

Programme Guide



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Vancouver, BC +
Streaming Online

LOVE



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MENĀ
Film Festival

January
15-23, 2026



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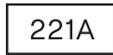
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Land acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the MENA Film Festival takes place on the unceded territories of Coast Salish peoples– Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) and xwməθkwəy̓ əm (Musqueam) Nations. As a festival presenting various diasporic views about belonging and displacement, we recognize the deep resonance of these themes with the land on which we gather, live, and work. MENA’s organization is in an ongoing process of learning how to decolonize our work and support Indigenous communities across Turtle Island.



Words from the Directors



Arman Kazemi
Co-Executive Director

It's year 7, a new chapter in the history of MENA. In the last years we have said many goodbyes to friends and contributors to our festival and welcomed many others. This organization has been growing year after year with the almost unbelievable effort that each individual from staff to friend to volunteer to board member has put into it. And today, as all arts organizations, we are fighting against economic precarity, and as all members of the SWANA diaspora, against political upheavals.

Yet we commit to continue, because we know that our community needs our support and our filmmakers' voices need to be heard and shared and because we continue to believe in the power of art. Today, more than ever, we need your support, we need you to show up for our filmmakers, for the team, and for each other. Come celebrate another year and our many firsts with us!



Ghinwa Yassine
Co-Executive Director

This year, we're proud to stream part of the MENA program outside of Canada to reach audiences across Turtle Island. We are hosting the Canadian premier of acclaimed Sudanese director Suzannah Mirghani's *Cotton Queen* and the first Mauritanian inclusion in MENA's slate with *The Father, Probably*. For the first time, MENA's Opening Ceremony will launch at the Vancouver Playhouse with the support of Vancouver Civic Theatres. But as has been tradition since 2021, our core programming continues to be hosted at VIFF Centre with the kind support of the VIFF staff and volunteers, with our industry activations supported by 221A, VIVO Media Arts Centre, and SFU's Centre for Comparative Muslim Studies.

Whether you join us for a film, a panel talk, workshops and networking, or all of the above, we hope to be able to meet each one of you as we witness our MENA/SWANA spaces spread to wider and more diverse parts of Canada and the world. We thank you for continuing to be part of our family and we thank our generous sponsors for allowing us to continue to serve you.

Enjoy the festival!



2026 Festival Theme • Love

For its 7th edition, MENA Film Festival presents something tender during turbulent times. This year, we focus on Love, its many representations and how it specifically relates to the MENA/SWANA region. Some films focus on romantic intimacy and the longing, heartbreak and comedy that comes along with it. Other films explore the platonic and familial bonds that we are born with or create over time. For our community, it is impossible to discuss the idea of love and not mention a love of home and a right to land sovereignty. Thus, we included films in this year's program that explore the good and complicated relationships we have with our homelands as part of this year's program.



Team

Ghinwa Yassine
Co-Executive Director

Arman Kazemi
Co-Executive Director

Sarah Trad
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nazanin oghanian
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Board Members

Ana Belén Asfura
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Summer Pervez
Co-Chair

Aryo Khakpour
Secretary

Bassim Nahhas
Treasurer

Jonathan Akkawi
Board Member

Tamar Hatayan
Board Member

Asya Twahir
Board Member



Festival Tickets

In-person screenings

	Regular	Low barrier ¹	Supporter ²	Self-identifying Indigenous ³
Festival Pass	\$100			FREE
Single Tickets (Features and Bundles)	\$20	\$15	\$30	FREE
Opening Ceremony	\$55 (\$65 at door)			

In-person events

Industry Rendezvous	Sliding scale starting at \$20			
Editing in the Archive Workshop	Sliding scale starting at \$20			
Stories Through Spaces Panel	By donation			
Afterparty	\$25 early bird, \$30 general admission, \$40 at door			

Online Screenings (available January 15–30)

With a few exceptions, all in-person films will be streaming online until January 30. Streaming availability is included under each film's details.

	Regular	Low barrier	Supporter	Self-identifying Indigenous
Online Pass	\$65	\$55	\$75	FREE
Single Tickets (Features and Bundles)	\$15	\$10	\$20	FREE

Passes are valid for all film screenings, not including Opening, Closing, and Industry events.

We are committed to making our festival accessible to all, so if the ticket price is a barrier, please don't hesitate to reach out. Simply email us at tickets@menafilmfestival.com to request a discount under our NOTAFLOF (No One Turned Away for Lack of Funds) policy.

1. If the regular ticket price is out of reach for you, this option is here for you. No explanation needed.
2. This ticket price helps cover our costs and makes it possible for us to offer reduced-price tickets to those who express need.
3. Indigenous guests can book up to 10 tickets per screening via email at tickets@menafilmfestival.com or in-person. No identification required.



Feature Films





Khartoum (2025)

Directed by Anas Saeed, Rawia Alhag, Brahim Snoopy Ahmed, Timeea Mohamed Ahmed, and Phil Cox

Languages: Arabic

Germany Qatar Sudan UK

Five lives, one city... the fate of a nation. From the metropolis of Khartoum five Sudanese characters: a civil servant, a tea lady, a resistance committee volunteer, and two street boys all in search of freedom, have their stories unexpectedly woven together through animated dreams, street revolutions and a civil war.

CW: Violence, Sexual Violence, Depictions of War, Sounds of War (e.g. sounds of explosions, sounds of gunshots)

FRI, JAN 16, 2026 • 5:00 PM • 81 min

📍 VIFF Cinema • Not available for streaming

This screening will be followed by a talkback with director Timeea Mohamed Ahmed.



