



Inspiring Voices and Bold Visions from GFF8's Rising Stars

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Cinema as a means of archiving memory, reclaiming identity, and dreaming of worlds yet to exist

Rowan Ashraf Amer

On the **sixth day** of the **8th GFF**, the **Forum Room** played host to an inspiring force of imagination, as emerging filmmakers gathered for the *Meet the Rising Stars: New Scene Panel*. Moderated by producer and Head of CineGouna Emerge **Hayat Aljowaily**, the session brought together Egyptian director **Yomna Khattab**, Yemeni journalist and filmmaker **Mariam Al Dhubbani**, Jordanian filmmaker **Yasmina Kharajah**, French Lebanese artist **Valentin Noujaim**, Egyptian director **Sameh Alaa**, director and producer **Sarah Gohar**, and Tunisian filmmaker **Amel Guellaty** – each a distinct voice reshaping contemporary Arab cinema.

The conversation revolved around cinema as both mirror and rebellion – a way to archive memory, reclaim identity, and dream of worlds yet to exist.

“I didn’t study film,” said **Al Dhubbani**, “but it became my way to show what was happening back home.” Speaking of exile and resilience, she added, “We’re trying to share stories that carry hope and dreams.”

Guellaty challenged the lens through which Arab women are often seen, saying “In the West, they think Arab women fight for their freedom. The women in my stories fight for their dreams.” Her words drew nods from the audience – a reminder that cinema can correct what history distorts.

Noujaim pushed further: “There are countless truths within the Arab World. I hope we can one day free ourselves from the burden of trying to represent a single narrative. It’s exhausting to be put in boxes.”

As for **Alaa**, he believes the future lies beyond tradition, saying, “I want to explore uncharted forms – VR, animation, video games – formats that push what Arab cinema can become.”

The session ended not in conclusion, but in promise – a shared commitment to authorship, to storytelling that rises from within the land, the language, and the lived experience.

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Today

✧ Red Carpet



At 7:00 PM, Festival Plaza's red carpet turns into a scene of youthful energy as *Where the Wind Comes From*, Tunisian filmmaker Amel Guellaty's debut feature, screens as part of the Feature Narrative Competition of the 8th GFF.

A CineGouna Platform alumna (2019), Guellaty captures the restless spirit of a generation in a story that follows 19-year-old Alyssa and 23-year-old Mehdi on a daring road trip across southern Tunisia. Walking the red carpet tonight are Amel Guellaty, Kamel El-Basha, Eya Bellagha, Marina Palii, and Frida Marzouk.

✧ Meet the Filmmaker

WIND TALK TO ME

Producer:
Dragana Jovović
Director:
Stefan Djordjevic
Sea Cinema 2
1:30 PM

HOW TO BUILD A LIBRARY

Directors:
Christopher King
Maia Lekow
Cinema 2
4:15 PM

50 METERS

Director:
Yomna Khattab
Protagonist:
Akram Khattab
Producer:
Ahmed Amer
Audimax
3:00 PM

SHORT PROGRAM 2

A BEAR REMEMBERS
Directors:
Hannah Palumbo
Linden Feng

AMBUSH
Director:
Yassmina Karajah
Cast:
Joanna Arida
Yazan Eid
Sereen Khass
Producer:
Rula Nasser

HYENA
Cinematographer:
Hu Yinghai

CITIZEN-INMATE
Producer:
Sara Sagaii

S THE WOLF
Director:
Sameh Alaa
Producer:
Ehab Rehan
Audimax
11:00 AM

SHORT PROGRAM 3

BREAKING OUT OF ALI AND MAHER'S BASE

Director:
Abanoub Youssef
Cast:
Nassar Gerges
Beshoy Hana
Producer:
Yasine Tbasi

LOYNES

Director:
Dorian Jespers

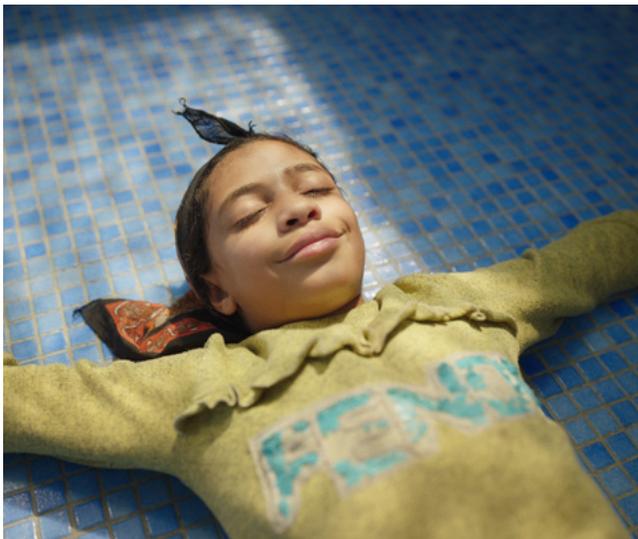
WATER GIRL

Director:
Sandra Desmazieres

THE DEVIL AND THE BICYCLE

Director:
Sharon Hakim
Sea Cinema 1
1:00 PM

✧ One Last Chance to Catch Happy Birthday!



