screening films throughout the year in a number of ways:

- By attending a select few film festivals.
- By screening films submitted to our festival through Film Freeway.
- By year-round research, keeping up with film reviews and film industry news.
- By keeping in touch with international film distributors, and with filmmakers, as well as our counterparts at different festivals.
- By far, the majority of films we screen are on the computers in our office and at home.

Our main criteria in selecting films is artistic quality. We also look at the originality of the script and the technical quality. We pay attention to films that are receiving recognition in other countries and other festivals, and films that receive awards. We look for new films by established directors, and keep our eyes open for first films by new directors. We keep track of all the films we see by taking personal notes which eventually will be merged together on a shared chart.

We monitor which films may be scheduled to open in U.S. theatres prior to our festival dates – which would make them ineligible to participate in Filmfest DC. Eventually we select the films that we want to invite, identify the distributors, and then start the process of reaching out to them to formally invite the film. We often get an immediate response from the distributors, which is great, but on the other hand, it can be a lengthy procedure for a variety of reasons:

- The film's calendar schedule for festival participation has not been established yet.
- Or the distributor will hold on to a film with the hopes of finding a US distributor.
- Both the Toronto and Berlin Int'l Film Festivals are key festivals where distributors hope to expand the distribution of their films.
- We pay a screening fee for films, and since the fees increase every year there's usually a period of bargaining that follows until we can mutually agree on a fair fee.

Materials are then collected from the confirmed films – images, production notes, trailers, and press kits. We hire copy writers to prepare the film notes for a number of the films in our festival catalog. Basically, the entire year from May to the following March is devoted to film research, programming, and coordination of the festival.

While working on the film programming, we address all the other festival logistics – preparing grant applications; contacting sponsors; finalizing the theatre venues; and putting the festival catalog together.

Additional logistics include addressing all the technical and shipping details; preparing the ticketing procedures; inviting guest directors and organizing their schedules; and working with our theatre managers and festival volunteers. This list can go on and on.

Immediately following the festival, the wrap up can be a lengthy process in itself, and often tedious. Everything must be put back where it belongs – sending films back to the distributors or on to the next festival; clearing the movie theatres from all the festival supplies; preparing final reports and wrap-up packages; and conducting internal wrap-up meetings.

Over the years, our most popular films – in terms of being the most well attended – have been films from France, Italy and other European countries, as well as Latin America. But attendance has also reflected an appreciation of films from other regions such as Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

Some Filmfest DC highlights over the years have included some special guest directors along with their new films:

Italian director Lina Wertmuller attended Filmfest DC with her films **Saturday, Sunday and Monday** and **Me Let's Hope I Make It**. Lina Wertmuller was the first woman nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director for her earlier film **Seven Beauties**.

The films of Argentine director Eliseo Subiela were extremely popular. We presented at least half a dozen of his films, including **The Dark Side of the Heart** and **Don't Die Without Telling Me Where You're Going**. Subiela's films contain magical elements that resonated very positively with the audience.

Other popular films included all the very artistic and fluid dance films of Spanish director Carlos Saura, especially his film **Flamenco**.

German director Wim Wenders was also popular. We featured his early films **Wings of Desire**, and **The Buena Vista Social Club**.

The French film **The Intouchables** was one of our closing night event hits. **Amelie** was France's most popular film until **The Intouchables** hit the screens in 2012. **The Intouchables** tells the true story of a wealthy, physically disabled man who hires a young, genial, black Muslim ex-con as his caretaker. A recent Hollywood remake of this film called **The Upside**, starring Kevin Hart, Bryan Cranston and Nicole Kidman, did not fare well in reviews where it was described as a "hollow replica" with "no chemistry between the characters".

Filmfest DC never shied away from controversial films. One such example is the Tunisian film **Halfaouine, Boy of the Terraces**, directed by Ferid Boughedir. Boughedir is a leading filmmaker not only in Tunisia, but in Africa and the Arab world as well. This film is a charming, coming of age story that offered an intimate perspective on Arab culture – specifically Muslim women – how they interact, how they gossip, and how they look unveiled and undressed. Specific scenes that took place in the women's public bath house caused an uproar in Tunisia and the film was banned from movie screens. Several Tunisians present in our audience raised their objection directly to Ferid about the film's nudity. Ferid told us that our audience in Washington, DC saw his film before it was ever seen by anyone in Tunisia.