There Was, There Was Not (2024)

Directed by Emily Mkrtichian
Languages: Armenian, English

Armenia USA

There Was, There Was Not follows four women living in the Republic of Artsakh, an unrecognized country reckoning with the aftermath of one war while on the precipice of another. In the midst of this uncertainty, four women build a life with the hope of making their home a better place. When war breaks out again, what began as an observational meditation on women's roles after conflict becomes an urgent and intimate record of their lives interrupted once again by war. From taking up arms on the front lines to fleeing their homes as refugees, each woman's life changes irrevocably. Their journey becomes the myth of a homeland lost forever, and the power of story to keep it alive.

FRI, JAN 16, 2026 • 8:00 PM • 94 min

📍 VIFF Cinema • Not available for streaming



East of Noon (2024)

Directed by Hala Elkoussy

Languages: Arabic

Egypt

Netherlands

Qatar

SAT, JAN 17, 2026 • 4:00 PM • 109 min

📍 VIFF Cinema • Online streaming

Screening as part of the Theatre and Romance Bundle, see pg. 12 for details



Naharina (2025)

Directed by Ferran Domènech

Languages: Arabic, Kurdish

Spain

Syria

Naharina are the descendants of the peoples who inhabited Mesopotamia thousands of years ago. Those who make communality their essence and coexistence between different ethnic groups their strength. But there is no longer a river, Turkey has dried it up, making life impossible for millions of people.

CW: Sounds of War (e.g. sounds of explosions, sounds of gunshots)

SAT, JAN 17, 2026 • 4:15 PM • 51 min

📍 VIFF Studio Theatre • Online streaming



My Sweet Land Տննու քաղցր ա (2024)

Directed by Sareen Hairabedian

Languages: Armenian

France

Jordan

USA

Ireland

My Sweet Land is a coming-of-age story set against a multigenerational war in the Caucasus Mountains. 11-year-old Vrej, who dreams of becoming a dentist, is forced to leave his homeland, Artsakh, during the 2020 war with Azerbaijan. Months later, upon his return to his surviving village, he must learn the ways of war to defend his endangered home. Can he carry a nation's hopes on his young shoulders?

CW: Sounds of War (e.g. sounds of explosions, sounds of gunshots)

SUN, JAN 18, 2026 • 4:00 PM • 86 min

📍 VIFF Cinema • Online streaming



Cotton Queen (2025)

Directed by Suzannah Mirghani

Languages: Sudanese

Germany

France

Palestine

Sudan

In a cotton-farming village in Sudan, teenage Nafisa is raised on heroic tales of battling British colonisers told by her grandmother, the village matriarch Al-Sit. But when a young businessman arrives from abroad with a new development plan and genetically engineered cotton, Nafisa becomes the center of a power play to determine the future of the village. Awakening to her own strength, Nafisa sets out to save the cotton fields – and herself. Neither she nor her community will ever be the same again.

SUN, JAN 18, 2026 • 6:00 PM • 94 min

📍 VIFF Cinema • Not available for streaming



Writing Hawa (2024)

Directed by Najiba Noori and Rasul Noori

Rasul Noori

Languages: Farsi

Afghanistan

France

Netherlands

Qatar

Forty years after her arranged marriage as a child, Hawa finally begins an independent life and learns to read. However, with the return of the Taliban to power, her dreams, along with those of her daughter and granddaughter, are cut short.

CW: Discussions of child marriage, patriarchy, sexism, war, political extremism

SUN, JAN 18, 2026 • 8:00 PM • 84 min

📍 VIFF Cinema • Online streaming



Where the Wind Comes From (2025)

Directed by Amel Guellaty

Languages: Arabic

France

Qatar

Tunisia

Alyssa, a rebellious 19-year-old girl, and her friend Mehdi, an introverted 23-year-old man, use their imagination to escape their unpromising reality. When they discover a contest in the south of Tunisia that may allow them to flee, they undertake a road trip regardless of the obstacles in their way.

CW: Violence

THURS, JAN 22, 2026 • 6:00 PM • 99 min

📍 VIFF Cinema • Not available for streaming



Short Film Bundles



Crush

Playing as part of MENA's Opening Ceremony

Desire, Relationships, Break-ups. Smoldering and brooding, these films deal with all aspects of the heart, especially when romantic love does not go as planned. We describe this bundle as tense, funny and vulnerable.

THURS, JAN 15, 2026 • 6:00 PM • 82 min •  Vancouver Playhouse

All films in this bundle are streaming online across North America



Languages: English • 13 min

USA

Baba I'm Fine

Directed by Karina Dandashi

When Sama's girlfriend blows off their Friday plans, the teen copes with romantic rejection by blasting music in her room. When her dad suggests hanging out, she agrees. Their evening takes an unexpected turn as a message forces her to choose between authenticity and keeping up appearances.



Languages: French • 15 min

France

Genealogy of Violence

Directed by Mohamed Bourouissa

A young man sits in the car with his girlfriend. Two policemen in an unmarked car pull up to command a routine identity check. They invite him out and proceed methodically to a pat-down, as he stands in front of the car, under the dismayed eyes of his girlfriend.



