

‘Believe in your dreams and fight for what you want to achieve,’ says Elham, the real-life protagonist of 9th Ajyal Film Festival’s gritty film ‘Orca’

- *The message of the film is that when we all stand together – both women and men – we can resolve all societal challenges, says director Sahar Mossayebi*
- *Produced by Katara Studios, Orca’s script was mind-blowing with its powerful message of inclusivity and women’s rights, says producer Luca Bercovici*

Doha, Qatar; November 11, 2021: Elham Sadat Asghari is a name that is synonymous with Guinness World Records. The Iranian swimmer set a world record for the ‘fastest 10 km swim, one arm, in 4 hours, 58 minutes and 32 seconds’ and has set records by swimming for over three hours non-stop wearing handcuffs.

But behind her success is also an agonising personal tale, one that has inspired a powerful film, which made its Home Premiere at the ninth Ajyal Film Festival, presented by the Doha Film Institute. **Orca** (Qatar, Iran/2021), the film’s Qatar connection runs deeper as it is produced by Katara Studios.

Elham’s tale finds emotional resonance globally, as it portrays how the divorced woman, who survived a horrific beating at the hands of her husband, sought to rediscover herself by finding solace and salvation in the open expanse of water.

Courageous, determined and encouraged by her father, Elham made her mark as a formidable endurance swimmer. In the fight of her life, Elham also faced political, ideological, and personal obstacles in search of her ultimate goal—the Guinness world record for swimming the longest distance with her hands bound.

Addressing a press briefing, Elham said that her mission has not been to break Guinness World Records but to send out a stronger message to women anywhere in the world: “Do not give up, believe in your dreams and fight for what you want to achieve.”

She said she started swimming when she was only five years old. Swimming gave her the solace and courage to overcome the mundane challenges and evolve as a truly empowered individual. She said she has been planning to break another Guinness World Record in Qatar. Her plans had to be postponed due to the pandemic but she is going to work on it shortly again.

Director Sahar Mossayebi said the film has closely followed Elham’s story and haven’t taken much cinematic liberties. “All the incidents in the film are true; they are real and Elham went through it all. With this film, we are stating facts not criticising or condemning anyone. I believe it is important to narrate these stories as they are so that we can resolve the challenges women faces and overcome them.”

Sahar said there are symbolic representations of Elham in the film, which is also reflected in the title of the film, the name of a fish. “Orcas are like human beings; they are very family-oriented and close to each other as well as emotional and sensitive. So naming the film after it was a natural choice.”

But there was also a providential reason for that. Once when Elham was out swimming, she found herself stuck in a place in the ocean where warm and cold tides met. “We have it documented,” says Sahar, “of a shoal of fish, orca, coming to help her out.”

Sahar said Elham had the support of her father and the society. “What I want to convey with the film is that if we stand together, both women and men, we can resolve all issues. We can not only protect women but also provide them rights.” She said the only challenge in making the film was the post-production process in Qatar, which she couldn’t participate in personally because of the pandemic. “In Iran, if your script is approved no one will stop you from shooting the film.”

Orca’s producer Luca Bercovici of Katara Studios said the film became a reality out of a cold call. “But when we read the script, we were spell-bound! It was really strong and its message of inclusivity and women’s rights resonated instantly with us.”

Orca will be screened again at Vox Cinemas at Doha Festival City on Saturday, Nov. 13, 7.30 PM.

Tickets for Ajyal 2021 and can be purchased at www.dohafilminstitute.com/festival.

The seven-day festival until Nov. 13, 2021, has a diverse mix of virtual and in-person events including film screenings, interactive discussions, multi-media art exhibit, Qatar’s largest pop-culture event Geekdom, and a drive-in cinema as part of a multisensory experience for all ages.

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About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

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About Ajyal Film Festival:

Ajyal Film Festival is an annual celebration of film designed to nurture young minds and support the development of mindful global citizens and thoughtful future leaders. ‘Ajyal’, Arabic for ‘generations’, brings people of all ages together through screenings and events that inspire creative interaction and stimulate cinematic dialogue.

Ajyal Film Festival builds on the Doha Film Institute’s history of community-based programming. Through its jury programme, youth between the ages of 8 and 25 are given an opportunity to watch, analyse and discuss global cinema and culture, developing self-confidence, independent critical thinking skills, self-expression, and an appreciation of cinema, while making new friends and discovering global cultures.

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Ajyal Film Festival

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