



## The 8th Wonder!

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# The GFF: 8 Years of Stories that Empower Humanity

By Aya Elhaddad

The eighth edition of the El Gouna Film Festival (GFF) commenced on the evening of **Thursday, October 16th**, with a dazzling opening ceremony that gathered luminaries and filmmakers from across the globe. Running until **October 24th**, the festival reaffirms its position as one of the Arab World's most distinguished cinematic events, dedicated to championing Egyptian and international cinema alike.

The evening brought together a constellation of influential figures, including Founder of the GFF and Chairperson of Orascom Investment Holding S.A.E. **Naguib Sawiris**, Founder of El Gouna and Chairperson of the GFF's Board of Directors **Samih Sawiris**, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the GFF **Amr Mansi**, iconic megastar and member of the GFF's Advisory Board Youssra, the GFF's Artistic Director **Marianne Khoury**, and the Governor of the Red Sea, **Major-General Amr Hanafy**.

Opening the ceremony was **Naguib Sawiris**, who congratulated Egypt on its pivotal role in ending the **War in Gaza** and advancing peace in the region, expressing his relief at the end of the conflict while reminding the audience of the importance of empathy and remembrance for those still enduring suffering around the world.

Following him was **Samih Sawiris**, who conveyed his joy at witnessing El Gouna flourish into a vibrant hub that welcomes guests from near and far. He also extended his warm wishes for an unforgettable festival experience filled with art, inspiration, and human connection.

Up next was **Major-General Hanafy**, who described the festival as a bridge between Egypt and the world and a testament to the power of art and culture as instruments of unity. He underscored that the event transcends cinema, serving as a platform for creativity and dialogue, while commending the visionary directives of **President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi**, which have helped place both the Red Sea Governorate and Egypt prominently on the global tourism map.

Taking the stage after the Major-General was **Mansi**, who reflected on the event's evolution, recalling how it began with "a simple yet clear dream, to become an influential platform that ushers in real change in the film industry." He also proudly revealed that **290 films** that once began their journey at **CineGouna** have since gone on to compete at major international festivals.

Before stepping off stage, Mansi went on to announce how this year's edition marks another pivotal milestone in the **GFF's** history thus far – its **first-ever collaboration with the streaming giant Netflix**, which is **premiering**



**two shorts at the GFF** before their global release on the platform as part of an initiative funded by it alongside **AFAC**.

Concluding the ceremony's string of preliminary speeches was Khoury, who expressed her delight in celebrating this year's honoree, the beloved Youssra, through a dedicated exhibition that chronicles her 50-year artistic journey.

She also announced the commemoration of **Youssef Chahine's Centenary**, describing it as a "tribute not only to the legendary filmmaker, but to an entire generation that shaped the soul of Egyptian and Arab cinema," adding that in his honor, the festival will screen **Alexandria... Again and Forever**.

With the formalities out of the way, the ceremony took on a more jovial and humorous tone when actor and stand-up comedian **Taha Dessouky** took to the stage to deliver an engaging and witty monologue that reflected on his evolving perception of cinema.

"What I once saw merely as a shooting location, I now recognize as the true home of an actor – a place alive with authentic emotions," he shared, noting that those emotions perfectly capture the **festival's core theme: Cinema for Humanity**.

Adding a heartfelt touch, Emirati entrepreneur and podcast host **Anas Bukhash** made a surprise on-stage appearance, delivering a moving message that encapsulated the evening's spirit: "There's one thing that unites us all, humanity. And today, we are gathered for **Cinema for Humanity**."

Concluding the night's on-stage festivities was **Youssra**, who announced the recipient of the **eighth GFF's Lifetime Creative Achievement Award**: The Emmy Award-nominated actress **Menna Shalaby**, who expressed her pride in receiving the award from **Youssra** and dedicated the honor to her mother after a short showcase of the key milestones of her career and remarkable achievements that have left a lasting mark on cinema.

