

## Acclaimed visual artist Shirin Neshat talks directorial decisions, approach to Oum Kulthum biopic at the 5<sup>th</sup> Ajyal Youth Film Festival.

**Doha, Qatar; Dec 4, 2017:** In conversation with local and international journalists, director Shirin Neshat accompanied by actress Neda Rahmanian, talked about her film ***Looking For Oum Kulthum (Germany, Austria, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar / 2017)*** and of the difficulties she faced in telling the story of the legendary Egyptian singer, whose weekly broadcasts on Radio Cairo were listened to all over the region and who is still known as the 'Star of the East'.

Neshat explained that the star's reputation and the complication of seeking to make a film that would resonate in the Middle East, where Oum Kulthum needs no introduction, as well as in the West, where she is still largely unknown, guided her decision not to make a straightforward biopic but rather to create a story within the story through the addition of an Iranian female character, a kind of alter ego, who like Neshat herself is engaged in a search for the star.

"I spent six years preparing this film, I know the story very well. I knew I could not cover her entire life, so I chose to focus on the pivotal moments that related to the story."

The roundtable of journalists had many questions about the film that touched on different creative decisions, notably the way many scenes had very little dialogue, as well as the reason that Neshat chose Oum Kulthum as a subject and why, as an Iranian director, she chose an Egyptian singer, rather than one from her own country.

"I am a poetic, visual artist and for me, dialogue can sometimes diminish the impact of a scene, so I tried to keep it to a minimum," she said. "I wanted to show the West the side of the Middle East they don't usually see, poetry, singing and culture. As for why I chose Oum Kulthum, it's because there is no one else of her standing in our region."

Commenting on actress Yasmine Raeis' portrayal, she said: "She learned the young Oum Kulthum's body language and lip-synched beautifully and completely transformed herself when she played her as an older woman. Yasmine demonstrated a real range of acting. I think she was an excellent choice."

In her response to whether she had 'found' Oum Kulthum, the director said that she was still looking, hence the title of the film. "You cannot demystify a legend. She is a muse to so many of us. Someone like Oum Kulthum cannot be reduced to the human scale, she has become bigger than that."

Later in the Festival, Neshat was the focus of an **Ajyal Talk**, when she spoke with urbanist and architect, Fatma Al Sehlawi, about her early life in Iran and her education in the United States, where she was by the time the Iranian Revolution came, and her inability to return to her family for 12 years. It was during this period that she began her exploration of visual art, first through photography and installation and later, through film.

Explaining that at first, she had no audience in mind, and her work, photos of poetry, women, guns and the veil, began as a conversation with herself, Neshat added that she is no stranger to controversy.

**In Conversation with Shirin Neshat** was the last of the four insightful and thought-provoking **Ajyal Talks** held as part of this year's Ajyal Youth Film Festival. It is part of the Festival's mission to demonstrate the power of film in exploring wide-ranging global issues.

***Looking for Oum Kulthum* screens Mon 4 Dec / 9:00 PM**

The Ajyal Youth Film Festival is made possible thanks to its partners: Katara Cultural Village as its Cultural Partner; Qatar Tourism Authority is the Strategic Partner and Occidental Petroleum Corporation and Ooredoo are the Principal Partners. For more details on the Ajyal Youth Film Festival, please visit [www.dohafilminstitute.com/filmfestival](http://www.dohafilminstitute.com/filmfestival)

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