

# Doha Film Institute steps up docus and TV series grants

LOS ANGELES, May 19, (RTRS): The Doha Film Institute, which is at Cannes as a co-financier of Elia Suleiman's competition entry "It Must Be Heaven", has announced the 37 projects receiving its Spring Grants, roughly half of them to be directed by women.

The latest batch of mostly Arabic fare set to tap into support from the DFI, a key driver for Middle East filmmakers, will comprise a slew of documentaries and two TV series, which "reflects the type of content currently in demand from streamers," said DFI director of financing Hanaa Issa.

TV series represent a new strand of funding for the DFI, initiated with the previous grants cycle. The standout TV project is "Faraya", a series presented by emerging Lebanese helmers Nadim Tabet ("One of These Days") and Mounia Akl ("Beirut, I Love You"). It's about "an inexperienced police officer investigating the death of a cleaning lady at a high-end ski Lebanese resort whose poor judgment triggers a series of violent events," according to the synopsis. The production company is Beirut-based About Productions.

DFI CEO Fatma Al Remaihi said plenty of submissions for TV projects have been coming in, prompting "a debate within our funding committee about how much should be allocated for TV series versus film," adding that they will not set quotas for film and TV and that their philosophy of "quality and merit" will stay the same.

Issa noted that Netflix, MUBI, Amazon and Vimeo all attended

the DFI's Qumra workshop this year, adding that she hoped streamers would get involved in their TV projects during next year's edition.

She also said that the volume of documentaries at this grants session – roughly half of the feature-length works – makes for congenial content for streamers, just like TV series. The docs include "Fouledh", by young Tunisian directors Mehdi Hmili and Abdallah Chamekh (pictured), about working conditions in Tunisia's biggest steel mill.

**Also:**

**LOS ANGELES:** In an industry-building effort for Saudi Arabia, new Saudi animation studio Manga Productions has teamed up with Japan's Toei Animation on a \$10 million to \$15 million animation feature titled "The Journey", an epic based on Saudi folklore to be directed by **Shizuno Kobun**, whose credits include "Godzilla: City on the Edge of Battle".

Manga and Toei will collaborate on the pre-production and creation of story and the character design with Japanese and Saudi artists working together, they said in a joint statement.

The co-production stems from a pact between the two companies made in November 2017, one month before Saudi Arabia lifted its 35-year ban on cinemas.

"The Journey" is a milestone project for Manga," said Manga Pro-

ductions CEO **Bukhary Essam**, who is at Cannes with members of the Manga creative team.

"What we are doing here with 'The Journey' is representative of our larger role in creating an ecosystem throughout Saudi Arabia and the Arab world in which young talents are given opportunities and are supported, and high-quality work representing our culture is produced," he added.

Toei Animation managing director **Shinji Shimizu** said it was "a great honor to cooperate in making Saudi Arabia's very first animation film based on the history and culture of ancient Arabia."

**LOS ANGELES:** Mumbai production outfit Azure Entertainment is powering up a slate of remakes of European and Asian movies. These include a rerelease of 2017 Thai hit "Bad Genius" and an Indian version of South Korea's "The Terror: Live".

Azure is collaborating with Reliance Entertainment and **Neeraj Pandey**-led Friday Film Works' Plan C Studio on the development and production of "Genius". The film, which focuses on a female student who monetizes her skill at exam-cheating, was Thailand's highest-grossing movie in international markets. Azure is presenting and producing **Tigmanshu Dhulia**'s "Yaara", based on **Olivier Marchal**'s "Les Lyonnais".