**The Gate of Heavenly Peace**, was a documentary about the 1989 protests at Tiananmen Square that climaxed with the Beijing massacre of June 4. Upon learning that this film was to be presented at Filmfest DC, we received an official letter from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China demanding that this film be removed from the schedule. We didn't remove the film.

In 2013, we opened the festival with the film **Underground: the Julian Assange Story**, a biopic about the early years of the activist/journalist/computer expert. Immediately following the film, we conducted a live skype interview between our audience and Julian

Assange from his quarters at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. We had a packed audience with a lively fascinating discussion on freedom of the press.

I would like to address the question of subtitles. Reading subtitles generally seems to be a deterrent. I often hear comments like:

“It’s such hard work!”

“I can’t follow the dialogue!”

“I can’t see what’s happening on the screen if I’m reading the subtitles!”

“Why can’t that film be made in English?”

It’s a problem that many people just can’t seem to surmount. The South Korean film **Parasite** is now available on Hulu, and it was reported that one person wrote to Hulu complaining:

“It’s not in English, no one wants to watch a movie that they literally have to read to understand what’s going on.” Hulu responded, “If you don’t want to read subtitles, you can always learn Korean!” This is one of the deterrents why film festivals tend to attract niche audiences – Audiences that can look beyond the subtitles to appreciate some of the gems coming out of international cinema.

No matter how many festival editions we have experienced, that whole coordination process from beginning to end can’t be sped up or simplified. Plus, every year there are new surprises or complications. We can never predict what they will be. But it keeps us on our toes and we never assume we can let our guard down. Whether they be technical, film shipping, or printing issues, there is invariably a new unexpected challenge every year!

A few years back, when all our films were 35mm projections, there was always the worry of film strips breaking in mid-projection, which of course happened a few times. And then there were a couple of instances where the wrong film reels were placed in the correctly labeled film canisters, followed by sleepless nights trying to sort things out. Nowadays projection with digital files, called DCPs, is much smoother. However, a password, is required to run the file. The password, which is set by the distributor, is active for a limited period of time. I remember the first year when DCPs were introduced to festivals. We were receiving DCPs from our distributors overseas who set the password expiration time according to European time. So, when we tested the DCP upon their arrival here, it worked fine, but one-half hour before the screening, the password expired. It was a tough initiation period for us as well the distributors!

I hope everyone has a chance to watch the official Filmfest DC trailers from the past couple of years. They were created by GMU film students in Prof. Amanda Krause’s Advanced Editing Class. It was a great experience for me to work with Prof. Krause and her students, and the results were really impressive. The trailers are available on the Visiting Filmmaker Series website and they include the trailers from 2018 and 2019. We’re also working on 2 new trailers for our 2020 edition when it eventually takes place.

My other hat is as director of the Arabian Sights Film Festival which focuses on films from the Arab World. Arabian Sights is presented by the Washington, DC International Film Festival and takes place each October.

About 10-12 new films from North Africa, the Fertile Crescent, and the Arabian Gulf are presented over two consecutive weekends.

Back in the early 1990's, there were hundreds of film festivals taking place throughout the United States, in large urban cities and small towns alike, offering an array of American and international films with diverse topics and themes. Yet, not one of these festivals focused on films from the Arab world. Because of my work with Filmfest DC, I had the opportunity to see new films from all over the world, including films from the Arab world, and every year a couple of films from this region are included in Filmfest DC's schedule. However, that still leaves a number of quality films that never make it across the ocean to American audiences.

The solution seemed simple. There was a need to organize a festival focusing on Arab cinema. In January of 1996, I presented the *Arabian Sights Film Festival* offering 6 films. This was the first Arab film festival presented in the US. It was a resounding success. Every film screening was sold out and people had to be turned away. It became quickly evident that there existed a hunger for people to see these films and *Arabian Sights* was filling this vast vacuum. This marked a new opportunity for the Washington audience to see Arab films. Very soon afterwards, the phone calls and letters started coming in from all over the U.S. – California, Michigan, New York, Texas – from individuals thanking us for organizing Arabian Sights and asking questions like:

“How did you manage to create this festival?”

“How did you raise funds?”

“What was the audience reaction?”

The Arabian Sights audience reaction was very positive and most supportive with patrons asking for more films. It was at that point that we decided to change Arabian Sights from a one-time event to an annual event. This year will mark the 25th edition of Arabian Sights.