Languages: No Dialogue • 22 min

Canada

Touchscape

Directed by Niloufar Samadi

In the in-between spaces of memory, desire, and diaspora, *Touchscape* unfolds through hand-processed Super 8 and digital layers, tracing Iranian queer identities in intimate, tactile landscapes of sensation and remembrance.

CW: Flashing Images, Symbolic Violence



Languages: Arabic, English • 13 min

USA

Mashed Potatoes

Directed by Suha Araj

After the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in NYC, tension was high and Arab Americans were subject to suspicion along with verbal and physical attacks all over the country for their perceived association with the event. In San Francisco on Thanksgiving of the same year, an Arab couple finds this tension in their own relationship as they prep to go to a Friendsgiving in Tech potluck, their discussion shifts to the controversial merits of a well quoted journalist.



Languages: Arabic • 7 min

Iraq

Talisman

Directed by Karar Hayder Abed

In a final desperate visit to the village fortune teller, Sabreen, a rural Iraqi woman burdened with blame and trapped by expectations, seeks a talisman to help her conceive, in order to preserve her traditional marriage. In a place that offers little hope, and with mounting pressures, she longs for a moment of freedom through which she can reclaim what remains of herself.



Languages: Arabic, French • 12 min

Germany

USA

Tunisia

Samra's Dollhouse

Directed by Maissa Lihedheb

After her husband leaves her, delusional Samra (33) concocts a plan to rewrite her love story. She orchestrates a meticulously scripted romance, enlisting a young actor (Hedi 23) who unwittingly becomes part of her unconventional rehearsal method. As reality blurs with fiction, Samra confronts her own chaos, blurring the lines between scripted drama and genuine emotion in this captivating tale of dark romance and illusion.

Theatre and Romance

A first for the MENA Film Festival: This event combines two shorts and a feature film that exemplify the romance inherent in all things theatrical! While some films have topics that are more overtly about the performing arts, some draw inspiration from the theatre in their set design and cinematography. Join us for an artist panel after the screening that will explore the intersection of film, performance, and theatricality. Please register for tickets to the film program and artist panel separately.

SAT, JAN 17, 2026 • 4:00 PM • 131 min •  VIFF Cinema

All films in this bundle are streaming online across North America



Languages: Arabic • 4 min

[France](#) [Lebanon](#) [Spain](#)

Shame

Directed by Hadi Moussally

Shame (عيب) explores the notion of shame in Arab culture and its impact on norms, gender, and identity. Set in recreated 19th-century Levant and filmed in vertical format, it follows Salma Zahore embodying multiple roles while confronting the boundaries imposed by “عيب.” Blending queer perspectives and AI voices, the film reimagines tradition, exposing how shame controls bodies and identities across time.



Languages: English, Farsi • 18 min

[USA](#)

Taha

Directed by Mahyar Mandegar

In a struggling Iranian circus in Los Angeles, an aged groundskeeper's daily routines intersect with the world of performers. Intrigued by a trapeze artist's claim of seeing something extraordinary from the heights, he steps in when her partner leaves, confronting his fears in hopes of sharing her vision.



Languages: Arabic • 109 min

[Egypt](#) [Netherlands](#) [Qatar](#)

East of Noon

Directed by Hala Elkoussy

Set in a confined world outside time, *East of Noon* is the fable of prodigy ABDO (19) who uses music to rebel against his elders: showman SHAWKY (70), an eccentric showman who rules with a mix of performance and fear, and storyteller JALALA (75), who provides relief with stories of the Sea, which no one else has seen. *East of Noon* is a satire on the inner workings of an ailing autocracy and its inherent vulnerability to youth's unchained vision of a better world.

CW: Violence, Sexual Violence

✦ Nature Lovers

It is impossible to talk about love and the MENA/SWANA region without referencing our relationship to the land. These films are love letters to the landscapes affected by western intervention, focusing on the communities that inhabit them. This program is for cinematography enthusiasts and our team describes this bundle as meditative and beautiful.

SAT, JAN 17, 2026 • 5:30 pm • 105 min • 📍 VIFF Studio Theatre
All films in this bundle are streaming online across North America



Languages: Arabic • 20 min

Canada

Syria

Who Loves the Sun

Directed by Arshia Shakiba

In war-torn northern Syria, *Who Loves the Sun* delves into the world of makeshift oil refineries and the stark realities of life within this post-apocalyptic landscape. Mahmood is a prominent figure in these operations, navigating harsh working conditions and complex local dynamics.



Languages: No Dialogue • 16 min

Iraq

Beneath Which Rivers Flow

Directed by Ali Yahya

In the marshlands of southern Iraq, Ibrahim faces an environmental collapse that endangers his way of life and his only companion, a buffalo.



Languages: Arabic • 18 min

France

Kuwait

Qatar

Perishable Idol

Directed by Majid Al-Remaihi

As the blue sky meets the surrounding seas, the native-turned-archeologist Hassan Al-Failakawy returns to the abandoned island of Failaka, off the coast of Kuwait. Between the desolation and the different ruins of the island after the Gulf War, Hassan is met with questions about return, restitution, and belonging.



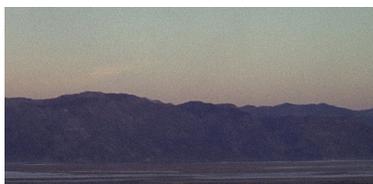
Languages: Arabic, English • 17 min

UK

The Flowers Stand Silently, Witnessing

Directed by Theo Panagopoulos

When a Palestinian filmmaker based in Scotland unearths a rarely-seen Scottish film archive of Palestinian wild flowers, he decides to reclaim the footage. This tender essay film questions the role of image-making as a tool of both testimony and violence when connected to entanglements between people and land.



