

Press release

## Coming of age dramas and tales of discovering hope amidst strife inspire youth jurors at the 10<sup>th</sup> Ajyal Film Festival

**Doha, Qatar; October 6, 2022:** “Who is Syria at war, and why are they fighting,” asked a young Ajyal Juror at the Special Edition of the 10<sup>th</sup> Ajyal Film Festival, leading to an engaging, often emotional, discussion about the futility of the wars waged by adults with children bearing the most severe brunt, as they are denied of their childhood, have to endure the loss of loved ones, and often having to live in refugee camps.

The trigger to the innocent questions about war and strife in the region was the screening of *Dounia & The Princess of Aleppo* (Canada, France/2022), directed by Marya Zarif and André Kadi. The animated feature is about Dounia, a six-year-old girl, whose father, a journalist, is taken away by uniformed soldiers one night, turning her life upside down.

As bombs drop around them, the family decide to flee in search of a new home with only a few possessions, and a little magic in hand. Dounia’s more traumatic encounters are eased in child-like flights of imagination thanks to her magic ‘baraki’ seeds.

Answering the ‘tough’ questions from the youngest of jurors (Mohaq, aged 8 to 12), director Marya displayed an astute understanding of their sensitivities, as she said, “wars happen because human beings are sometimes too stubborn and refuse to understand that living in peace and harmony is more important than being right or wrong.”

Asking the young people whether they patch up after a fight with their siblings and getting an enthusiastic chorus of ‘Yes’ from the audience, she added: “Human beings take such fights to the streets, and when large groups of people fight against each other, they create such a mess, and they refuse to make amends.”

Marya said her film, however, was inspired not as much as by tragedy as by the hope and cheer she saw in the faces of Syrian children, who had lost everything, but were finding joy in the little things. “Despite losing their homes and loved ones, despite living in camps, I saw in them abundant strength. I got inspired to create a film for them and create a character that is truly reflective of them, which is Dounia, even when life is hard.”

Clearly impressed by a young juror who said he learnt a lot about Syrian culture after watching the film, Marya said the most important aspect of the film was her focus on ensuring that their nation’s roots were documented. “When war happens, we start to lose something. But our culture – how we make food, our music, our dance – that is what we must keep with us because no number of bombs can take that away. In fact, in the journey of Dounia to distant lands, all that they really carry with them is their cultural ethos.”

Marya, who now lives in Canada, said many elements in the film are similar to her own life. “But it is the real experience of hundreds of thousands of Syrian kids, who experienced such

traumatic experiences in the past 11 years. I collected many such stories to create Dounia. I wanted to create a character, a little Syrian girl, who loves the world and tries to be happy despite her difficulties, and I want to project to the world that she – and in turn, the Syrian children are heroes.”

Young jurors also watched **Comedy Queen** (Sweden/2021) by Sanna Lenken, about Sasha, a teenager, who wants nothing more than to become a stand-up comedian. There is so much grief within though, as she refuses to mourn her mother, who passed away in tragic circumstances. Instead, she secretly writes a list of everything she must do to survive — shave her hair, stop reading books, say no to the world’s cutest puppy and above all — become a Comedy Queen. This allows her to finally come to terms with her loss and re-establish a relationship with her father in this touching coming-of-age drama.

The Hilal jurors aged 13 to 17, who watched and critiqued the film, said it is a dark subject, but treated with sensitivity, and care. The discussion inspired many in the audience to open up and share their own stories, of how they coped with loss and grief. Experts at Doha Film Institute explained to them the diversity of choices in Scandinavian cinema, which explore bold themes, and urged young people to watch such coming-of-age dramas, and also share their concerns freely than bottle them up.

The Special Edition of the 10<sup>th</sup> Ajyal Film Festival will screen a specially curated programme of important stories from around the world to over 613 jurors from 50 countries. They will also take part in the Ajyal Talks and Spotlight sessions in addition to taking part in lively discussions on cinema and critiquing the movies they watched.

Katara is the Cultural Partner of the Special 10<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Ajyal Film Festival. Contributing Partners include Darwish Holding, the Official Electronics Provider; with FNAC, Sony and 51 East; Qommunication is the Social Media Partner; and Friends of the Festival include Alkalive, the Official Water Sponsor; Giffoni, Qatar Museums, Leisure (Virtuocity).

-ENDS-