

## Morocco's Celluloid Dreams

*At the Marrakech Film Festival, filmmakers and artists reflect on cinema's power to bridge cultures and inspire peace.*



*A host of filmmakers and actors gathered at the Marrakech Film Festival to celebrate cinema.*

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Art will always be a more powerful instrument of change than weapons, renowned Italian-American director Francis Ford Coppola told *Newsweek Middle East* on the sidelines of Marrakech's 15th Annual Film Festival last week.

Speaking at La Mamounia Hotel in Marrakech days *after* *Rock The Kasbah*'s screening, Coppola deplored violence and war, saying that they have "brought trepidation and fear and unhappiness to the world, but I haven't seen profound change brought by the Kalashnikov."

Coppola added: "The Kalashnikov is an instrument of death and cinema is an instrument of life, and life will always triumph over death, in my opinion."

Addressing a private roundtable inside the famed hotel's library, 76-year-old Coppola spoke fondly of the Middle East and North Africa.

"I'm by no means a political expert, but I know a lot about the Middle East and I know a lot about Islam," Coppola said. "Most people don't know anything about ... the so-called enemy. They don't know anything about Islam. They don't realize that it was the height of civilization in the 13th Century, or that ... the first page of the Quran is about God as 'righteous and merciful,' and it stresses [this] over and over."

The American film director, producer and screenwriter also recited verses from the Quran to explain compassion within Islam.

The award-winning director said delving more deeply into "what the issues really are" to learn the truth about subjects being "portrayed as evil" could help promote peace without engaging in violence.

The famed Italian-American told an intimate gathering of journalists of his personal interest in the Middle East, which he reads extensively about, adding that cinema can play a key role in fostering awareness among the public through education. It is worth noting that Coppola's paternal grandmother was an Italian born in Tunis who was fluent in four languages, including Arabic.

Coppola seemed to add to the festival's message of "Love, Unity and Security." These words have been on everyone's mind throughout the past week as thousands of cinema enthusiasts from across the world joined Moroccan and international actors, filmmakers, and journalists in Marrakech to celebrate the city's glamorous event.

The director behind all-time hit movies such as *The Godfather* trilogy, *The Rainmaker*, and *The Great Gatsby*, headed the jury for this year's festival, which includes master classes by German-Turkish filmmaker Fatih Akin, South Korean director Park Chan-Wook, and Iranian filmmaker and photographer Abbas Kiarostami, who chaired the festival's 2009 jury.

The festival ended on Saturday with its Golden Star Festival Grand Prize going to Beirut-set comedy-thriller *Very Big Shot*, from Lebanon's Mir-Jean Bou Chaaya.

The opening night paid tribute to legendary American actor and comic Bill Murray, who accepted an Etoile D'Or Lifetime Achievement Award. Launched with a special screening of Murray's latest film, *Rock The Kasbah*, which includes Hollywood heavyweights Kate Hudson, Bruce Willis and Zooey Deschanel, the festival will showcase 93 films from 33 countries through December 12.

Taking place in the wake of recent terrorist attacks in Paris, Beirut and San Bernardino, the mood at Murray's opening tribute and among the nine-member jury which included luminaries such as Ukrainian

actress Olga Kurylenko, Moroccan actress Amal Ayouch and French film director Jean-Pierre Jeunet, was somber.

Murray, whose trip to Morocco to film *Rock The Kasbah* was his first to the African continent, has become very emotionally invested in the film, which paid homage to Setara Hussainzada, one of four Afghan women who sang as contestants in “Afghan Star,” Afghanistan’s version of “American Idol.”

*Rock The Kasbah* presents Afghanistan’s capital city of Kabul as an austere and devastated city hiding a hedonistic core. The film’s heavy-handed stereotypes and sometimes cliched characters have earned it a number of negative reviews. Yet the film has a decidedly political message, openly satirizing the heavy U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and lampooning the corruption and hypocrisy permeating much of the country’s foreign residents and ruling Afghan elite.

Speaking in Marrakech, both Murray and *Rock The Kasbah* screenwriter Mitch Glazer expressed hope the film would help convey the humanity of Afghans and the commonalities all people share in the face of growing xenophobia and conflict.

“The Afghans I do know ... said at least you showed people that we laugh. There is a phobia about what Muslims are like,” Murray said at a press conference the day after the screening. “I don’t presume to act like I’m any kind of savior of the world, but the ideas I might communicate might help save something.”

In the film, the award winning U.S. actor and comedian plays washed-up music manager Richie Lanz.