For everyone who missed the first two screenings, here's your opportunity: **Tonight at 9:00 PM in Audimax**, the GFF is hosting the **third screening of Happy Birthday** – Egypt's **official Oscar submission** and the **Opening Film of the eighth edition**. Director **Sara Gohar** expressed her gratitude for the film's selection at GFF, saying, "The GFF keeps evolving to meet the industry's needs – and that's its greatest strength. Its local impact is remarkable, from supporting projects and nurturing young talents through **CineGouna Emerge** to creating meaningful connections."

✧ CineGouna Forum Today

Today, the **CineGouna Forum** delivers a dynamic program of panels and talks shaping the future of Arab cinema. The day opens at **11:00 AM** with *The Creation Process Powered by AI* at the **CineGouna Theater**, while the **Forum Room** hosts *From Originals to Formats* – a panel exploring how Arab stories are adapted for international markets.

At **1:00 PM**, Turkish star **Kaan Urgancıoğlu** sits down for an **exclusive conversation**, as another

panel in the **Forum Room** discusses *New Media Partnerships and Collaborations Across the Industry*.

The momentum continues at **3:00 PM** with a **session** on casting for foreign roles, alongside *Who Can Tell the Story?*, a conversation about authorship and representation.

On the **Island Stage**, podcasting takes the spotlight at **4:00 PM** with **Yango Play**, followed by *Corporate Storycraft* at **5:30 PM**, where cinema meets business strategy.



GFF Explores Cinema as Humanitarian Power

Rowan Ashraf Amer

Yesterday, a profoundly moving and intellectually charged panel was held at the **CineGouna Theater** under the theme '*Cinema: Activating Tools for Humanity*.' The session brought together an exceptional panel of figures dedicated to storytelling and social impact, including the UAE's Ambassador to Egypt **Hamad Obaid Al Zaabi**, Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Emirates Red Crescent **Dr. Hamdan Musallam Al Mazrouei**, and actors **Youssef Othman** and **Hussein Fahmy**. The conversation was moderated by Deputy Executive Director of the GFF **Sarah Bissada**.

The panel opened with a short film by the **UAE Presidential Court** and the **International Humanitarian and Philanthropic Council** portraying Gaza's suffering and resilience through the eyes of frontline doctors. It also spotlighted the UAE's humanitarian efforts, including the **Flying Hospital Initiative** for Gaza's civilians. The film concluded with the message "Hope remains," and the moving words of a young survivor saying, "The UAE feels like a home away from home."

Following the screening, **Dr. Al Mazrouei** reflected on the powerful



intersection between humanitarian service and visual storytelling. He went on to extend his heartfelt gratitude to Egypt for its critical role in supporting these humanitarian efforts.

Next, **Fahmy** emphasized that the artist's mission goes beyond entertainment. **Al Zaabi** also expanded on the vital role of cultural diplomacy and the capacity of art to serve as a conduit for change.

Bringing the conversation to a deeply emotional close, **Youssef**, a longtime humanitarian advocate and **UN Goodwill Ambassador**, spoke with raw sincerity about cinema's ability to rekindle compassion in an increasingly desensitized world.

"These stories must be seen and shared. Cinema is not escapism; it is a mirror. And in times like these, the world doesn't need distraction. It needs reflection."



Film Criticism at FIPRESCI 100

Farah Shasha

In a room steeped with quiet anticipation, the **CineGouna Theater** hosted one of the festival's most thoughtful conversations: *Film Criticism at 100: Tradition and Transformation*. The panel gathered President of the FIPRESCI and Head of CineGouna Funding **Ahmed Shawky**, alongside distinguished critics **Ola Salwa** and **Dubravka Lakić**, moderated by **Mohamed Tarek**. Filmmakers, actors like **Ahmed Magdy** and **Youssef Othman**, and devoted cinema lovers filled the hall. The panel discussed one of cinema's most persistent myths – that critics exist in opposition to filmmakers. "We don't write for filmmakers; we write for audiences," **Shawky** said.

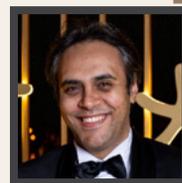
Lakić added that filmmakers and critics are "two sides of the same love – cinema."

