

Report of the Jury on the 13th Edition of the SAMA International Film Festival (Stockholm 8-9 October 2022)

Jury Members

1. **Mohsen Hosseini** – born in Kabul. Filmmaker and painter. Animation classes.
2. **Hussain Danesh** – born in Kabul. Film critic, documentarist and filmmaker.
3. **Nima Sarvestani** – Swedish Iranian documentary filmmaker.
4. **Birger Nilsson** - Swedish documentary filmmaker and TV productions.
5. **Mara Matta** – Italian scholar of Asian cinema and member of the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC)

The 13th Edition of the SAMAIFF offered an exciting selection of feature films, short films, documentaries and animations, giving the audience and the appointed Jury the chance to watch a thought-provoking and good array of both national and international films from different countries, shot using different styles and genres that went from the docudrama to the reportage, from the long and short feature film to fantastic and visionary animation movies.

The Jury was composed by distinguished filmmakers and film critics and presided by a scholar of Asian cinema, all of them bringing to the discussing table their experiences and points of view. The Jury was composed by Mohsen Hosseini (born in Kabul. Filmmaker and painter. Animation classes); Hussain Danesh (born in Kabul. Film critic, documentarist and filmmaker); Nima Sarvestani (Swedish Iranian documentary filmmaker); Birger Nilsson (Swedish documentary filmmaker also working in TV productions); and Mara Matta (Italian scholar of Asian cinema and member of the Network for the Promotion of Asian Pacific Cinema – NETPAC – where she has acted as Jury member and consultant for many years).

The international selection presented to the Jury included important feature films like *1000 Dreams*, directed by Marat Sarulu (Kyrgyzstan 2021) and *TSUNAMI*, directed by Milad Sadrameli (Iran 2021). The Jury worked independently from any external influence, something which we all deeply appreciated, and we were left to develop our own opinions on the films. In the category of international long feature films, the Jury awarded the film from Kyrgyzstan *1000 Dreams*, because we all agreed that director Marat Sarulu presented a technically accomplished, lyrical and visionary film. The hyperreal representation of the story is conveyed with light touches of white, shadowy blacks and nuanced greys. The film carries the spectator through a journey between reality and dream. These two dimensions appear coalescing and preventing the audience from truly understanding whether some of the characters are just ghosts/fantasies/dreams, or if all of us – adult humans who lost our teenagers' dreams – are inhabiting some sort of hellish underground, as if we are the dreamless, empty shells, of what we used to be in our youth. Human beings are similar to ghosts and only the ones who save their dreams, in an almost desperate and Shakespearean quest for answers, save their souls and can learn to fly beyond human miseries. For its powerful story and the original aesthetics, the Jury unanimously selected this film for the award.

Among the international short films, the selection was made after watching a set of five very interesting and well composed works:

1. *A winner*, directed by Mehdi Mahaei (Iran 2022).
2. *Chicken*, directed by Anastassiya Biryucheva (Kazakhstan 2022).
3. *No Return*, directed by Zainulodiddin Muso (Tajikistan 2022).

4. *The Banishment*, directed by Yilmaz Özdil (Turkey 2022).
5. *The Key*, directed by Elshad Elsever (Azerbaijan 2022).

After debating all the films, sometimes watching them more than once to make sure to be fair to all the filmmakers who had painstakingly worked to produce these engaging and creative works, the Jury came up with a short list and then decided that the film which mostly deserved to be awarded with the first prize was the one realised by the director Yilmaz Özdil (Turkey 2022): *The Banishment*. This short film is intense and well-composed. No man appears to show any kind of pity on anyone else. Survival is left to the mercy of the women, who seem to be the only ones who manifest some form of wordless compassion. At the end, the stronger beats the weaker. The weaker saves himself becoming as merciless and clever as the ones who have banished him. The character of the dumb hunter, who metaphorically cannot either defend himself or fight back the injustice he is subjected to by the banished man, is mirrored by the hopelessness of the poor fox, trapped and killed and traded in this dark and cold environment. The audience leaves the cinema hall with the laughter of the madman resonating in their ears, while the gloomy atmosphere of the snowfall and the coldness of the scene conveys the iced heartedness that has befallen humanity. Nobody is forgiven and the sky appears to wish to cover in snow the cruelty of the humans. A landscape without hope, without salvation. Women busying themselves at the stove are the only – albeit confined - creatures who nevertheless keep a heart, even when deprived of agency and voice.

In the category of documentaries, the festival submitted for evaluation two international productions: the documentary by James Longly (USA 2020) titled *Angels are made of light*, and the visually stunning *Prisoners of the Afghan Pamir*, directed by Louis Meunier (France 2019). The award was bagged by this last work, as it documents what are perhaps the last glimpses of a world on the verge of disappearing. Despite holding to their traditional ways of living, the Afghan people inhabiting the Pamir highlands are aware of the precarity of their lives. Drugs like opium have become common and are almost the only ‘treatment’ for incurable ailments, both physical and emotional. Humans and animals live in an increasingly harsher environment, where satellite phones connect them to the fantasy of ‘modernity’ in far-away Turkey. Meunier follows the lives of these ‘prisoners of the Pamir’, whose harsh landscape makes for a challenging and yet beautiful canvas where their sufferings, joys, difficulties, and feelings are sketched with a poetic touch, conveying the nostalgia of the Afghans who are trying to survive, dreaming of escaping, and yet still deeply enamored of their land and their customs.

The international selection was completed by two animations: the fantastic *Being a Dog*, realised by the Swedish director Felix Swahn (Sweden 2022) and the poetic *Giant and the Seed*, directed by Sara Shabani (Germany 2022). The Jury discussed the two animation films and finally decided to award Felix Swahn’s beautifully designed film *Being a Dog*, especially for the quality of its graphic aesthetics and the conceptual poignancy of the message it conveys.