Desperate for money, Lanz travels to war-torn Kabul with his screechy protege Ronnie (played by Deschanel), hoping her performance for American troops there can make them both some quick cash. Instead, Ronnie steals Richie’s cash and passport hours after arriving in Kabul, running away to Dubai and literally leaving Richie in the dust. Richie then departs on a bullet-ridden, yet comedic, quest to earn some money and find a way back home.

It is the lovely voice of Salima, a character partially inspired by the women on “Afghan Star,” who becomes the source of Richie’s salvation. Played by Palestinian actress Leem Lubany, whom Murray described in Marrakech as “extraordinary,” Salima is a young Pashtun teenager with a beautiful voice. She doesn’t seek fame or fortune; she wants only her voice to be heard. Richie helps her do that by helping her become the first woman to compete in Afghan Star.

“We felt that a father’s love for a daughter, the love of music, the love of humor, were things all people share, and that was what we tried to celebrate in this film,” screenwriter Glazer told the audience during a speech honoring Murray at the festival’s opening tribute.

Expressing his deep love for Morocco, 65-year-old Murray told journalists he is eager to see how *Rock The Kasbah*’s story resonates with Muslim viewers worldwide. Recent global violence, including the terrorist attacks in his former home city of Paris and a mass shooting at a Black-American church in his current home city of Charleston, South Carolina have left him with a “crushing sadness,” Murray said.

In addition to an extensive tribute to Murray, this year's Marrakech Film Festival pays special homage to renowned Indian Bollywood actress Madhuri Dixit, American actor Willem Dafoe, South Korean director Park Chan-Wook, as well as Canadian director Atom Egoyan and a delegation of Canuck directors and writers.

"The language of cinema spreads peace and communication, and brings unity to cultural ideologies," said Moroccan actor Rabie Kati.

Other jury members have echoed Coppola and Murray's sentimental calls for love, peace and unity since the festival launched last week.

In a press conference the morning after the festival's opening, Italian jury member Sergio Castellitto admitted he was initially hesitant to travel to Morocco in the wake of the Paris terror attacks. Ultimately, he and his fellow jury members decided attending would be a "political gesture."

"Art and culture are our biggest weapons against terror and darkness," acclaimed Moroccan filmmaker Nouredine Lakhmari told *Newsweek Middle East*.

"We are fighting to tell the world [Morocco] is a Muslim-Jewish country, and we can receive Christians, [people of other religions], and non-religious people. They all come together for one week and they all have one thing in common: cinema, which is an international language."

Jury member Richa Chadda of India spoke of her country's legacy of social unrest and religious violence following its 1947 partition, likening the continued volatility on the Indian subcontinent to the conflicts wrecking the Middle East. Chadda said throughout the wars and difficulties, and even more recently with India's election of a conservative government last year, filmmakers have persisted with their art, continuing to create "movies that spread the message of peace."

"We have to go on working, and we have to have an idea and a vision for the future," Jeunet said. "We decided we have to be here for this definition of art."

The Marrakesh film festival has long aspired to expose developing filmmakers from regions such as Africa or Eastern Europe, who typically have less exposure to the global film circuit.

While this year's nine-day affair in Marrakech has been replete with international Hollywood, European and Bollywood stars, at least three of this year's 15 competing films are made by first-time filmmakers.

With respected directors and actors such as Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Isabelle Huppert chairing Marrakech film juries, the platform offered by the festival to aspiring filmmakers has also had an impact on Morocco's burgeoning film industry itself, Lakhmari told *Newsweek Middle East*.

“How do we change the image of how other people look at us? By making our own films, and the young people are aware of this,” Lakhmari added.

Indeed, the Moroccan director signed a contract on December 9, with Icflix, a Dubai-based streaming and video on demand platform, to direct five new feature films within the next seven years to be streamed online worldwide.

Two additional Moroccan directors have also signed contracts for one film each with Icflix. Referred to as the “local Netflix,” Icflix is investing heavily in the Middle East and North Africa, and represents a huge opportunity because it will guarantee filmmakers digital film distribution.

Lakhmari’s Icflix contract is a direct result of the country’s annual film festivals and the meetings with international distributors they have helped facilitate, the director said.

“Filmmakers are dreamers. When you see Coppola here or Park Chan-wook or Scorsese, they tell you their stories and you think: well, if you make it, we can make it,” Lakhmari said.

“There are so many beautiful stories to tell in the Arab world, and nobody will tell [our stories] better than us,” he added.