“There's one thing that unites us all, humanity. And today, we are gathered for Cinema for Humanity”

“290 films that once began their journey at CineGouna have gone on to compete at major international festivals”

# CineGouna Takes Flight With 4 Wings

Kicking off today at the Festival Hub, **CineGouna** launches its full slate of programs for the eighth **El Gouna Film Festival (GFF)** (October 17th–24th). With its four wings – **Forum, Funding, Market, and Emerge** – the platform continues to nurture creativity, empower new talent, and fuel the growth of Arab and global cinema.

## CineGouna Funding: Supporting Arab Voices

Now in its eighth edition, **CineGouna Funding** strengthens its role as a key platform for **Arab cinema**, selecting **19 projects** from **over 290 submissions** across **12 countries**. Filmmakers will pitch to industry leaders and receive mentorship, competing for **\$15,000-awards** and other prizes that champion **bold storytelling and regional collaboration**.

## CineGouna Forum: Where Cinema Connects



At the heart of the **eighth GFF**, **CineGouna Forum** unites filmmakers, producers, and creatives through panels, talks, and workshops – including sessions with **Cate Blanchett, Menna Shalaby, and Youssra**. With its new **Island Stage** and collaborations with **Netflix, CSA, and FujiFilm**, the forum remains a vibrant hub for dialogue, discovery, and inspiration.

## CineGouna Market Expands Its Global Reach



Now in its **third edition**, **CineGouna Market** returns to the **eighth GFF** with **30 international exhibitors** from **Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq, India, China, and beyond**. Highlights include the **Host Country Showcase, Cinematography Corner, and Salon du Marché** – a creative hub developed with the **British Council** and **Gemini Africa**. Strengthening ties across the industry, the Market continues to drive collaboration, innovation, and global growth in film.

## CineGouna Emerge: Empowering the Next Generation

Now in its third year, **CineGouna Emerge** returns to the **eighth GFF** to champion young filmmakers from **Egypt, the Arab World, and Africa**. Supported by the **Sawiris Foundation, DROSOS FOUNDATION, and the EU** in Egypt, it offers access to screenings, panels, and **Meet the Experts Sessions**. With new booklet and podcast highlights and creative tracks like **SeeMee, Perspectives, and Emerge: Take Two**, the program continues to shape the future of Arab cinema.



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At the **GFF**, we've been shaping a clearer, stronger identity – one that bridges industry growth with emerging talent. These two worlds fuel each other, and we've worked to expand that connection through **CineGouna Funding, Forum, Market, and Emerge**. What keeps us moving forward is our ability to evolve – to question, adapt, and create – even when challenges arise. At the heart of it all is trust and collaboration. Working closely with **Amr Mansi** and our incredible team, we've turned ideas into reality and built a festival that grows not just in scale, but in purpose.

**GFF Artistic Director Marianne Khoury**



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This year, we're building on the solid foundations of the past two editions, guided by a clear vision that puts supporting the film industry at the heart of everything we do. From **CineGouna Funding** and **Forum** to the **Market** and **Emerge**, each pillar continues to grow and connect filmmakers from Egypt, the Arab World, and beyond. I'm proud to see how the festival has evolved – more open, more dynamic, and more inclusive – attracting young talents, new audiences, and global partners who share our belief in cinema's power to create lasting impact.

**GFF Co-Founder & Executive Director Amr Mansi**

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Our shared humanity transcends differences



Sarah Gohar, Director of *Happy Birthday*:

## Arab Cinema Belongs in the Global Conversation

The GFF keeps evolving to meet the industry’s needs – its greatest strength. Its local impact is remarkable, from supporting projects and nurturing young talents through CineGouna Emerge to creating meaningful connections.

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I want to help youths with work that feels emotionally real and grounded in their experience

**Nahed Nasr**

**Winning three Tribeca awards and being Egypt’s Oscar submission, how did that recognition and audience response affect you?**

The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Seeing people from different cultures connect with this story reminds me how our shared humanity transcends differences. Awards are wonderful, but moving an audience is the greatest reward.