Languages: Arabic • 6 min

Lebanon

USA

This Dissonance

Directed by Christophe Katrib

Through poetic visual and aural fragmentation, *This Dissonance* navigates the emotional terrain of exile, colonialism, and resistance. The film weaves Palestinian and Lebanese voices with sweeping “American” landscapes, capturing the aching dissonance of witnessing U.S.-backed atrocities from afar, and resulting in a searing reflection on the generational toll of empire.

CW: Sounds of War (e.g. sounds of explosions, sounds of gunshots) Flashing Images



Languages: Farsi • 28 min

Iran

Within the Sun

Directed by Sepideh Jamshidi Nejad

Set in a stark yet mesmerizing salt mine, *Within the Sun* is a poetic observational portrait of elderly female workers whose lives follow the rhythm of the seasons. Through intimate close-ups and quiet moments, the film captures the weight of their labor, the resilience etched into their bodies, and the fragile balance between solidarity and tension that binds their community. It’s a meditation on endurance, aging, and the haunting beauty of life shaped by work.

✕ Home Movies

Whether related through blood, heritage or “found family,” these films explore the dynamics of our closest bonds. MENA staff describes this program as pensive and bittersweet.

SAT, JAN 17, 2026 • 8:00 PM • 84 min • 📍 VIFF Studio Theatre

All films in this bundle are streaming online across North America except *Nothing Happens After That* and *Burcu's Angels* which are NOT available to screen virtually



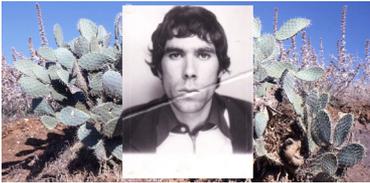
Languages: Farsi • 18 min

Canada Iran

A History of Sadness

Directed by Layla Tosifi

A History of Sadness uncovers the unseen legacies of memory, migration and motherhood. Told through three generations of Iranian women, it explores the silences and memories that shape who we become, reimagining family history through fragments of unspoken bonds.



Languages: Algerian, Amazigh
• 5 min

Algeria France UK

Bladi | My Country

Directed by Leila Gamaz

Bladi | My Country draws on family experience of destitution and sleeping on the underground in 80s Paris to explore how displacement is embodied across generations. Through personal and public archives, the film speaks to the ongoing oppression of people we see around the world today and the fragmentation this causes.



Languages: Arabic • 12 min

Egypt Sudan

Nothing Happens After That

Directed by Ibrahim Omar

In a diligent attempt, Thomas seeks to find a final resting place for his only child, but he is surprised that today is not the right day to do so.

CW: Depictions of War



Languages: Algerian, Arabic • 9 min

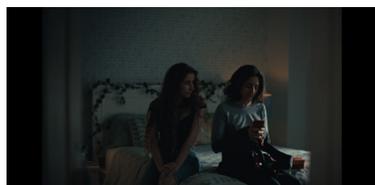
Algeria

France

Deadlock

Directed by Lucien Beucher and Mahdi Boucif

Sifou and Mahrez are childhood friends. Both are seventeen, both grew up in Sidi Lekbir, Algiers, and both have an older brother who fled to Europe. Lost between the bleak fate promised by their neighbourhood and the uncertainty lurking on the horizon, they wonder : Can they break the deadlock?



Languages: Arabic, English • 20 min

USA

Two Sisters

Directed by Ahmed Qaid

On the day before Eid, Safaa, a rock-climbing obsessed teen, struggles through literal and emotional ascents after her estranged older sister, Farah, suddenly returns home for the first time in years. Over the course of an evening, the pair slowly reconnect through a shared love of rock climbing, pushing their relationship to the limit in hopes of unraveling the issues that haunt them both.



Languages: English, Turkish
• 20 min

Canada

Burcu's Angels

Directed by Özgün Gündüz

For over 30 years, Burcu's Angels was more than a store, it was a radical space of care. This film honours a Turkish queer elder and the vanishing spaces that held queer lives.

CW: Mentions of physical abuse, racism, hate speech, homophobia, and transphobia (no visual depictions)

✿ Self-Care

This one's for the baddies, pioneers and survivors, who understand that self care is not just a consumer act, but sometimes a dedicated practice of overcoming. Subjects of each film address challenges to their wellbeing or dreams head-on, even as they face transphobia, sexism, chronic health disabilities, trauma and violence. These films explore what it means to truly be comfortable with oneself as we face adversity from outside and within. MENA staff describe this bundle as powerful.

SAT, JAN 17, 2026 • 9:00 PM • 94 min • 📍 VIFF Cinema

All films in this bundle are streaming online across North America



Languages: Arabic, English • 26 min

Egypt

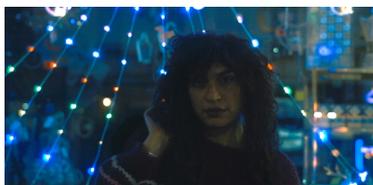
USA

I Told You So

Directed by Malak ALSayyad

I Told You So is a tender self-portrait of life and love entangled with pain, where relationships to self and others are tested by doubt and the weight of an unseen illness. With raw honesty, Malak transforms the private struggles of her body into a universal story of vulnerability and resilience.