Film

Variety



Model Isabeli Fontana poses for photographers upon arrival at the premiere of the film 'The Best Years of a Life' at the 72nd international film festival, Cannes, southern France on May 18. (AP)

Cannes

'Family Romance' a drama on rent-a-relative service

## Happiness comes at a cost in 'LLC'

By Peter Debruge

For those raised on a diet of hot dogs and hamburgers, think back to the first time you ever heard of sushi, and the idea of eating raw fish. Werner Herzog's "Family Romance, LLC" extends a comparably otherizing attitude to a Japanese rent-a-relative service written up last year in the New Yorker, dramatizing for Western eyes a peculiar Tokyo-based company that caters to fulfilling nonsexual but undeniably intimate fantasies for its clientele. Weird? Yes, but so is the way Americans convince their kids to climb into the laps of white-bearded strangers in Santa costumes.

Homo sapiens are a strange species, and few capture that more satisfyingly than Herzog, who re-imagines. Not quite 90 minutes, the film might actually be more effective at half the length. As is, it feels padded with slow-motion footage, long shots in which characters stare out in wordless contemplation, and an awkward dream sequence involving a gang of swordless samurai. But Herzog, as we know from such films as "Fata Morgana" and "Fitzcarraldo", can be an absurdist poet – a spirit that comes through in the shape of this project, a scripted drama inspired by real events, which accentuates the exotic more than the universal side of its subject.

The film opens in Ueno Park, Tokyo, devoid of context or an opening sales pitch for the company that gives the film its title (no doubt, it would interest audiences to see how Family Romance positions its offerings).

The cherry trees are in bloom, and the handsome gentleman in the three-piece suit standing by the wall could be a gigolo, for all we know. To a certain extent, he is, minus the more manual obligations of selling one's company to lonely strangers. In the eyes of 12-year-old Mahoki Tamimoto, however, this stranger (Yuichi Ishii, as "himself") could just as easily be her father – the very man he's arranged

to impersonate – and she shyly plays along with their "reunion".

Does Mahoki know that this man is not her real dad, but a very special kind of escort whom her mother has hired to make her happy? That's never entirely clear, since Herzog chooses to maintain a certain amount of mystery, introducing highly irregular situations in which audiences have to figure out where the line between reality and pantomime might be drawn – as in a later scene, when the rental dad stands in for a Japanese National Rail employee who's being reprimanded for releasing one of the company's always-punctual trains 20 seconds early (a tacky extrapolation of how one might use such a service that pokes fun at another of Japan's odd-to-outsiders customs).

**Unique**

An entrepreneur whose unique business idea combines his instincts as actor and amateur shrink, Ishii founded Family Romance with the idea of role-playing relatives that clients can't seem to live without. Straddling the line between documentary and fiction, Herzog withholds literal comment from "Family Romance, LLC" – his signature voice doesn't come rolling in to offer aloof, empyrean judgments from on high, as it did in "Grizzly Man" and others – but is otherwise editorializing the whole way, as when paid-liar Ishii discovers that Mahoki hasn't been entirely honest with him either.

When spending time with Mahoki, Ishii isn't really trying to embody her father; he's replacing the absentee parent with something better, a man who's attentive and encouraging. He never shouts, never scolds, and he's willing to do the things most workaholic dads would never make time for, such as taking her to one of Japan's hedgehog cafes – where customers can rent time with the adorable little creatures, much like she does with her surrogate guardian, while Mahoki's mother receives the bills for

both. The "LLC" in the film's title is a clue that the movie wasn't conceived purely in a spirit of empathy, although Herzog's humor is good-natured enough. If anything, Family Romance is just the latest iteration of a uniquely human desire to replicate the relationships we can't control in our lives, a thirst for virtual connections in the internet age (the service feels like the opposite of cat-fishing, since its adherents seek to deceive themselves).

While staying true to this general theme, the director digresses to visit a "robot hotel," where Ishii spends a very long time studying a tank of virtual fish, and a funeral parlor where living people "seeking the experience of being dead" can climb into a coffin to stage their own memorials.

Compared to these services, which feel as though they belong to the realm of speculative fiction (a la Ray Bradbury's "Marionettes, Inc"), Ishii's work seems almost quaint, offering his customers a sense of closure for a bond they felt lacking in life.