**Your film draws from your childhood summers in Cairo; why did that memory stay with you?**

Sahar was the only child my age I knew in Egypt. I barely spoke Arabic, she spoke no English, yet we connected instantly – just two kids trying to have fun on long, hot days, driving my grandmother crazy as we jumped in and out of her windows. As a child, I never questioned why Sahar was there, because no adult seemed to. Later, when she disappeared, I began to understand how wrong that whole setup was and how painful it must have been for her. Every family has its blind spots; what matters is acknowledging them and trying, in some way, to make things right.

**You worked with first-time child actors alongside stars like Nelly Karim and Hanan Motawie. How did you balance both worlds on set?**

Working with children takes immense preparation – almost a year in our case. We taught them not just to act but to understand their characters’ backstories and relationships, so everything felt authentic. Having seasoned actors like Nelly, Hanan, Ali Sobhy, and Sherif Salama was a gift – they instinctively guided the kids, making every moment between them feel honest and alive.

**You’ve collaborated – and shared life – with Mohamed Diab for years (*Cairo 678*, *Clash*, *Amira*, *Moon Knight*). How has that partnership shaped you both, and how did it lead to *Happy Birthday*?**

Mohamed and I are very different, but in ways that complete each other. We’re each other’s toughest critics and strongest allies, so our process is often full of sparks! Finding balance between life and work is a constant challenge, but it’s also what keeps us growing.

I always wanted to direct, but it had to be the right story – one that felt personal yet universal. *Happy Birthday* began with an idea from Khalid and Sherine Diab about a birthday party, which we blended with stories from my own childhood. We started writing in 2018 and honestly kept rewriting until the last day of shooting. For me, a film should stay alive and keep evolving – just like the creative partnership that gave birth to it.

**After this debut, what are your next steps, and what kind of stories do you dream of telling?**

I’m drawn to young people – their emotions, anxieties, and the rawness of how they see the world. Their stories are more essential now than ever, yet our screens rarely reflect

them honestly. I want to help change that with work that feels emotionally real and grounded in their experience. I’m currently co-writing a film with Mohamed for Netflix US and developing two other projects – one of them set in Upper Egypt and is again centered on youths and their untold stories.

**Born in the US with Egyptian roots and a grandfather like Abdo Dagher, how did that mix shape you and help make your film both Egyptian and globally accessible?**

I grew up in the South Bronx with a hardworking single mother who made sure we spent every summer in Egypt. At home, it was all Arabic TV and cassette tapes, and summers were filled with music – dancing around my grandfather Abdo Dagher as he played in his salon or watching him perform at the Opera House. His pride in our heritage deeply shaped me, while growing up in the US gave me a clearer sense of how to tell stories that resonate both locally and internationally.

**From your view in the West, what does Arab cinema need to reach global audiences, and are Western viewers more open now to hearing Arab voices?**

This might be one of the most significant years for Arab cinema; we’ve seen so many films make real progress internationally. To reach a global audience, we need stories that are powerful, well-written, and emotionally resonant. Streaming platforms have certainly expanded our reach, but the foundation has to be strong writing.

I always look at the Korean model with admiration. Their rise to becoming the world’s second-largest media exporter after the US didn’t happen by chance. It took vision, persistence, and people who literally carried Korean films to Hollywood and said, “Watch our films!” That kind of determination and advocacy for cultural identity is what we need. We shouldn’t be relevant only when we’re in the news – we should be part of the global cinematic conversation, permanently.



# Today

## ✦ Red Carpet!



Tonight, at 7:00 PM, Festival Plaza will host the red carpet of *Happy Birthday*, Egypt's official **Oscar submission** and the **Opening Film of the eighth Edition of the GFF**. The evening will bring together film director Sarah Goher, writer **Mohamed Diab**, and producer **Ahmed El Dessouky** alongside its stellar cast – **Nelly Karim, Hanan Motawei, Sherif Salama, Khadeja Ahmed, Doha Ramadan, and Saber Omar Ali** – as well as many members of the film's creative team.