CW: Images of surgery



Languages: Arabic • 10 min

Egypt

Germany

Aleya

Directed by Omar Abogabal

An intimate close-up on Aleya, a trans woman who has recently moved from Cairo to Germany right after her transition. This portrait marks her first year as a woman, having to cope with the loss of loved ones, family disownment, hormonal and psychological turmoil. She shares intimate stories, anecdotes and poems that document her transition.



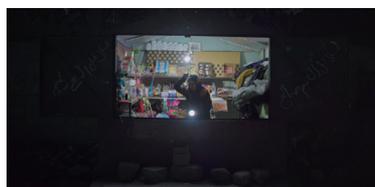
Languages: English, Kurdish
• 13 min

Canada



Languages: Turkish, Kurdish
• 18 min

Switzerland



Languages: Arabic • 27 min

Qatar

Yemen

Ezda

Directed by Halime Akturk

Ezda is the story of Besime, a young Yazidi mother and survivor of ISIS's genocide against the Yazidi community. In her own words, she recounts her experiences of being in captivity for nearly 3 years among ISIS members, and the challenges she faces after fleeing with her children, and adjusting to her new life in Canada.

CW: Descriptions of war, hate speech, violence, sexual violence, and self-harm

Ever Since, I Have Been Flying

Directed by Aylin Gökmen

A 60-year-old man, who grew up in a nomadic tribe in the mountains of southeast Turkey, recalls moments from his youth that have shaped his life. He takes us back to his idyllic childhood with his mother, his first love found in a cotton field and lost in the woods, and the mistreatment suffered at the hands of the police, in a cold and dark place.

Fariha

Directed by Badr Yousef

Fariha ('Joy') - a 70-year-old woman from Yemen - stepped out of the limelight of a burgeoning singing career in the 80s after a series of set-backs within a male-dominated society and industry. When filmmaker Badr stumbles upon her singing in her kiosk in downtown Sana'a, he insists on following her with his camera to learn about her past and ultimately tries to convince her to return to her long-lost passion: performing on stage!

Veiling and Visibility

A special screening of three short films centering veiled women whose stories move through the layered terrains of visibility, identity, and resilience—across the region and diaspora. The program concludes with a curated panel featuring scholars, artists, and advocates in dialogue on representation, agency, and the politics of visibility.

SUN, JAN 18, 2026 • 4:15 PM • 57 min + panel discussion •  VIFF Studio Theatre

All films in this bundle are streaming online across North America except *The Father, Probably* which is NOT available to screen virtually



Languages: English • 10 min

UK

Roll Down the Window

Directed by Lipa Hussain

Filmmaker Lipa Hussain interrogates a neurological condition she has experienced since childhood and the parallels it represents with her own religious and racial struggles. Alice In Wonderland syndrome causes the sensation of shrinking and losing bodily control. The film explores the idea of utilising AIW to confront an enemy from Lipa's past.

CW: Racism, Hate Speech



Languages: Arabic • 28 min

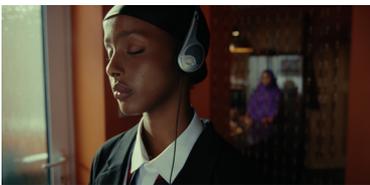
Mauritania

The Father, Probably

Directed by Sidi Mohamed Tolba and Tayib Tolba

Set in a poor Mauritanian village, a girl becomes involved in a mysterious accident with no witnesses. However, her parents, particularly her father, respond more casually than she expects.

CW: Domestic Assault, Violence



Languages: English, Somali • 19 min

UK

Muna

Directed by Warda Mohamed

Muna is a delicate exploration of grief across cultures. It challenges narratives around girlhood and coming-of-age stories, which are almost universally white, and asks why a young British Somali girl cannot be seen in this everyday context. Although the story is about grief, it foregrounds the radical power of ordinary Gen Z dreams against traditional custom, and avoids victimisation narratives.

✦ It's Complicated

This shorts program includes non-fiction films exploring the relationship between the MENA/SWANA community and their homelands. Affected by exile, genocide, censorship, and government neglect, each subject voices their complex bond with home. MENA staff says these stories are nostalgic and full of wisdom, as many feature the experience of community elders.

SUN, JAN 18, 2026 • 6:30 PM • 84 min • 📍 VIFF Studio Theatre
All films in this bundle are streaming online across North America



Languages: English, French • 7 min

Lebanon

already dead

Directed by Ghada Sayegh

Spring 2020 – I drove by the Beirut port. After August 4, I dared to take a shot — not of the port, but of a building opposite. Today, the words of *The End of the World Has Already Occurred* resurface in these images of a building in decrepitude.



Languages: Arabic • 6 min

Sudan

Is It War?

Directed by Timeea Mohamed Ahmed

Set against the backdrop of a forest, an artist clad in traditional “Aragy” attire navigates the chaos of his inner world and the war-torn reality of Sudan. As a member of the Sudanese diaspora, he mentally escapes the brutal truths of his homeland’s conflict. Through a series of visually striking and symbolic scenes, he expresses his inner turmoil and the profound impact of war on all Sudanese people, regardless of their ethnicity and affiliation.

CW: Depictions of War



Languages: Farsi • 36 min

Canada

Iran

Redacted Dreams

Directed by Fariba Farjam

Redacted Dreams is an intimate portrait of Mohammad Mohammadali, the prominent Iranian author who became a target for censorship in his homeland. As pressures mounted, he immigrated to Canada in search of creative freedom. However, he faced new struggles of cultural isolation, disconnect from his peers and the challenges of being an immigrant writer. The film traces a writer's journey of perseverance as he continues to write and publish despite the odds.



