

'Creative and intellectual approach'

Arab, African filmmakers increasingly focusing on genre films

LOS ANGELES, Dec 9, (RTRS): 2019 has been an excellent year for films from Africa and the Middle East, with a higher presence in A-list festivals, and kudos for films such as Mati Diop's "Atlantics", which won the Grand Prix at Cannes.

The "new wave" of Arab and African cinema includes a small group of films that explore links with genre cinema – including fantasy, sci-fi and horror – which is related to a broader trend in literature and the contemporary arts in the Arab world that is exploring dystopias and fantasy settings.

Lamia Chaabi, a leading producer of daring films from the Middle East and North Africa region, is developing a pan-Arab genre series, "Meskoun", with Moroccan filmmaker Hicham Lasri ("Jahilya") as show-runner, in co-production with Mohamed Hefzy's Film Clinic (Egypt), Georges Schoucair's About Productions (Lebanon) and Habib Attia's Cinetelfilms (Tunisia).

Chaabi recently produced Talal Selhami's "Achoura", Morocco's first fantasy film, for which Orange Studios is handling international sales. The pic won the Special Jury Prize in the 2019 Sitges Fantastic Film Festival.

Until now Chaabi has specialized in social realism films with a strong political voice, but she believes that genre codes can also be used in stories set in the Arab world, since it has a rich fabric of stories and beliefs that can be explored. She nonetheless highlights the danger of producing a fake "Orientalism" that is not rooted in local traditions.

"Meskoun" co-producer Shoucair is developing his first genre-themed feature film. This follows in the wake of his founding of the Maskoon Fantastic Film Festival in Beirut, which is positioned as the only festival in the region focusing exclusively on modern genre film, dedicated to screening horror, thriller, science-fiction, fantasy and action films from around the world.

Inked

Maskoon is a member of the Melies International Festivals Federation (MIFF). In its second edition Maskoon inked a formal partnership with Sitges Fantastic Film Festival, and the best short from Maskoon is shown in Sitges.

Inspired by this experience, Shoucair is now developing his first genre movie "Under Construction", to be directed by Nadim Tabet, written by Tabet and Antoine Waked. In 2017, Schoucair produced Tabet's debut feature "One of These Days", about Lebanese youth.

The new pic, pitched as an "elevated horror film," has been presented to several development competitions, including the Frontiers International Co-Production Market in Montreal.

In the Cairo Film Connection (CFC), a co-production platform for Arabic film projects, it won the Arabia Pictures award and the Red Sea Festival prize, which means that the project will participate in the new Saudi fest's project market. Schoucair hopes to shoot the pic in

September 2020.

"Through Maskoon's master classes and all the foreign filmmakers attending our festival, I discovered a new world. For me, genre movies offer an interesting way to tell stories with some distance and perhaps less risk of censorship. My main idea is to do something more commercial, closer to the audience, without going too commercial."

Schoucair considers that streaming platforms have played a key role in fostering greater circulation of African and Arab content both within the region and to the world and have also stimulated the development of new trends such as genre films.

"I think the phenomenon of the streamers and Netflix in particular is one of the reasons for the change," commented Schoucair. "The other streamers aren't really inventing anything new in this region. Netflix has introduced audiences to non-English language films, documentaries and genre movies from this region. They have a creative and intellectual approach, not just commercial."

The Marrakech Film Festival's 2nd Atlas Workshops held two panel discussions on the theme of genre cinema, which analyzed the roots of the phenomenon and its likely evolution.

"Atlantics, Between Realism and the Fantastic: Writing and Filming Absence" featured a discussion between French-Senegalese director Mati Diop and screenwriter Olivier Demangel, moderated by film critic Farah-Clementine Issifou.

Film

Variety



This image released by A24 shows Adam Sandler in a scene from 'Uncut Gems'. (AP)

Film

Sandler emerges as real gem

'Uncut Gems' sparkling comedy-drama

By Todd McCarthy

Think you are the most annoying person on the planet," someone remarks to Howard Ratner, a madly obnoxious wheeler-dealer in New York's diamond district. The question immediately becomes whether this frantic, sweaty, manic, disorganized, unreliable and frequently desperate middle-aged man will emerge as a figure of revulsion or fascination to the audience. It's thus a tribute to writer-directors Josh and Benny Safdie and Adam Sandler, who plays the part, that Uncut Gems emerges as a real gem itself, a sparkling comedy-drama about a compulsive gambler and risk-taker who never knows when to quit. Many will agree that this is Sandler's best performance, and the Safdies will finally move from the fringes of the commercial film scene to somewhere closer to the center.

This is not because the Safdies have made a lovable movie – far from it. From the beginning, in a prolonged and intense scene in Howard's 47th Street-area jewelry shop, the yelling and haggling and confrontational behavior is monumental; it's possible to feel that this is the last place on Earth you'd want to be.