## ✦ Boarding From Cairo Station!

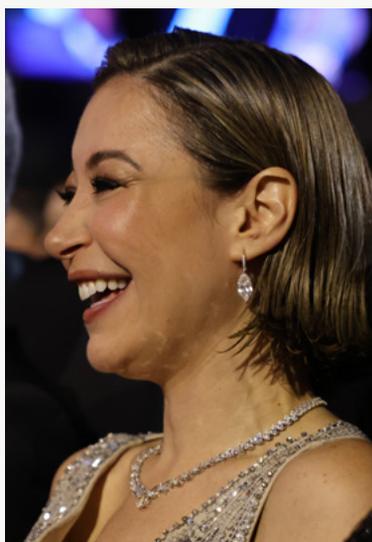


Today at 12:00 PM, The Festival Hub opens its doors to the *Cairo Station Exhibition* – a vibrant, interactive tribute to legendary filmmaker **Youssef Chahine** on his centenary.

Inspired by his classic *Bab El Hadid (Cairo Station)*, the exhibition

reimagines Chahine's cinematic world through film, sound, and light – turning his legacy into a living, immersive experience. Curated by **architect Shereen Farghal** of **JYStudios**, in collaboration with **Artistic Director Marianne Khoury**, the exhibition is presented with the support of the **Sawiris Foundation for Social Development**, and in partnership with the **Youssef Chahine Foundation** and **Misr International Films**.

## ✦ Meet Menna Shalaby

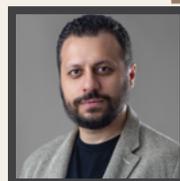


Today at 1:30 PM, the **Roman Theater at the Festival Hub** hosts a special session honoring **Menna Shalaby**, recipient of the **GFF Career Achievement Award**, moderated by Egyptian director **Karim El Shenawy**. Menna Shalaby is one of the Arab World's most celebrated actresses. With a career that bridges cinema and television, she has captivated audiences through daring roles and diverse performances. In this candid conversation, Menna reflects on her artistic journey, her craft, and the choices that have made her a defining voice in contemporary Arab storytelling and a role model for a new generation of artists.

## A Cannes Palme d'Or Laureate by the Red Sea

Tonight at 9:30 PM in the **Festival Hub**, join us for the **Arab World premiere** of *It Was Just an Accident* by acclaimed Iranian director **Jafar Panahi**. Winner of the **Cannes Palme d'Or**, this gripping dark comedy-thriller follows former political prisoners confronting a man they believe once tortured them – a powerful reflection on memory, justice, and fragile humanity.

# 8 Editions Questions



**Ahmed Shawky**  
Head of CineGouna Funding

- **If GFF were a person, what kind of friend would it be?**  
A friend I meet once a year, because they're very fun but extremely exhausting.
- **What tradition from past editions feels most rooted in GFF now?**  
Having **Gouna** as the perfect hub for film society to work hard and party harder.
- **And what's the boldest new beginning this year?**  
Starting a new form of mentorship tailored to the needs of each **CineGouna Funding** project.
- **The highlight of your department this year in one line?**  
Having our alumni films selected in all of 2025's major international film festivals.
- **Biggest challenge you've faced this year & how you beat it?**  
The economic circumstances made it more difficult to acquire award partners, but the trust **GFF** carries helped a lot.
- **In eight years, how has GFF changed film culture in Egypt and the region?**  
It elevated the level of festival organizing in the region and supported numerous talents in all film professions.
- **How would you like audiences to remember the eighth edition?**  
An edition that was full of amazing films, promising projects, enriching panels, and fun vibes.
- **Name one thing you hold most dear in the eighth edition (a film, or a corner, or a guest, etc) and why?**  
Olivier Laxe's *Sirât*. It was a thrilling experience watching it in **Cannes** and I'm going to love seeing the **GFF** audience's reaction to it.

## ✦ Meet the Filmmaker

**DJ AHMET**  
Actor:  
Arif Jakup  
**Sea Cinema 3**  
2:30 pm

**WHEN A RIVER BECOMES THE SEA**  
Actress:  
Claud Hernández  
**Sea Cinema 3**  
4:45 pm