Since Arabian Sights' inception, Arab film festivals have appeared throughout the U.S. to enthusiastic audiences of Americans, Arabs and international film lovers. Over the years, Arabian Sights has offered hundreds of the most outstanding and newest films from all over the Arab world. We offered films by established as well as first-time directors. Films of all genres including documentaries and shorts were featured. Guest stars and directors who were invited to attend the festival introduced their films and interacted with our audience. We also began to organize panels made up of film directors, and American and Arab experts on Arab cinema to discuss the films and the latest developments and trends in Arab cinema.

The majority of films presented during Arabian Sights are full-length features providing audience members the opportunity to experience comedies, dramas, thrillers and mysteries that address a number of important topics in very creative and imaginative ways. The films touch on a wide variety of social, political, religious, economic, gender, and family issues that are relevant to today's Arab region and often to today's headlines, thus offering a deeper and more personal understanding of the Arab society, culture and politics.

It is a unique opportunity for audiences to see the Arab world as seen through the eyes of Arab filmmakers. It provides a glimpse into the Arab world that is rarely accessible to American audiences. The films, guests, as well as the panels have generated media interest and coverage from American, Arab and international outlets.

These films have helped break negative stereotyped images of Arabs. They have also helped humanize Arabs and Muslims and illustrate that the people of the Arab world face the same challenges and have the same hopes, aspirations, and dreams as other people around the world.

In addition, we invite a number of guest filmmakers who discuss their work in detail with the audience. As a result, a dialogue is opened providing an interaction between the audience and filmmakers and amongst the audience members themselves. This encourages and builds a community among the Washington public and bridges the gap between filmmaker and viewer.

The level of interest within the American audience to see quality Arab cinema has been a continuously growing phenomenon. *Arabian Sights* attracts film lovers who are curious about Arab cinema and culture and what inspires Arab filmmakers.

As with Filmfest DC, films are selected based on their originality, high artistic merits and technical quality. All Arabian Sights film screenings take place at commercial movie theaters offering the best quality viewing experience and attracting an audience of a minimum of 2500 people to two weekends of programs.

Film and guest presentations have included:

Egyptian director Magdi Ahmed Ali and his films **Life...My Passion**, and **Girl's Secrets**. Magdi is known for his films featuring strong female leads.

Egyptian star Khaled Abol Naga attended *Arabian Sights* on several occasions and discussed his film **Microphone**, that he starred in, which focused on a group of artists during the Tahrir Square demonstrations, which ultimately led to the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarek.

Khaled Abol Naga was also present for the Egyptian film **Asmaa**, which he produced. This film was groundbreaking in Egypt for portraying a woman suffering from AIDS. Based on true events, and starring Hend Sabry, one of the Arab world's leading

actresses, the story follows Asmaa who was denied medical treatment when doctors learned she was HIV positive. When the TV producer of a talk show learns of her situation, he asks her to break her silence and appear on television to discuss this stigmatized disease.

The film **El Gusto** is truly a beautiful rhythmic cocktail of Andalusian, Berber, Arabic, and Flamenco music – known as chaabi music – the people’s music of Algiers in the 1940s. **El Gusto** has been dubbed as Algeria’s *Buena Vista Social Club*. This multi-award-winning film was directed by Safinez Bousbia. When she first learned about the El Gusto orchestra, Safinez sought out the original members of the band from all over Algeria and France – Moslems and Jews, and all in their 70s and 80s – and brought them together for an amazing live concert. Her documentary then grew out of this experience. This was a life-changing turn for her. Originally an architect, Safinez sold her home and all her jewelry in order to make this film. As a result of **El Gusto**’s participation in Arabian Sights, Safinez was able to coordinate a multi-city live concert tour in the US for the original band members, which culminated in an amazing and unforgettable concert at the Kennedy Center, which had people dancing in the aisles.

Yemeni director Khadija Al-Salami presented her gripping drama **I Am Nujoom, Age 10 and Divorced**, about Yemen’s most famous child divorcee. Khadija spoke to the audience about the challenges she faced in making the film in Yemen. And she also recounted her very similar personal experience being married, then divorced, at a very young age. **I Am Nujoom** won both the *Arabian Sights Audience Award* as well as the *Jury Award*.

