



Maghreb women's cinema in the spotlight in Britain

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A recent festival held in Britain celebrated women's film in the Maghreb and Middle East. Many filmmakers said the event gave the region an opportunity to dissociate its culture from terrorism.

By Hayam El Hadi for Magharebia in Algiers - 05/03/08

The Maghreb was well represented at a recent Arab film festival in Britain. Eighteen films were shown in London and Cambridge during the February 20th – March 2nd event, entitled "Women's Cinema from Tangier to Tehran". It was an experience which female directors said provided a clearer picture of the rapidly-changing societies of the region.

This was the first festival of its kind to include feature-length films, documentaries and shorts made since 2000 by female directors from the Maghreb and Middle East. The event schedule also included classic cinema, films focused on women's issues, music performances and discussions with film-makers.

The festival, which gave Arab women an opportunity to talk about their experiences and unveil the fruits of their creativity, was organised by Med-Screen, in partnership with Parlat Media and the French Institute in London.

Med-Screen is one of twelve projects financed by the European Union through the Euromed Audiovisual Programme. Its goal is to promote the cinema of the eight Arab countries of the Mediterranean region and improve the films' chances for wide, commercial release.

To Algerian filmmaker Hiba Mohelbi, movies offer an opportunity to correct popular misconceptions about the Arab world. "This sort of event should happen more often because it allows us to present a different image of our societies," she said. "Other cultures see us in a negative light because of terrorism and fundamentalism, so they have a totally false image of our societies, which are changing."

"It's even more complicated when one tries to discuss women's issues," Mohelbi continued. "There are a lot of people who don't know what our societies are really all about and regard us as people who are completely suppressed and cannot express themselves." However, she added, "When they watch films made by women from the Maghreb which are about women, they can change their viewpoint and realise that what they thought they knew was actually nothing more than stereotypes."

This view is shared by Hania, a young Algerian actress. "In our region, filmmaking doesn't get enough support from the public authorities. To make a film you often have to work really hard to find the money and work even harder to find opportunities to showcase them, so when chances like this come along you just can't miss them," she said. "It's vital for our culture and to change the perception that other people have of us."

The festival featured a preview of the Moroccan film *Samira's Garden*, a feature-length drama written and directed by Latif Lahlou. The movie starring Moroccan actress Sana Mouziane has already won the Montreal World Film Festival prize for best screenplay, the International Federation of Film Critics award, and Tangier National Film Festival honours for best male role.

Screenings included *Caramel* (Lebanon), *Cut and Paste* (Egypt) starring Hanane Tourk, *I Am the One Who Brings Flowers to Her Grave* (Syria), *Dunia* (Egypt/France/Lebanon) and other films written and directed by Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat and Zineb Sedira.

Musicians from a number of countries also showcased the many facets of the music of the Maghreb. Algerian singer Souad Massi closed the festival in glamorous style with a concert during which she delighted the public with some of her most stirring songs.

This content was commissioned for Magharebia.com.



[Getty Images] Moroccan actress Sana Mouziane poses at the Marrakesh International Film Festival in December, 2007. She starred in the award-winning film "Samira's Garden" from Moroccan director Latif Lahlou.

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