Languages: English • 7 min

Palestine

UK

Portugal

Fragmented

Directed by Balolas Carvalho and Tanya Marar

A pioneer journalist in Gaza and ex-political prisoner, Qassem left his homeland after 25 days of genocide, answering his daughter's plea for a future together. *Fragmented* weaves his memories, exposing the human cost of Israeli occupation and the struggle for justice. It is a timely portrait of belonging, resilience, and the unbreakable spirit of those who refuse to be defeated by oppression.



Languages: Arabic, English, French
• 28 min

Canada

Like A Spiral

Directed by Lamia Chraibi

Like a Spiral is a dialogue between Beirut and five women, migrant domestic workers, under the Kafala system. Expressing their belonging to a society in collapse, the women's voices rise through the film's grainy images to denounce their stolen freedom with an inalienable thirst for existence. Their memories dance in the rhythm of oppression. Caught within life's spiral, they lift themselves up to not sink into oblivion.

Queer Shorts

This program compiles all LGBTQ+ short films from this year's festival! These films spotlight the Vancouver queer community with love, and include intimate biographical documentaries, experimental films and coming-of-age narratives.

THURS, JAN 22, 2026 • 8:30 PM • 69 min • VIFF Cinema

All films in this bundle are streaming online across North America



Baba I'm Fine

Directed by Karina Dandashi
Languages: English • 13 min

USA

See pg. 10 for description



Touchscape

Directed by Niloufar Samadi
Languages: No Dialogue • 22 min

Canada

See pg. 10 for description

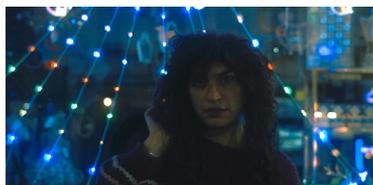


Burcu's Angels

Directed by Özgün Gündüz
Languages: English, Turkish • 20 min

Canada

See pg. 16 for description



Aleya

Directed by Omar Abogabal
Languages: Arabic • 10 min

Egypt Germany

See pg. 17 for description



Shame

Directed by Hadi Moussally
Languages: Arabic • 4 min

France Lebanon Spain

See pg. 12 for description

Events & Workshops



Opening Ceremony

THURS, JAN 15, 2026 • 6:00 - 9:30 PM • Doors: 6:00 PM • 📍 Vancouver Playhouse

The Vancouver MENA/SWANA celebration of the year is back and you don't want to miss out!

The celebrated MENA Film Festival Opening Ceremony takes place this year at the Vancouver Playhouse. We are excited to present our opening Crush Bundle of shorts to kick off this year's theme of Love.

\$55 TICKETS (\$65 AT DOOR)



6:00 PM • DOORS OPEN AT VANCOUVER PLAYHOUSE

- Catering by Mazahr Lebanese Restaurant
- Official #MENA2026 art and merch to snag some swag.
- The Azure carpet to get your “had-to-be-there” shot by MENA’s professional photographers.

7:00 PM • MENA 2026 OPENING CEREMONY

- Land greeting.
- Word from the MENA team and our community
- Music performance by Sudanda
- Screening of Crush Bundle (*see pg.10 for details*)

9:30 PM • CLOSING

- Make your way to the exits and prepare for the host of activities throughout the week!

Screening: Crush Bundle



Desire, Relationships, Break-ups. Smoldering and brooding, these films deal with all aspects of the heart, especially when romantic love does not go as planned. We describe this bundle as tense, funny and vulnerable.



Stories Through Spaces: On the Intersection of Theatre and Film

SAT, JAN 17, 2026 • 7:00 - 8:20 PM • Doors: 6:30 PM • 📍 VIFF Cinema

This panel brings together SWANA artists who work at the intersection of film and theatre, to discuss how these two disciplines enrich each other in their practices and beyond. Visiting filmmakers who staged their sets like painters, and plays that used the stage as a filmic backdrop, the conversation will reflect on the evolution of storytelling, performativity, and theatricality, while paying attention to the body as an actor and archive, documentation, movement, and staging, and raising questions about the future of this interdisciplinarity in the wake of the advent of new media such as XR and live-action capture.

We recommend attending our special screening called Theatre and Romance (see pg. 12 for details) taking place at 4pm on the same day then sticking around for light snacks before attending the panel.

Screening:

Theatre and Romance Bundle



A first for the MENA Film Festival: This event combines two shorts and a feature film that exemplify the romance inherent in all things theatrical! While some films have topics that are more overtly about the performing arts, some draw inspiration from the theatre in their set design and cinematography.

Moderator



Ghinwa Yassine (Lebanon/Canada) is an award-winning anti-disciplinary artist, art educator, and cultural producer, based on the unceded Territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-waututh people, also known as Vancouver. Her work includes film, installation, performance, sound, and sculpture, and text and her embodied interdisciplinary practice is speculative feminist auto-theory. Yassine's work is concerned with the body as a site where personal and collective memory manifest. She's a shapeshifter whose practice is currently hovering in a gap between radical resistance and embracing an inner belly dancer.