Rayhana presented her first feature film, **I Still Hide to Smoke**, set in 1990s Algeria. This drama, set in a women’s bath house, featured women of all backgrounds who talked about their lives. The film touched on several controversial and sensitive topics, and audience participation was lively. Discussions touched on themes of extremist and governmental violence, and on the role of religion in society, specifically on women. Rayhana was very passionate and eloquent while talking about her film and had a great connection with the audience. But not everyone agreed with her, including a former mayor of the capitol city of Algiers, who was in the audience. A heated, but fascinating exchange followed with most of the audience siding with Rayhana, including a former Algerian minister of oil.

One of the most exciting developments in international, as well as Arab cinema, is an increase in the number of films being made today. The most significant reason for this is the availability of digital technology. Not only is it more accessible and more affordable, it enables filmmakers to shoot films that were not possible before. As a result, we are now seeing works by a number of talented young filmmakers who have innovative stories to tell, and wouldn’t have been able to do so as easily in the past.

One of the most fulfilling experiences every year from both festivals is witnessing audience members filing out of the movie screen and filling the theatre lobby so that they can continue their discussions of the film amongst themselves.

Before concluding, I think it's important to briefly address the current situation of the Coronavirus impact on film festivals in general.

There has been pressure on all film festivals to postpone, cancel or offer an online festival as an alternative. Festivals, large and small, all over the world, have been faced with this decision since early March.

Filmfest DC, which was scheduled to take place April 23 – May 3, is postponed, and thru May and June we are offering a free series of virtual films featuring some audience favorites from the past couple years.

- The Edinburgh International Film Festival which is the UK's oldest festival, is postponed.
- The Tribeca Film Festival, scheduled for this month, is also postponed.
- The San Francisco, Seattle, and Sydney Film Festivals are all canceled.
- SXSW will feature a portion of their festival on Amazon Prime.
- The Miami Film Festival had to end abruptly and prematurely, six days into its festival. Then there's the most famous festival in the world – the Cannes Film Festival.

The parallel sections of Cannes – Directors' Fortnight, Critics' Week, and Acid – have been canceled. The main competitive portion of Cannes is postponed and no further dates or plans have been announced yet. This is the portion of the festival that is the most visible, where stars walk up the red carpeted stairs leading to the 2,200 seat Lumiere theatre, and pose for the sea of photographers and spectators, before entering for their film's premiere. This is also where the critics' reviews the next morning can make or break their film. An event like this can't be replaced with something virtual. The physical component of this festival is key to its identity.

It's unlikely that anything will take place this summer since the French government has prohibited all public events through mid-July. However, the Cannes Market, which is the business portion of the festival and attracts anywhere from 12-14,000 participants from all over the world, will take place virtually for 5 days in June.

There have been reports in industry press that the Cannes Festival director is in the midst of discussion with the Venice Film Festival on some sort of collaboration. The Venice Film Festival has already confirmed it will go ahead as planned this year in September, and they are not considering a postponement or cancellation, but they denied that there is any dialogue with Cannes on a joint event. At any rate, if Venice does indeed go ahead with their festival in September, they could benefit from a rich selection of films that were originally earmarked for Cannes, that is of course, assuming that Cannes has not set an alternative date before then.

The premiere festival in North America is the Toronto Film Festival. They have already announced that they are committed to present some form of the event in September, although no details have been determined yet. It most likely means smaller audiences,

fewer theatre venues, and a virtual component. But whatever the case, this festival which offers 300 films and a market with a large gathering of film professionals, will no doubt have some limitations that will prevent them from following the successful format of previous years.

Meanwhile, as the pandemic has shut down film festivals, movie theatres and movie and television studios, streaming services are expanding. Netflix subscribers increased by 16 million new subscribers worldwide from January through March of this year to a grand total of 183 million subscribers. Although their new content has been affected by the shutdown of production, Netflix is rushing to finish final edits on their shows as well as acquiring content from other producers and studios. In addition to Netflix – Amazon, Disney, Hulu, Apple, and other media conglomerates are also doubling down on their subscription video-on-demand content.

The biggest question facing us is when will movie theaters open again? And when they do open, will anyone go? When will the public feel comfortable enough to sit in a theatre to watch a film with a crowd? Will social distancing in the theatres work? No one knows the answers to these questions yet. It's still to be seen how the global pandemic shutdown will change the film and television industry, but there will no doubt be some permanent changes as to how projects will be developed and featured.