

# A wider world of film

[Festival, from D1] the world of movies as we can."

Eleven new films made in the Middle East will premiere in the festival's Arabian Nights program, a reflection, Macdonald said, of an upsurge in both the quantity and quality of film production in the region.

"Something has been bubbling up in the Arab world over the course of the last two to three years, not just socially and politically but also on the cinema front," he said. "During our shorts festival in the summer, we were surprised to find so many strikingly well-made films from that region of the world, which we'd never seen much representation from before."

Two Middle Eastern film festivals — the 2-year-old Doha Tribeca Film Festival in Qatar and the 7-year-old Dubai International Film Festival in the United Arab Emirates — have helped foster many of the films coming to Palm Springs, including "Habibi," a romance set in the Gaza Strip and shot with an almost entirely Palestinian cast and crew in the West Bank.

"I tried very hard to make it a nuanced film," said "Habibi's" Lebanese American director, Susan Youssef, who held a work-in-progress screening at Doha and received finishing funds from Dubai. "The politics are in regards to the real-life obstacles the lovers would have experienced."

Last year's Palm Springs festival drew 130,000 people, and early ticket sales are on pace to at least match that, according to Macdonald.

One of the earliest events



Palm Springs Film Festival

"**HABIBI**" takes place in the Gaza Strip and features obstacles that the lovers would experience in real life, Lebanese American director Susan Youssef says.

to sell out was the Saturday night awards gala, traditionally one of the glitziest events on the Oscar campaign trail. Pitt, Clooney, Williams and Close will be on hand, as will "The Help's" Octavia Spencer, who is receiving the breakthrough performance award. Gary Oldman will accept the international star award for his performance in "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy," and "Young Adult" director Jason Reitman, screenwriter Diablo Cody and cast members Charlize Theron and Patton Oswalt will receive the Vanguard Award for creative ensemble.

"The honorees and presenters seem to feel more comfortable to say off-the-cuff things they wouldn't say at any other major awards show," said festival chairman Harold Matzner. "That's why we don't televise it. We really prize the natural state of the show, the fact

that it is so relaxed."

The cinema of yesteryear is the focus of the festival's Archival Treasures section, which will be anchored by film historian Mark Cousins' 15-hour documentary "The Story of Film: An Odyssey," being screened over two days. Some of the movies highlighted in the documentary, including the 1958 Egyptian classic "Cairo Station" and Satyajit Ray's 1960 Bengali film "The Goddess," will also play for audiences.

"The Prince and the Showgirl," the 1957 Monroe movie that provides the setting for current Oscar hopeful "My Week With Marilyn," starring Williams as the cinema icon, will also be screened. Photographs from the book "Marilyn: Intimate Exposures" by Susan Bernard will be exhibited throughout Palm Spring's uptown design district.

By the festival's end on Jan. 16, 188 films from 73

countries will have been shown, including 40 of this year's 63 foreign-language Academy Awards submissions, such as Win Wenders' dance documentary "Pina" (Germany), the drug war thriller "Miss Bala" (Mexico) and family drama "A Separation" (Iran).

For many of the directors coming to Palm Springs from abroad, the festival is an opportunity to see how their films play to a Western audience, and to network.

"I'm looking for some feedback about how this kind of film can be seen in the U.S., which for me is a big question," said Fatma Zamoum, director of the Algeria-set "How Big Is Your Love," which is in the Middle Eastern showcase. "I'd like to find a professional relation who can care about this film's future, and my future."

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