

EL GOUNA
FILM FESTIVAL

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EL GOUNA STAR

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GFF

KABONGA RETURNS TO THE GFF!

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Today

Red Carpet



It's a **double feature** on the **red carpet** tonight! **Two films** competing in the **GFF's Feature Narrative Competition** celebrate their **MENA premieres**, bringing their directors to **Festival Plaza** alongside festival stars and guests. French Lebanese filmmaker **Danielle Arbid** will be joined by producer **Omar El-Kadi** for *Only Rebels Win*, starring Palestinian actress **Hiam Abbass** and **Amine Benrachid**, with the **red carpet** scheduled for **7:00 PM**. Jordanian director **Zaid Abu Hamdan** will also take to the **red carpet** with his film *Boomah*.

Meet the Filmmaker

HOLD ONTO ME

Actor:
Christos Passalis
Sea Cinema 1
2:00 PM

AMERICAN DOCTOR

Director:
Poh Si Teng
Producer:
Reem Haddad
Composer:
Suad Bushnaq
Sea Cinema 1
5:00 PM

WHISPERS IN MAY

Director:
Dongnan Chen
Designer:
Xi Chen
Sea Cinema 2
12:30 PM

CITIZEN OSAMA

Producer:
Rashid Masharawi
Sea Cinema 2
3:30 PM

HEARING

Producer:
Yen Huynh
Sea Cinema 2
5:30 PM

OASIS

Producer:
Alexandra Rilli
Sea Cinema 3
7:45 PM

Who Still Needs a Producer?

Written by Malak Sherif

In a **CineGouna Forum** panel moderated by Bosnian producer **Amra Bakšić Čamo** titled 'Who Still Needs a Producer?' filmmakers **Odessa Rae**, **Kana Matsuda**, **Jennifer Ritter**, **Omar El-Kady**, and **Annemarie Jacir** discussed the evolving role of film producers, AI, self-production, and alternative financing.

"We don't make films alone," stated **Ritter**, stressing the importance of collaboration, while **El-Kady** described producers as "guardians of the film," responsible for supporting creative teams and nurturing talent, and **Jacir** emphasized protecting directors and recognising producers' contributions, saying, "We need to fight for our visibility."

Ritter also advised filmmakers to collaborate with multiple producers and develop two projects simultaneously to maintain momentum despite delays.



Window on Palestine

After its **world premiere** at the **Venice Biennale** and its selection as Palestine's **official submission for the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film**, Ahmed Hassouna's *Citizen Osama* is holding its **MENA premiere** at the **GFF** today.

The screening is part of the festival's continued celebration of Palestinian cinema with the **Window on Palestine Program**, now in its fourth consecutive edition. Other films highlighting Palestinian stories include **Poh Si Teng's** *American Doctor*, **William Lafi Youmans' Who Killed Alex Odeh?**, and **Omar Rammal's Kentucky Gaza**.



Beyond the screen, the program also includes the **Ways to Remembering Art Exhibition** at the **Festival Hub**, which boasts a rich collection of works expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people and reflecting their ongoing suffering and resilience.

The 3rd Eish Short Film Competition Announces its Winner

The **UN World Food Program (WFP)** in Egypt, **GFF**, and **Zest** named **Fares El-Tabey** the winner of the **third edition** of the **Eish Short Film Competition** for his film concept, *Between Two Shores*, during a special event at the **ninth GFF**.

The event brought together WFP Representative and Country Director in Egypt **Rawwad Halabi**, GFF Co-Founder and Executive Director **Amr Mansi**, and Head of Zest Specials and Artistic Director of the competition **Abdallah Dnewar**.

The winning project was selected by a jury comprising filmmakers **Mark Lotfy**, **Norah El-Khatib**, **Zena Abdelbaky**, and **Bassam Mortada**. It will receive seed funding to support its production and bring its story to wider audiences.

