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Sudan cinema takes inspiration from revolution

Sudanese filmmakers who celebrated the end of stifling restrictions following the ouster of autocrat Omar Al-Bashir have won multiple international awards but are yet to enjoy the same recognition at home. Cinema languished in the North African country through three decades of authoritarian rule by Bashir. But Sudanese took to the streets to demand freedom, peace and social justice, and Bashir's ironfisted rule came to an end in a palace coup by the army in April 2019.

"We started realizing how much our society needs our dreams," said director Amjad Abou Alala. His 2019 film "You Will Die at Twenty" was both Sudan's first Oscar entry and the first Sudanese film broadcast on Netflix, winning prizes at international film festivals including Italy's Venice and Egypt's El Gouna. The film tells the story of a young man a mystic predicts will die at age 20.

As Sudan undergoes a precarious political transition, the country's filmmakers have found more space to operate, Alala said. Young filmmakers act "without the complexes, the lack of self-confidence or the frustration that we suffered in previous generations", he added.

Art 'aborted' under Bashir

Talal Afifi, director of the Khartoum-based Sudan Film Factory program, has trained hundreds of young people in filmmaking. Bashir's government "aborted all cultural and artistic initiatives and fought... diversity and freedom of opinion, through policies of alleged Islamization and Arabization", he said.



In this file photo taken on Nov 11, 2019, Talal Afifi, founder and director of the "Sudan Film Factory", speaks to AFP in Khartoum.

Afifi began work long before the 2019 revolution, with advances in digital camera technology making filmmaking far more accessible. The filmmaker attended a 2008 short film festival in Munich, where the winning film - an Iraqi documentary shot on a handy-cam - inspired him to return home and set up a training center and production house.

In the past decades, the Film Factory has organized some 30 screenwriting, directing and editing workshops - and produced more than 60 short films, honored in international festivals from Brazil to Japan. Afifi says the roots of Sudan's innovative cinema was born from the "hard work dating from before

Bashir's overthrow, when many cinemas were closed.

Today, cinemas are allowed - big budget Hollywood films, as well as Indian and Egyptian movies are popular - but moves to reopen them have been frustrated by restrictions to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus. The Sudanese National Museum organized screenings of films, including "You Will Die at Twenty", but they were not screened in large theatres.

Filmmakers still face challenges. Hajooj Kuka, director of the acclaimed 2014 "Beats of the Antonov" was jailed for two months last year for causing a "public nuisance" - for what he said was an acting workshop. Other Sudanese films have also garnered international attention, including the 2019 documentary "Talking About Trees" by Suhaib Gasmelbari, which tells the story of four elderly Sudanese filmmakers with a passion for movies.

The quartet and their "Sudanese Film Club" work to reopen an open-air cinema in Omdurman, the city across the Nile from the capital Khartoum. It won prizes ranging from the Berlin International Film Festival to awards from Istanbul, Athens and Mumbai.

'Leap into the void'

Another film, director Marwa Zein's award-winning 2019 documentary "Khartoum Offside", tackles sexism in the conservative country through the story of young female footballers determined to play professionally. Sudan films from 2020 include "The Art of Sin", a



In this file photo taken on Dec 22, 2014, Sudanese watch a film at The Palace of Youth and Children in the Omdurman district, one of just three functioning cinemas left in the capital Khartoum. — AFP photos

documentary about openly gay Sudanese artist Ahmed Umar.

A refugee in Norway, he returns to Sudan to see his mother again despite the risks that remain even after Bashir's ouster. Many leading Sudanese directors have lived abroad for years, some shuttling between the Egyptian capital Cairo and Khartoum, like Zein and Gasmelbari. "We are children of the diaspora, which is why our analysis of the affairs of the Sudanese is critical," said Dubai-based Alala.