The Jury and the spectators were also given the precious opportunity to watch a good selection of national films, often co-produced in different country in a transnational mode of cinematic production.

Among the national feature films, the one directed by Ramin Rasouli and titled *The dog did not sleep last night* (Netherland/Afghanistan/Iran, 2020) stirred emotional responses and gave the jury some food for thought, especially as we had to pit it against the less technically accomplished but intriguing and original film by Hasib Nabizada (Afghanistan 2019): *The man who changed to fly*. This last one was also a well-made film, addressing a difficult topic: birth selection in favor of male children. Despite having been shot in a low budget modality and with difficult means, *The man who changed to fly* deserved the *Jury’s Special Mention*, as it offers a very different perspective on Afghanistan and its diverse ways of living. The surreal dimension and the claustrophobic views of the urban setting debunk stereotypical representation of life in the country, presenting an insight in

the daily lives of a young married couple who cannot reconcile their views on child bearing. Forced abortions imposed on the young woman and the haunting nightmares she lives through, while her husband indulges into a corrupted job which appears to him as the only way to climb the social ladder, are matched by the lack of intimacy and communication between them, to the point that she imagines him turning into a fly, an insect that lives off decaying and rotten waste. The strong political criticism of the customary laws that make men prefer boys to girls, even when they claim is ‘for their own good’, makes this film a strong candidate for an award, which was not offered because *The dog did not sleep last night* by Ramin Rasouli was by far more accomplished on the aesthetic and technical level. The powerful cinematography of Rasouli, together with the quality of the aesthetics and the beauty of the composition, helps the director to portray the resistance of simple people and the grassroots solidarities that help them to survive even when anything else is falling apart. Darkness, desperation, feelings of hatred and resentment are mixed with the need of leaving some space for reconciliation and closure. Although sometimes, as the director seems to imply, you are left alone and there is nothing else to do but close your eyes and ‘shoot’, perhaps a metaphor for the artist himself, who works through his camera and ‘shoots’ at the audience through the powerful scenes of a beautifully dramatic film.

Not less challenging for the Jury was the choice to be made among a list of national short films:

1. *The Scent of Dialogue*, directed by Fariba Haidari (Afghanistan /Sweden, 2021).
2. *Death Dictates Silence* directed by Javid Sina (Sweden, 2021).
3. *Heaven and Earth*, directed by Sami Hasib Nabizad (Afghanistan, 2022).
4. *In the exile*, directed by Siyar Noorzad (Afghanistan, 2022).

After what was perhaps the longest and most complicated debate the Jury had to face to arrive to a harmonious conclusion, it was decided to award the film directed by filmmaker and poet Fariba Haidari. The film, titled *The Scent of Dialogue* (Afghanistan /Sweden, 2021), presents the nostalgic journey of two women – an old Swedish lady whose daughter never visits her, after having made the choice of marrying an older man – and a young Afghan refugee whose mother refuses to speak to her after discovering that she is living separately from her husband. This simple and yet powerful story is an instance of good cinematography and contradicts what is often imagined to be a clash of cultures. The audience witnesses the suffering of both women: old or young, Swedish or Afghan, they are both searching for support and understanding by their own siblings. At the same time, like the plants they love to tender for, they stubbornly stand by their own feelings. The seeds of dialogues that perhaps will never fully bloom in a conversation between mothers and daughters appear to develop into a sweet, melancholic scent of a flower to be, perhaps to be planted into a different soil to be able to finally grow.

The Jury appreciated and watched also an animation film and some films which were out of competition. Last but not least, they evaluated four films among the ones submitted in the category of ‘national documentary’. The films were:

1. *I wish our house had water*, directed by Mostafa Monji (Afghanistan 2022).
2. *Lying in the grave*, by Abbas Rezaie, (Afghanistan 2020);
3. *The Weaver*, by Mohammad Ayreek (Afghanistan 2020) and the homage to Afghan cinema’s history presented in *Afghan Cinema Exists*, by Ali Orokzai (USA 2021).

After much discussion, as the Jury was composed by distinguished documentarists and filmmakers who were very careful and serious about awarding the best film in this important category, the award went to Abbas Rezaie’s film *Lying in the grave* (Afghanistan 2020). The reasons behind the Jury’s decision are linked to the fact that this documentary film presents an intimate portrait of a man’s life,

very prosaic and yet utterly poetic in its exilic drama. The film is touching without ever becoming a pitiful cry on a single man's destiny. Dignified and lyrical, the main character's life offers an almost Kafkaesque view of a man living in exile, where his artistic resilience makes of him a semiheroic figure. He is caged and yet his soul continues to be free thanks to his uncompromising courage. Despite its status, which appears hopeless and utterly dramatic, he gives hope and injects warmth into an otherwise doomed humanity.

As the President of the Jury, I must conclude by saying that I was honoured and pleased to work with such distinguished jury members. I had the amazing opportunity to delve into a world of images, emotions and intense feelings which made of this Festival an unforgettable experience. I wish to thank the SAMAIFF's organizers, in particular Mr Fatah Ghafori and all the team of the festival, for inviting me and bestowing on me this important role, trusting me with infinite generosity. Last but not least, my heartfelt thanks go to Siddiq Barmak, who made possible for me to attend this festival in the first place. The faith placed upon me is something I am truly grateful, knowing his great art and heart. Again, an act of generosity from the Afghani friends, after more than one year of fighting side by side to make possible for students, artists, photographers, filmmakers, to keep dreaming of a world where freedom shines, not just on our silver screens.

Stockholm, 9/10/2022

Mara Matta