The Actor's Choice

Written by Sarah Azer

Egyptian actress, editor, and production manager **Nesrine Talaat** moderated a panel on the **second day of the CineGouna Forum** titled 'The Actor's Choice: Who Gets to Shape a Performance?' which brought together a host of high-profile Egyptian actors, including **Amina Khalil**, **Salma Abu Deif**, **Amir El-Masry**, **Yasmina Al-Abd**, and **Sara Taibah**.

The discussion explored how actors choose their roles, develop their characters, and collaborate with directors to shape their performances.

Khalil highlighted the importance of ongoing discussions with directors to develop characters and understand their motivations, while **Abu Deif** described the story as "the first hook" that draws her to a project. **El-Masry** suggested that actors serve as their characters' "lawyers," stressing the need to understand their decisions, and recalled how two weeks of rehearsals with director **Abu Bakr Shawky** on *The Stories* helped build chemistry and encouraged creative freedom.

Al-Abd expressed her preference for challenging roles and directors who welcome actors' ideas, while acknowledging that social media reactions can influence her choices. And **Taibah** discussed balancing her perspective as a writer with the director's vision through dialogue and mutual respect.



Crafting Television Drama



Written by Bishoy Emad

Yesterday, the **CineGouna Forum** brought producer **Mohamed Mashish** into conversation with actress **Riham Abdel Ghafour** on *Crafting Television Drama*: A session exploring the creative and production challenges facing Egyptian television that drew a large gathering of actors and industry professionals.

Reflecting on his journey from journalism and photography to production, **Mashish** recalled his long-held ambition to work in Egypt. On choosing projects, he said, "There is no magic formula for choosing series, but we like to support talented people," stressing the importance of collaboration and giving directors creative freedom.

Addressing the challenges of Egyptian television, **Mashish** called for longer writing and preparation periods, particularly for Ramadan productions. While some international projects spend up to two years in development, Egyptian series may have just four months. He also pointed to the gap between industry demand and production capacity, made more difficult by economic pressures and changing budgets.

On reaching international audiences, **Mashish** emphasized the need for competitive production quality, a clear understanding of target viewers, and effective marketing strategies.

Film Review

A Gloomy Buzz

Mexican cinema gained some of its popularity when a number of prominent Mexican filmmakers made Hollywood-style films that broke into the global mainstream, like **Alejandro González Iñárritu's** *Birdman* and *The Revenant*, **Alfonso Cuarón's** *Gravity* and *Roma*, and **Guillermo del Toro's** *The Shape of Water*. This year, the **ninth GFF** selected another Mexican film that may just follow in its peers' footsteps: **Fernando Eimbcke's** *Flies*, featuring in the **Out of Competition Program**.

The film, which premiered at the **Berlinale**, opens with Olga, a middle-aged woman living alone in an apartment opposite a large hospital. In the opening scenes, the filmmaker establishes Olga's daily routine, highlighting her solitary lifestyle. The buzzing of flies early in the film underscores this sense of isolation as the sound penetrates her quiet world. A minor financial difficulty forces her to rent out a room in her apartment, though

she sets strict rules for any prospective tenant. It is here that the film introduces Isaac and his son, Cristian, who are clearly impoverished and have traveled from a distant city to be near Isaac's wife while she undergoes cancer treatment at the hospital.

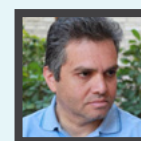
The director shot the film in black and white to visually unify the emotional states of the characters: Olga's loneliness and grief, paired with Isaac and Cristian's anxiety and sense of anticipation.

Both worlds converge when Isaac decides to rent the room for their brief stay in the city. However, fearing Olga might charge an extra fee, he conceals the fact that he has his son with him. He waits until she falls asleep and sneaks Cristian into the room.

The drama revolves around the dynamic between Olga and Cristian: A lonely woman and a child longing for his sick mother.