On the other hand, some people get off on this, and for Howard it's the core of his existence. In a brief Ethiopian-set prologue, a football-sized piece of rock is extracted from a mine, and numerous embedded gems are clearly of significant value. Having just acquired it and against his better instincts, Howard lets one of his most valued customers, basketball titan Kevin Garnett, borrow the piece, a misjudgment that sets in motion no end of crises and misfortune.

The Safdies plunge the audience into the deep end of this world, and it's easy to be both overwhelmed and seriously put off by the vulgarity of it; everyone is brash, it's the norm for promises and expectations not to be met, feverish yelling is the accepted mode of communication and no day is complete without a new unwelcome incident.

Of course, Howard doesn't get his valued piece of rock back when he expects it, and this is just the beginning of promises not met, debts remaining unpaid, lies mounting to cover the shortcomings and everyone becoming angrier and angrier. For his part, however, Howard nearly always has an angle, another card to play – what's a new day without a fresh fire to put out?

Presentation

The writers have concocted any number of outrageous incidents that, in fact, feel real and not gags invented just to be toppers. What should be a calm night out for the Ratner family on the occasion of a school theater presentation morphs into an insane set of events that finds Howard locked nude in the trunk of a car. His wife Dinah (Idina Menzel), who well knows how to deal with her husband, is naturally furious.

Of course, Howard has a woman on the side, Julia (Julia Fox), a nice young lady who – what else? – works at his jewelry store and for whom he provides an apartment. This relationship hits the rocks during this period when Howard is sweating over basketball scores he's bet big on and whether or not he'll ever get the big gem back. "Uncut Gems" would need to be on any final list of films in which the greatest percentage of dialogue is yelled.

And yet the Safdies and the cast go deep enough here to make the film a genuinely human one; it may not be a lifestyle that most people will recognize, but the dynamics and desires and anxieties all feel real, thanks to the way the writer-directors push through the obvious dramatic trappings to tap into credible feelings.

This is also true of the entire cast top to bottom, but the way is led by Sandler. Howard's passions for business, money, gambling, women and sports are entirely normal, but he doesn't seem to have learned much about his own shortcomings over the years. Sandler's performance shows that time may have

provided him peeks at the errors of his ways, but the fact that he's continued to get away with things gives him the confidence to carry on, without lessons learned. It's a helluva part, and Sandler aces it.

As his woman on the side, Fox at first seems destined to remain the mere victim of her boss/lover's abuse and inattention, but the performance slowly opens like a flower in a beautiful way that one doesn't expect. There's not an actor in the cast who doesn't deliver work that's boisterous and full-bodied, and that includes baller Garnett, who, in addition to his numerous scenes, is glimpsed in games on TV.

Also:

LOS ANGELES: Hollywood's hometown critics clearly aren't afraid of subtitles.

Members of the Los Angeles Film Critics Assn met Sunday to vote on the year's best cinema accomplishments. South Korean thriller "Parasite" fared the best, taking not only best picture, but also the group's director prize for **Bong Joon Ho** and supporting actor for **Song Kang Ho**.

Unlike most voting groups, LAFCA makes public the runner-up for each of its awards. "Parasite" was a clear favorite with the critics organization, placing second in two other categories: screenplay and production design.

The west coast critics' love for "Parasite" should not be so surprising: LAFCA has a track record of honoring international cinema, having previously given its top prize to "Roma", "Amour" and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" – all three of which went on to earn Oscar nominations for best picture.

Because "Parasite" bested English-language "The Irishman" (which came in second with LAFCA, after dominating the New York Film Critics Circle earlier in the week), the group opted to give best foreign language honors to another film, voting for **Pedro Almodovar's** "Pain and Glory", which also earned best actor for **Antonio Banderas**. (RTRS)

responds. "You?"
"So many times, yeah. All the time," Barbara says.

Viewers are also introduced to **Pedro Pascal's** Max Lord, an infomercial king.

She added the Wiig's appearance for Cheetah is mostly practical, with a little CGI to help it go all the way. (RTRS)



Reitman



Gadot

LOS ANGELES: "Ghostbusters: Afterlife" is the official title of **Jason Reitman's** upcoming franchise reboot, Sony Pictures announced on Friday.

Reitman has co-written the screenplay with **Gil Kenan** and will direct. The film will be produced by his father, **Ivan Reitman**, who directed and produced the original 1984 film.

In addition to the title, Sony also revealed the first poster and the plot synopsis for the new movie: when a single mom and her two kids arrive in a small town, they begin to discover their connection to the original Ghostbusters and the secret legacy their grandfather left behind.

This installment will not be

connected to the 2016 "Ghostbusters" movie, starring **Melissa McCarthy**. Sony released a first look at the project in January with footage of the Ecto-1 and set a July 10, 2020, release date.

The original "Ghostbusters" starred **Bill Murray, Harold Ramis, Dan Aykroyd, Ernie Hudson, Rick Moranis** and **Sigourney Weaver**. (RTRS)

Features

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