SLIDING SCALE TICKETS

Panelists



Matilda Aslizadeh's video installations are characterized by dense visual surfaces and unexpected juxtapositions drawn from a range of photographic, cinematic, and painterly influences. Her projects have been exhibited internationally in galleries and festivals, including solo exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery, AC Institute (New York), Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery and Emmedia (Calgary) and group exhibitions at the Audain Museum (Whistler) and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto. She is based in Vancouver, on the unceded territories of the Skwxwú7mesh, Tsleil-Waututh, and xwməθkwəyəm Nations.



Aryo Khakpour is a multidisciplinary artist working across film, performance, theatre, and installation. Born and raised in Tehran, he has been involved in multiple theatre, dance, and film productions in Vancouver since 2006. He cofounded The Biting School in 2013, which was the company-in-residence at PuSh International Festival and The Dance Centre 2018 – 2020.

He is the recipient of the 2024-25 Theatre Replacement Accelerator Lab Fellowship, which focuses on international touring within the context of experimental theatre and interdisciplinary performance. He currently serves on the Boards of Directors for Leaky Heaven Performance and the MENA Film Festival.



Pegah Tabassinejad is an Interdisciplinary artist and educator. Her new media practice primarily revolves around the construction of digital and live performances, film, and video installations.

Her projects have been exhibited locally and internationally. Her latest video installation, Entropic Fields of Displacement, presented in Vancouver at VIVO Media Arts and VIFF-SIGNALS, and in Amsterdam at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam in 2024, and won the IDFA Award in digital storytelling.



Veiling and Visibility Special Screening and Panel

INCLUDED IN SHORTS
BUNDLE TICKET PRICE

SUN, JAN 18, 2026 • 4:15 - 6:15 PM • VIFF Studio Theatre
Screening at 4:15 PM (see pg. 19 for details) • Panel Discussion from 5:15-6:15



A special screening of three short films centering veiled women whose stories move through the layered terrains of visibility, identity, and resilience—across the region and diaspora. The program concludes with a curated panel featuring scholars, artists, and advocates in dialogue on representation, agency, and the politics of visibility.



Moderator

Simun Ismail is a multidisciplinary Creative Director whose work spans styling, film, photography, and cultural storytelling. Rooted in a passion for visual narrative and bold aesthetics, Simun crafts compelling creative experiences that bridge identity, memory, and imagination. With a background that weaves together directing, shooting, and curating, their portfolio is a testament to a deep commitment to both artistic integrity and community-rooted expression.

Panelists

Duha Awad is a Sudanese woman who came to Canada as an adult. She is on a journey figuring out how she fits into a society that often feels too foreign and roles that don't fully resonate with her. She offers her personal experiences and perspective as your average everyday Hijabi community member.

Hala Mousa is a Lecturer in the Business Communications Department at University Canada West. Her research interests span Sudanese history, political economy, Literature, and Performance, exploring the intersections of culture, power, and identity. With an interdisciplinary approach, she examines historical narratives, economic structures, and artistic expressions in Sudan and beyond. She was recently selected as one of 2025's 30 under 30 by the Canadian Arab Institute for her advocacy work for Sudan. Hala is passionate about education, and she fosters critical thinking and engaged scholarship in her teaching.

Tasneem Alsayed is an assistant professor of Philosophy and Social Justice at University Canada West. She has recently completed her PhD in Philosophy from the University of Waterloo, where her doctoral work focused on epistemic and ideological injustices related to the marginalization of Muslims and Muslim women. Her published work addresses Islamophobia and epistemic injustices in the discourse surrounding the hijab (the Islamic veil), and upcoming work discusses hermeneutical obstacles to Muslim women's solidarity.



Industry Rendezvous: Film Funding Workshop

\$20-\$50 SLIDING
SCALE TICKETS

MON, JAN 19, 2026 • 11:00 AM - 4:00 PM • 📍 221A

If you're a filmmaker, producer, or media creative looking to get funding in the Canadian grant space, or just curious to see how grants work (and why!), this is your chance to hear from the people behind organizations like Telefilm, Canada Media Fund, Canada Council for the Arts, and more!

You'll have the chance to share your idea, ask specific questions, learn more about the specific funding packages available, and meet fellow filmmakers, all in an informal, low-stakes environment!

The Industry Rendezvous is open to all, but preference will be given to MENA/SWANA, Indigenous and other BIPOC filmmakers in case of limited resources.

Program:



10:30 AM • PRE-SESSION NETWORKING + REFRESHMENTS

Make sure you've filled out the Rendezvous funder form. Any pending check-ins may be given to walk-ins, so head over early lock in your pairings and request and updates! All participants will get to speak to two representatives (potentially more) based on preference and availability.

11:30 AM - 12:45 PM • WORKSHOP: SMART TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL GRANTS Led by MaryAnn Anderson (Little Dog Creative Consulting & SmartGrant Ltd) + SMART GRANT DEMO

This workshop will walk you through the essentials of writing successful grant applications: what funders look for, how to frame your work, and how to avoid common pitfalls. No matter what funder you plan to apply to, this session will offer practical tools and helpful insight. She will also share a short presentation of her BC-wide grant database website, SmartGrant.ca.