A high point in the movie is when, after Olga and Cristian form a bond, they spend time playing a game at the arcade together. The game involves shooting flies as they descend from the top of the screen. The flies – both in the apartment and in the arcade game – symbolize life's struggles: Sources of annoyance for Olga and a metaphor for cancer cells, as Isaac explains the mother's condition to Cristian.



Written by
Hani Mustafa

Amir El-Shenawy,

Director of *The Return of Captain Kabonga*:

Keeping the Dream Alive is an Achievement

Written by Nahed Nasr

"I'm so thrilled that *The Return of Captain Kabonga* is coming back to the GFF. The festival has been part of the film's journey from early on, so returning with the completed film for its **world premiere** in the **Official Competition** feels incredibly meaningful. It's like coming full circle, bringing the film back to a place that witnessed an important part of its journey and sharing with audiences what it eventually became."

The project received support from CineGouna Funding last year. How did that support contribute to the completion of *The Return of Captain Kabonga*?

When we presented the project to **CineGouna Funding** last year, the film was still in post-production. We were incredibly lucky to receive **six awards**, both cash and in-kind, which gave us the final push to complete it. I'm extremely grateful for **CineGouna Funding's** support. Over the years, it has proven to be an important platform for filmmakers and projects from the Arab World.

How did your relationship with Captain Kabonga begin, and what drew you to his world and made you decide to turn it into a film?

My relationship with Kabonga began almost by accident in mid-2021. I came across a photograph on Facebook that piqued my curiosity about wrestlers in strange, colorful costumes performing in what looked like a rural area.

Eventually, I called Captain Ashraf Kabonga and told him I wanted to make a documentary about him and the federation. He immediately said, "Of course. Pick a day, and we'll start right away." I explained that filming might take years, not a day, and sent him my debut feature, *Kilo 64*, to show him what I had in mind.

He told me the federation had stopped operating because of the pandemic and that he had sold the wrestling ring, but was determined to make a comeback. That was when I realized



the film wasn't simply about wrestling, but about Kabonga's attempt to revive his dream.

How did you structure Kabonga's journey in the editing room, how long did the process take, and what did you choose to leave out?

We filmed for 60 days over three years, accumulating more than 300 hours of footage. We started editing during production, partly to manage the volume of footage. But the process also influenced filming. Watching the material raised new questions about Kabonga's life and guided what we explored in subsequent shoots.

Ultimately, we had to cut entire storylines, characters, and moments we loved because they distracted from Kabonga's journey. Our guiding question was always whether the material brought us closer to Kabonga. We had to sacrifice good footage to keep the film emotionally focused on him.

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Captain Kabonga is a persona Ashraf created, but it has become part of who he is

From *Kilo 64* to *The Return of Captain Kabonga*, you seem drawn to people pursuing dreams against the odds. What attracts you to these characters, and how much do you see yourself in them?

I think what draws me to them is their persistence. What interests me isn't whether they succeed or fail, but how they adapt, what they sacrifice, and how they keep going.

I don't consciously seek out these characters. I discover them first, then recognize something in their journeys that resonates with me. As a filmmaker, I know what it means to pursue a dream despite uncertainty, financial limitations, and rejection.

That's what connects many of my films: The space between dreams and reality. Sometimes achievement isn't about getting exactly what you imagined, but simply keeping the dream alive. As a filmmaker, I'm still trying to do the same.

How did you navigate the boundary between Kabonga's public persona as a wrestler and social media figure and the man behind the performance?

Kabonga doesn't just perform in the ring, but also on social media and in everyday life. I didn't want to separate 'Kabonga' from 'Ashraf' as if one were real and the other fake. Both are part of his identity.

Rather than looking "behind the mask," I wanted to observe when the performance naturally fell away. We filmed him performing and training wrestlers, but also with his family, facing problems, and making decisions.

He was comfortable with cameras. Sometimes he performed for us, sometimes he forgot us, and sometimes the distinction was impossible to make. That ambiguity interests me. Captain Kabonga is a persona Ashraf created, but it has become part of who he is.