But if international recognition is seen as a sign of success, Alala fears the new boom in Sudanese cinema will amount to a "leap into the void" because it has not

benefited from "any official support or suitable infrastructure". He understands that this is in part due to the many challenges facing Sudan, as it struggles with a dire economic crisis and seeks to implement a recent peace deal with rebels to end decades of civil war. While Alala says government support is necessary for the film industry to flourish, he admits that it "would be unfair to ask the new government to shoulder this burden when the economy is devastated". — AFP

Theatre, cinema, concerts thrive in Madrid despite virus

With entertainment venues shuttered across much of Europe, Spain stands out as a cultural oasis where people still go to the theatre and cinema or watch concerts despite soaring infection rates. "Having the chance to be here with you is a huge blessing and with all my heart I applaud the great efforts being made in this country to defend culture," Mexican tenor Javier Camarena told Madrid's Theatre Royal last week after going months without performing on stage.

rooms and even the costumes.

And the performers themselves are not exempt from these new rituals: As well as respecting the safety distance and protective partitions, the musicians must undergo regular tests and wear masks, except for the players of wind instruments.

'Safe space'

"We can and we must" put on these performances, Spain's Culture Minister Jose Manuel Rodriguez Uribes told

Madrid's regional government, readily acknowledges it is "concert halls and live music venues that are facing the most difficult challenge", saying they will need the vaccine to be widely adopted "to get back on their feet".

Until then, the authorities are looking at rapid virus tests. In Barcelona, 500 people attended a standing-only concert, grouped very close together but wearing masks who had been previously tested in the context of a clinical study carried out in December. Eight days later, there was no sign of any infection. It's an idea that could prove to be "the safest way to reactivate the entertainment sector", says infectious diseases specialist Boris Revollo, who led the study.

'No sweat!'

At the Renoir cinema in the center of Madrid, the cashier's voice crackles over the intercom: "Screen 3, at the back after the escalators". A risky outing? Not for Paloma Arroyo, 38, who has come to see a retrospective of work by Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai. "When you go wearing a mask, you don't talk. People eating popcorn is a bit dangerous, I've thought about that," she jokes, saying such outings were important for protecting her "mental health".

If public transport is considered safe, the cinemas are even more so, says Pablo Blasco, another movie-goer. "I don't understand why other countries aren't doing this. It seems strange to me." A few hundred metres (yards) away, old promotional posters outside the Cafe Berlin, a popular live music venue, give nostalgic echoes of the world before the pandemic.

— AFP



Spectators wait for the start of a performance at the Teatro Real in Madrid on Jan 14, 2021.

In the audience were 1,200 people in suits, fur coats and masks, often the FFP2 type, after having their temperature taken as part of a meticulous safety protocol. Following a months-long national lockdown at the start of the pandemic, Spain's cultural venues reopened in the summer operating with strict capacity limitations, well-spaced seating policies and bars and cloakrooms closed.

And since then they have never closed their doors, unlike in other countries such as France or Germany. But it has meant a costly investment by the venues. The Theatre Royal, where Spain's King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia attended a performance in September, said it has spent one million euros (\$1.2 million), part of which went on an ultraviolet light system for disinfecting the auditorium, the dressing

AFP, who wants to show that culture "is a safe space". But the pandemic has forced some venues to temporarily shut, such as Barcelona's famed Liceu opera house which closed its doors in November.

Under the combined pressure of nationwide curfews, public anxiety and economic pressures, many cultural venues are fighting for their survival. According to Javier Olmedo, director of "Noche en vivo" association which represents 54 concert halls in the Madrid region, "80 percent have not opened since March". "It's a time of distress."

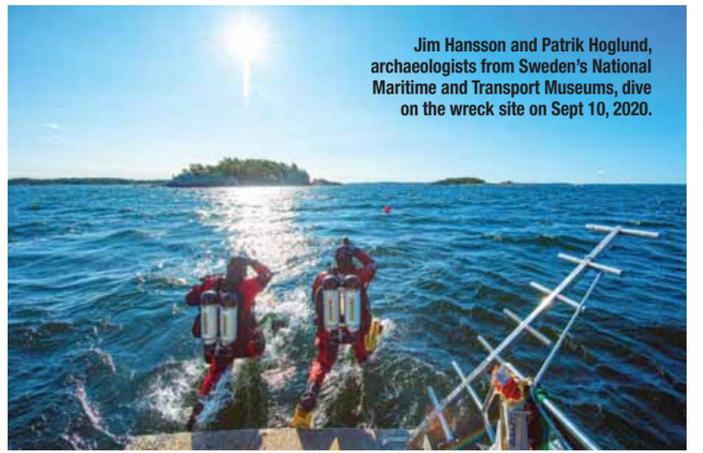
Many initiatives to bring people back to theatres and concert halls have popped up on social networks, tagged #SafeTheatre or #CultureisSafe, insisting they have not been linked to any outbreaks. Marta Rivera de la Cruz, deputy head of cultural affairs in



Youths enjoy the evening at the Berlin Cafe in Madrid on Jan 17, 2021. - AFP photos



A DJ performs at the Berlin Cafe.



