

Abu Dhabi Film Festival to Celebrate 100th Birthday of Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz

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During his very long life, Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz was credited with two important “firsts” - he was the first Arab author to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1988), and he was the first Arab author to devote much of his energy to the movies. The Abu Dhabi Film Festival (ADFF) announced today that to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of this unique and enormously influential artist, it will present screenings of eight major films drawn from his work, many in newly struck or newly subtitled copies, to mark its fifth edition October 13-22. In addition, it will publish a monograph on Mahfouz and cinema, mount an exhibition of posters of films drawn from Mahfouz’s work, and present a roundtable discussion.

Born in Cairo in 1911, Mahfouz published his first novel in 1939, and continued his remarkably prolific career which saw him produce no less than 30 novels and more than 100 short stories, until 1994. In that year, the knife wounds he suffered in an assassination attempt by a religious fanatic made it difficult for him to use his right arm and hand for more than half an hour a day, severely curtailing his artistic activity for the remaining dozen years of his life. Since the 1940s Mahfouz earned his principal living as a civil servant, working in a variety of government departments related to culture and cinema. In fact, for a while he was director of the Office of Film Censorship. But starting in the late 1940s he had also begun to write screenplays and was eventually credited with more than 25 original screenplays.

Not only were Mahfouz’s works brought to the screen by some of Egypt’s most notable directors, including Salah Abou Seif, Youssef Chahine, Hassan Al Imam, Kamal Al Sheikh, Ali Badrakhan and Tawfik Saleh, but two of his novels were the inspiration for a couple of Mexico’s major directors, Jorge Fons and Arturo Ripstein. ADFF’s series will include films by most of these filmmakers, and several of them are expected to attend. The retrospective will also include the two Mexican films, which have rarely been screened in the Middle East.

Most of Mahfouz’s fiction has been translated into English and published by the American University of Cairo Press. After he received the Nobel Prize, his worldwide readership increased incrementally, and no less a luminary than Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, then an editor at Doubleday in New York, came to Cairo to meet him and championed the first American publication of *The Cairo Trilogy*, his most famed work.

Commenting on this remarkable series, Eissa Saif Al Mazrouei, who as the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage’s Director of Special Projects heads the ADFF team, said, “The Festival takes this opportunity to reaffirm the importance of honoring the art of film by presenting important examples from the history of cinema and by supporting their preservation and restoration in order to share them with today’s new audiences. Thanks to the cooperation of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture

and the Egyptian Film Center, it will be possible for us to present newly struck or newly subtitled copies of five of the films chosen for the retrospective. These screenings and other events relating to Mahfouz during the film festival will offer a unique chance to lovers of film and lovers of books throughout the United Arab Emirates to enjoy the work of one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, a man whose influence upon both literature and cinema is widely recognized as being without equal."

Peter Scarlet, Executive Director of ADFE, remarked, "Mahfouz's depiction of the lives of his countrymen is so broad and so penetrating, whether in his early works in which he depicted Egypt's ancient past or later work when he focused on the lives of Cairo's lower middle class, that he's sometimes been compared to Balzac – and that's a comparison of which very few authors are worthy. At this moment in history, as the world turns its attention anew toward that ancient and fascinating nation, the work of Naguib Mahfouz, both on the page and on screen, gives a unique sense of what life was like there for much of the preceding century. In addition, throughout much of his career Mahfouz was an extremely cinematic writer, using devices like flashbacks and parallel montage to bring his characters to life on the page. And in his screenplays, as in his novels, he moved freely between genres and historical eras. In short, he was a master of many realms."

Intishal Al Timimi, an ADFE programmer and the main curator of the program, added, "We recognize the impossibility of fully encompassing Mahfouz's long career in this retrospective, but we hope to shed light on some of the key landmarks in the creative path of the writer of such important novels as *The Children of Gebelawi*, *The Beginning and the End*, and *The Cairo Trilogy: Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street*. To this end, ADFE has chosen to present a multi-faceted program that reflects Mahfouz's diversity, offering something both for his admirers and for those who are just discovering this 'cinéaste of literature'."

Further details on the Mahfouz retrospective at Abu Dhabi Film Festival will be announced in the coming months.

ABOUT THE FESTIVAL

The Abu Dhabi Film Festival (formerly the Middle East International Film Festival) was established in 2007, with the aim of helping to create a vibrant film culture throughout the region. Presented each October by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH) under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Sultan Bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, Chairman of Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, the event is committed to curating exceptional programs to engage and educate the local community, inspire filmmakers and nurture the growth of the regional film industry.

With its commitment to presenting works by Arab filmmakers in competition alongside those by major talents of world cinema, the Festival offers Abu Dhabi's diverse and enthusiastic audiences a means of engaging with their own and others' cultures through the art of cinema. At the same time, a strong focus on the bold new voices of Arab cinema connects with Abu Dhabi's role as a burgeoning cultural capital in the region and marks the Festival as a place for the world to discover and gauge the pulse of recent Arab filmmaking.

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