When asked what makes a true critic, **Shawky's** answer was clear: Literary craft, integrity, and vision. Citing **Yehya Haqqi**, he said, "Fix your voice to fix your opinion."

The session became a quiet defense of criticism – not as judgment, but as dialogue, memory, and the conscience of cinema.



8 Editions Questions



Andrew Mohsen

GFF Head of Programming

• **If GFF were a person, what kind of friend would they be to you?**

That cool friend I get to go out with to spend a nice time, get dinner, and go to the movies together.

• **What tradition from past editions feels most rooted in GFF now?**

The balance between films and CineGouna events – when guests start planning their schedules around what they can't miss, you know it's become a true GFF tradition.

• **And what's the boldest new beginning this year?**

The growing trust from our audience – you can see it clearly in the fully booked Plaza screenings, not just for Egyptian films.

• **Highlight of your department this year in one line?**

I think this year, we have almost all the big winners of the main festivals: the Berlinale, Cannes, and Venice. Also we have a remarkable number of Egyptian feature films.

• **Biggest challenge you faced & how did you beat it?**

With the highest number of Egyptian films this year, the real challenge was fitting them into the schedule without overlaps – but we pulled it off.

• **In 8 years, how has GFF changed film culture in Egypt and the region?**

The GFF has reshaped the regional festival scene with its fresh energy and strong organization – inspiring other festivals since its very first edition.

• **How would you like audiences to remember the 8th edition?**

As the edition of great films, a Netflix partnership, standout Egyptian titles, and Cate Blanchett.

• **Name one most dear thing for you in the 8th edition (a film, or a corner, or a guest, etc)?**

Of course it will be introducing Cate Blanchett on stage to talk about *Father Mother Sister Brother* – a moment I will always remember.

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There's a growing gap between politics and youth, who are often seen as naive or inexperienced



Amel Guellaty, Director of *Where the Wind Comes From*:

Younger Generations are Isolated From Politics

"I'm deeply honored to present my film at the GFF, which has supported it from the start – from development through post-production. I'm proud and grateful to finally share the result of years of work at a festival that continues to grow and affirm its humanitarian vision. Bringing the film back to the MENA region means a lot to me. I can't wait to share it with an audience that will recognize both its struggles and its humor more than anyone else."

Nahed Nasr

Why did you choose this story for your debut feature, and what were the main challenges you faced in bringing it to the screen?

I wanted to tell a story about friendship between a man and a woman, blending drama and comedy. My aim was to reflect the social and economic struggles of Tunisian youth without making a dark film. In Arab cinema, this mix of tones is rare – most films are either drama or comedy. Making a film in our region is always challenging, and securing financing, especially for a first feature, is inevitably a struggle.

Many films have explored post-revolution Tunisia, yet your film approaches it through a coming-of-age lens that feels distinct. How did you shape this perspective?

I didn't want to show post-revolution Tunisia through politics alone. I

was more interested in how young people live these changes day to day – through friendship, love, humor, and struggle. The coming-of-age lens let me show both their fragility and resilience, reminding us that even amid hardship, there's still light, dreams, and laughter.

Your heroine is strong and resilient, while the man is more passive. Were you mainly highlighting women's strength, or also questioning how men are seen today?

The male character, Mehdi, is a dreamer: Introverted, sensitive, and creative. Calling him "passive" feels reductive; even if he is less outgoing than Alyssa, he is active in his own way. He is the one who draws, writes poetry, and becomes Alyssa's source of inspiration. He is also the responsible one, and his talent is what sparks their adventure.

It was important for me to move away from Western clichés about the Arab World. That's why I wanted to create two very different characters – a fearless woman and a sensitive man – to reflect this diversity of roles and personalities.

Your film is a road movie rooted in Tunisia's history, starting with the heroine's name, Alyssa. Do you think today's generation must reconnect with its roots to regain hope and strength?

Yes, absolutely. I believe it's very important for today's generation to reclaim its identity as Arab, North African, and Tunisian. Our history and heritage carry a strength that can give us hope and a sense of belonging, especially in uncertain times. We need to assert our identity internationally, both as a

larger community and through the differences that exist within our countries, diverse cultures, and histories. We should always be proud of who we are and where we come from.

Why did you choose to present Alyssa and Mehdi's relationship as a friendship rather than a romance? Does this reflect how young people connect today?

Friendships between men and women have always been very important in my life, especially at the age of my protagonists. When I was younger, some of my closest and most formative friendships were with my male friends. That's why I wanted to create an intimate, intense, real, and profound bond between Alyssa and Mehdi without it being defined by sexuality, because that's how I experienced it myself.

And yes, it reflects how young people connect today. At school or university, friendships are often mixed and not always romantic. Among them, there's a real desire to build trust and creative bonds beyond clichés. In the Arab World, where such friendships are often misunderstood, I wanted to show that intimacy can exist without romance.