Ahmed Shawky

Head of CineGouna Funding

A FUNDING PLATFORM FOR ALL GENERATIONS AND EXPERTISE LEVELS

Having led CineGouna Funding for several years, how have you seen the quality, ambition, and diversity of projects evolve?

It has been evolving even before I headed it. It's based on a brilliant idea: That **El Gouna** is a perfect place for an industry hub, and that the successful track record of alumni films and diverse award offerings would attract the best projects and supporters.

We can now say that we have access to no less than 95% of the arthouse film projects in the region, and that most of the regional key players are interested in being part of the **CineGouna Funding** network. This enables us to have a diverse lineup with high-quality projects and to offer them real artistic, networking, and financial support.

Egyptian Voices is a major addition this year. What gaps in previous submissions inspired the initiative, and how do you hope it will benefit emerging filmmakers?

The primary reason is that we've often received projects that have the right ideas that just haven't been packaged or marketed properly. The main target of the **Egyptian Voices Program** is to make the four selected projects better prepared for markets and to increase their chances of being selected in the future, not only by **CineGouna Funding**, but also in by biggest international and regional funds and platforms.

Having worked closely with hundreds of projects over the years, what have you learned about what makes a film project stand out? Has your own understanding of what a promising project looks like changed?

I now believe that the greatest projects come from artists that dream big while still keeping themselves grounded in reality; when they balance their original ideas and creative narratives with an understanding of how to operate within this industry and how to make your film financeable and feasible.

This year's selection includes established Arab filmmakers alongside emerging talents. What attracts experienced filmmakers to CineGouna Funding, and how has the program earned their trust?

CineGouna Funding was never limited to beginner or emerging filmmakers; it was always open to talents from all generations and expertise, especially since we know that most Arab countries, including Egypt, lack a solid

national funding system that can support independent and arthouse films – a responsibility platforms like **CineGouna Funding** must step in and carry.

There are many established filmmakers who are already part of **CineGouna**. **Ayten Amin, Mohamed Siam, Marwa Zein, and Sofia Djama**, whose **four films** are screening in this year's **GFF** competitions, have all participated in the program before and know how beneficial it can be for their new projects. Two of these films arrive after participating in and winning awards at A-list festivals, while the other two are **world premieres**. This shows how the process eventually goes full circle.

What are the main challenges in securing and maintaining CineGouna Funding's partnerships, and what distinguishes this year's awards and support?

Inflation, of course, since our awards are paid and valued in USD, which means the same award can cost more in EGP with every passing year. There is also an increasing number of co-production and development platforms seeking support from the same circle of sponsors. But we can say with confidence that we are still one of the most popular and supported events in the region, and the feedback we get from our partners is always positive, even when they cannot support us in a year for any reason.

Beyond financing, what are the most pressing challenges facing Arab filmmakers today, and how has CineGouna Funding adapted to address them?

We study each project's needs case-by-case, we ask them which in-kind awards they are interested in (because everyone is usually interested in the cash awards), and we try to tailor the mentorship program according to their needs. The main challenge is always finding financing with the limited resources in the region, but since we believe that networking is a valued resource in our industry, we think that participation in **CineGouna Funding** helps every project, even those who don't end up winning any awards.

As El Gouna approaches its tenth edition, how do you see its place in Arab and international cinema, and what are your ambitions for the festival and CineGouna Funding?

Great festivals don't need to reinvent the wheel every year. When we go to **Cannes** or **Venice**, we expect to find the best films, projects, and most recent and important discussions in the industry. We don't ask: "What's new in **Cannes** this year?" I think that the **GFF** now has a solid legacy and a clear vision of how to achieve its goals, and I would like this to continue and grow, with small new initiatives here and there that serve the same vision.

“Participation in CineGouna Funding helps every project, even those who don't win any awards