Jim Hansson and Patrik Hoglund, archaeologists from Sweden's National Maritime and Transport Museums, dive on the wreck site on Sept 10, 2020.

SWEDISH ARCHAEOLOGISTS TAKE TO THE WAVES TO PROTECT BALTIC WRECKS

On a small boat on the choppy waters of Stockholm's archipelago, four maritime archaeologists pulled on wetsuits and prepared to dive into the Baltic to survey a merchant ship that sank nearly 500 years ago. The team from Stockholm's National Maritime and Transport Museums are racing to protect wrecks along Sweden's Baltic coast from looting, which they say has been on the rise since 2017.

They have called in the navy, coastguard and police since the spring to help document the wrecks, so they can monitor them more carefully for signs of interference. Plunging into the murky waters, two divers descended to the preserved timbers 28 m below, photographing items used by the sailors on the deck before resurfacing.

When the team discovered the wreck in 2017, they realized it could reveal long-lost historical details about the Baltic Sea trade that brought riches to the region. But returning months later, one of the archaeologists, Jim Hansson, noticed that a three-legged cooking pot left on the wreck where it had settled five hundred years before had vanished.

"I was cursing in my facemask down at 30 meters," the 47-year-old said as he sat drying out in his wetsuit on deck. Although the law forbids theft from wrecks like this near the waterside town of Dalarna, archaeologists believe the artifacts are being taken by collectors or put up for sale. "If everything is still there at the wreck, we can tell a story as close to reality as possible, because there are no books, sketches, blueprints on these things," Hansson said.

Rich maritime heritage

Experts believe up to 20,000 shipwrecks lie on the floor of the Baltic Sea, many of them well preserved by its brackish waters, a mix of salt and freshwater. In 1961, divers found the wreck of the Vasa, a magnificent 69-m warship carrying 64 cannon, which had sunk on its maiden voyage in 1628. It was salvaged, put on display, and is now one of Sweden's most popular tourist attractions.

Then, last November, Hansson and his colleagues discovered a wreck they believe to be the Vasa's sister ship in the Stockholm archipelago. They came across it as they searched for sites to feature in a new museum - the Museum of Wrecks - dedicated to the sea's underwater archaeological sites. There

have long been cases of looting in the area, and the archaeologists also noticed signs of recent interference with the wrecks as they began research for the museum in 2017.

They discovered that items such as porcelain and tableware were missing from at least four 17th-century wrecks in the archipelago - all of which require diving permits. Exploring further, they found items such as dive masks and knives left behind by the intruders. From the beginning of the year, Hansson and his colleagues decided to step up their surveys of the wrecks, to chart more clearly if other divers had tampered with key sites.



In this handout photo released by National Maritime and Transport Museum, archaeologists from the National Maritime and Transport Museums carry out a dive on the wreck of a 16th century merchant ship off the coast of Dalarna in the Stockholm Archipelago on Dec 7, 2017. — AFP photos

After one dive on the merchant ship, Hansson and his colleagues gathered round a table below deck on their dive boat check the latest 3D map of the site that they had produced. Noting the untouched items - barrels of iron ore, the ship's beams - they satisfied themselves no one had interfered with the wreck. And now they have a record for future use. "We can come back and check ... if people have been here looting or if natural causes have made the wreck fall apart," said Patrik Hoglund, an archaeologist with the Maritime Museum.

But the team has 1,500 km of Sweden's Baltic Sea coast to watch, so Hansson organized a seminar in January 2020 to persuade the Swedish navy, coastguard and police to help them. Now the archaeologists are sharing the photos, videos and 3D maps of the wrecks they survey with the authorities so they too can track any changes to the sites.—AFP