But such "happiness" comes at a cost – not just the hourly wage Family Romance charges, but in terms of a certain emotional dependency that develops. Contracting Family Romance isn't as simple as a one-off visit to one of Tokyo's kitschy maid cafes – although it can be, the way an aspiring viral sensation hires them to pose as paparazzi, or another seeks to replicate the thrill of winning the lottery.

Much like seeing a shrink or a chiropractor, neither of whom will ever admit to their patients being "cured," these specialists want to keep the treatments open-ended – which means that breaking off such sessions could be as brutal as the trauma that prompted them in the first place. At least, that's the observation that seems to inspire the film's ending, in which Herzog finds it almost inevitable that one of Ishii's clients should ask him to make the role official. (RTRS)

**LOS ANGELES:** Harvey Keitel will star as notorious gangster Meyer Lansky, a contemporary of Bugsy Siegel, in a biopic directed by **Eytan Rockaway**. **Sam Worthington**, **Emory Cohen** and **Austin Stowell** are also set to star in the picture, with **Alexandra Daddario** and **Tony Danza** in talks to join.

Voltage Pictures has boarded the project and hopes to spark international sales at Cannes. Rockaway wrote the script from a story by **Ido Fluk** and **Sharon Mashih**, partially based on interviews with the real-life Lansky conducted by Rockaway's father, history professor **Robert Rockaway**.

The film centers on an aging Lansky living in anonymity in Miami Beach after being investigated and pursued for decades by the FBI. When he enlists a young journalist named David Stone (Worthington) to tell his story, the Feds use him as a pawn to track down the hundreds of millions of dollars that the mobster has been suspected of stashing.

Stone finds himself caught in the middle of a game of cat and mouse, uncovering the hidden truth about the life of the notorious boss of Murder Inc and the National Crime Syndicate. (RTRS)

**JOHANNESBURG:** Actor **Arnold Schwarzenegger** was assaulted during a public appearance in **South Africa** on Saturday, but the 71-year-old quickly recovered and said, "I'm just glad he didn't interrupt my Snapchat."

Video shows the former **California** governor standing and filming children at a sporting event in Johannesburg when a man makes a flying kick into his back. Schwarzenegger stumbles forward. The man is quickly grabbed by security. Off camera a man shouts several times "Help me!" The video shortly afterward shows Schwarzenegger smiling and shaking hands with bystanders before walking out ringed by security.

Schwarzenegger later posted on Twitter: "Thanks for your concerns, but there is nothing to worry about. I thought I was just

jostled by the crowd, which happens a lot. I only realized I was kicked when I saw the video like all of you. I'm just glad the idiot didn't interrupt my Snapchat."

Schwarzenegger also tweeted a second video of the incident "without whatever he was yelling so he doesn't get the spotlight." (AP)



Shore



Arnie

**LAS VEGAS:** **Sammy Shore**, an actor and standup comedian who co-founded the Comedy Store, died Saturday. He was 92.

Through a spokeswoman, Shore's family said he died at his Las Vegas home surrounded by family. He was the father of actor-comedian **Pauly Shore**. Shore's nearly seven-decade

career stretched from the "Borscht Belt" summer resorts of **New York's** Catskill Mountains to Las Vegas to the studios of Hollywood.

Shore began his career doing standup with **Shucky Greene**. **Elvis Presley** chose Shore as the opening act for his comeback tour, and the comedian opened for many others, including **Tony**

**Orlando**, **Barbra Streisand**, **Tony Bennett**, **Sammy Davis Jr.**, **Tom Jones**, **Ann-Margret**, **Connie Stevens**, **Bobby Darin**, and **Glen Campbell**.

In 1972, Shore, his first wife **Mitzi** and writing partner **Rudy Deluca** founded the world-famous Los Angeles comedy club, the Comedy Store. (RTRS)