The protagonists often feel isolated from a hostile world around them; was this mainly to reflect a teenage perspective, or to stand more broadly with their generation?

Both. Many Tunisian youth feel abandoned and hopeless about their future. The desire to leave is widespread, regardless of background. They feel isolated and excluded from policies that should empower and reward them; instead, they're pushed aside, even dismissed. This isn't unique to Tunisia; it's true in many places. There's a growing gap between politics and youth, who are often seen as naive or inexperienced, while most countries are still led by older men disconnected from their struggles.



Cinema & the Taste of Life

Farah Alaa

At this year's GFF, the *Cinema & The Taste of Life Panel* brought together filmmakers, humanitarian leaders, and industry experts to explore how food, cinema, and social responsibility intersect. Moderated by **Hoda El-Sherif**, the panel featured actress **Laila Eloui**, Head of Communications at World Food Program Egypt **Amina El-Korey**, CEO of the Egyptian Food Bank **Mohsen Sarhan**, and Chief Commercial and Business Development Officer at Orascom Development **Mohamed Ashour**.

El-Sherif opened by framing food and cinema as two universal languages before **Ashour** spoke about **El Gouna's** sustainability efforts and its seed-to-table concept restaurant,

saying, "We gather around food to connect, discuss, and celebrate life."

Eloui reflected on Egyptian cinema's use of food to portray family and belonging, urging films to address real humanitarian struggles.

Then, **El-Korey** emphasized that food security means dignity as much as nutrition, while **Sarhan** reminded the audience that "Fighting hunger starts with how we value food – with empathy, awareness, and collective responsibility."



Are Adolescent Actors Safe Enough Under the Spotlight?

Menna Elnakib

Yesterday, at the **Island Stage**, the GFF hosted a panel titled '*Empowering Adolescents – On Screen and Beyond*' moderated by actress **Yasmina El Abd**.

The session brought together National Project Manager for Combatting Child Labor Projects at the ILO **Marwa Salah**, Country Representative for the UNFPA **Yves Sassenrath**, and Egyptian psychiatrist and psychotherapist **Dr. Nabil El Kot**, with child actor **Ali Beialy** as a **guest of honor**.

The discussion tackled the responsibility of the film industry in portraying and protecting adolescents. **El Abd**, who began her own acting journey as a child, shared personal insights on the need for protection and awareness in youth roles, emphasizing that "on set, priorities must always be safety and well-being before performance."

Salah then shed light on child labor laws and the importance of creating healthy environments for youth, both on and off the screen. "We work to ensure that every child and adolescent is protected, trained, and supported, not just for today, but for the future they

represent," she said, underscoring how safeguarding young people's rights is central to building stronger societies.

Representing the **UNFPA**, **Sassenrath** reflected on the organization's role in promoting equality and awareness through storytelling: From amplifying youth voices to ensuring authentic representation of women and girls.

Furthermore, **Dr. El Kot** explored the psychological dimensions of performance, drawing from his collaborations with screenwriters and actors to highlight how emotional depth and realism can strengthen the impact of drama.

Ultimately, the panelists agreed that ensuring the safety, dignity, and development of adolescent actors is essential for building a more ethical and responsible creative industry.



8 Editions Questions



Ahmed Atef Megahed
Publication Art Director

• If GFF were a person, what kind of friend would they be to you?

An old friend I've grown with since the first edition – intense at times, but full of memories and the kind of energy I look forward to every year.

• What tradition from past editions feels most rooted in GFF now?

The combination of visual spectacle with strong film content and CineGouna programs has become a core tradition and defining feature of the festival.

• And what's the boldest new beginning this year?

The new film and CineGouna schedule design – more detailed, clearer, and much easier for guests to navigate.

• Highlight of your department this year in one line?

Finalizing and delivering the Festival Guide and Screening Schedule – digital and printed – on time despite last-minute changes.

• Biggest challenge you faced & how did you beat it?

The biggest challenge – as always – was balancing tight deadlines with high-quality output, and we overcame it through careful planning and true teamwork.

• In 8 years, how has GFF changed film culture in Egypt and the region?

GFF has become an inspiring force – igniting healthy competition with older festivals and setting a standard that many newer ones now aim to reach.

• How would you like audiences to remember the 8th edition?

As one of the most dazzling, with its vibrant crowds, red-carpet energy, celebrations, and a powerful film program of real artistic value.

• Name one most dear thing for you in the 8th edition (a film, or a corner, or a guest, etc)?

The presence of Intishal Al Timimi, former GFF festival director and now its Strategic Advisor. His legacy in building the festival is undeniable, and on a personal level, I owe much of my experience to what I learned from him. I still follow the professional path he inspired.