12:45 PM - 1:00 PM • BREAK

1PM - 3:30 PM • ONE-ON-ONE SESSIONS COMMENCE WITH YOUR PRE-SCHEDULED REPRESENTATIVES:

- Time to pitch! While we encourage you to discuss your project with the funders for suitability, feel free to ask questions or just connect. The time is yours!
- Each session will last approximately 10 minutes, with a 2 minute changeover for a quick snack and chance to catch your breath before moving to your next session!
- In case of late or no-shows, pairings may be filled based with walk-ins or update requests

3:30 - 4:00 PM • WRAP



Cultures of Belonging: Nader's Girl Screening and Q&A with director Omar Mouallem

Special Screening and Panel



TUES, JAN 20, 2026 • 5:30 - 8:30 PM • DOORS: 5:00 PM
📍 SFU HARBOUR CENTRE – LABATT HALL, 515 W HASTINGS ST.

As part of the SFU-sponsored 2025-26 series on “Cultures of Belonging” hosted by SFU’s Dr. Aryn Sajoo, this event – in partnership with the Centre for Comparative Muslim Studies – features an onstage conversation with Omar Mouallem on his short film, “Nader’s Girl.”

This event is hosted in partnership with the Centre for Comparative Muslim Studies at SFU.

Screening:

Nader's Girl



Adapted from Saeed Teebi’s acclaimed collection, *Her First Palestinian and Other Stories* (Anansi, 2022), the film is a timely prompt on uncovering narratives about Palestinian belonging and identity in the western diaspora. No less intriguing is the challenge of translation from an elegant literary to a cinematic medium.

Memory and heritage are perennial issues for migrant auteurs & authors alike — but also for the very idea of pluralist citizenship and belonging today. “With these glimpses of Palestinians living in a world bent against them,” notes the Canadian Literary Review about Teebi’s collection, “the terrain of Canadian literature has slightly fewer walls, guard towers, and checkpoints.” We extend that terrain with this premier BC screening of Mouallem’s film.

\$10-\$50 SLIDING SCALE TICKETS
FREE FOR SFU STUDENTS + STAFF



Co-presented with:



Moderator



Amin Sajoo is a scholar-in-residence and lecturer in the SFU Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences. His work is at the interface of citizenship and human rights – and his teaching includes courses on migrant literature and political cinema. Dr. Sajoo was earlier affiliated with Cambridge and McGill universities, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, and the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London.

Filmmaker



Omar Mouallem is an Edmonton-based writer and filmmaker. Known for weaving together comedic human interest stories with broader social and historical themes, his work bridges literature, film, and journalism. Omar's feature-length debut, *The Lebanese Burger Mafia*, premiered at Hot Docs in 2023, winning multiple awards, including Audience Choice at NorthwestFest and Best Documentary Screenplay at the Rosies. His other films, like *Digging in the Dirt* and *Making Kayfabe*, bring fresh perspectives to misunderstood places, whether by examining the mental toll of oil and gas labour or exploring the eccentric world of indie wrestling as a "gonzo journalist."

Editing in the Archive with Deena Charara and Chantal Partamian

\$20-\$50 SLIDING SCALE TICKETS

WEDS, JAN 21, 2026 • 12:00 - 6:00 PM • 📍 VIVO MEDIA ARTS CENTRE



Join us for this full-day program around archival, editing, and documentary practices for filmmakers and artists working with found footage and archival material and those who are interested in working with hybrid essayistic forms.

Our two facilitators, Lebanese editor and video artist Deena Charara, and experimental filmmaker and archivist Chantal Partamian, will share conceptual frameworks and propose technical approaches to editing archival images in the context of film and video art. The session will further situate archival mediation, media excavation, and “digital sculpting” as decolonial practices. The program will include a lunch break and will end with an open discussion between the participants and both artists.

Filmmakers



Deena Charara is an award-winning film editor, video artist, and educator from Lebanon. Her work blends archival and found footage into poetic explorations of memory, resilience, and the shifting landscape of the self.

She received Best Editing for Heritages (2015), and several films she has contributed to have earned major international recognition — including a Grand Prix nomination at Sundance for *Sous Les Bombes* (2008), broadcasts on ARTE, and selections that represented Lebanon at the Oscars and Golden Globes.

From 2008 to 2020, she taught Art of the Moving Image at the Lebanese American University’s School of Architecture and Design, guiding emerging designers and architects in visual literacy and creative practice.



Chantal Partamian is an experimental filmmaker and archivist with a focus on super 8mm and found footage. Her films, recognized and awarded at numerous festivals, are distributed through Vidéographe, Groupe Intervention Vidéo (GIV), and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center.

As an archivist, Partamian specializes in preserving and restoring film reels from the Eastern Mediterranean through the project: *Katsakh Mediterranean Archives*, while also conducting research on archival practices in conflict zones. Her written works are primarily published in the *Revue Hors-Champ*.

Chantal Partamian’s work spans both the artistic and archival realms, merging experimental cinema with preservation efforts to safeguard the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean region.



THIS IS A LOVE LETTER — MENA Underground sounds

FRI, JAN 23, 2026 • VIVO MEDIA ARTS CENTRE
DJ SETS: 9:00 PM - 1:00 AM • DOORS: 8:30 PM

\$25 EARLY BIRD, \$30 G/A,
\$40 DOOR TICKETS

Come celebrate the end of the 2026 MENA Film Festival with us at our Closing Event, co-produced with MIAAN Art Association at VIVO Media Arts, with a stacked lineup of SWANA underground veterans who will share their sonic devotions after dark!

Co-presented with:



DJs

J Squeezy • Community builder, programming coordinator/curator Jamal aka J Squeezy discovered his love for sharing and gathering around music through involvement in local community radio. From beginnings with CJSW 90.9FM in Treaty 7 (Calgary) to co-founding bside.radio on the Unceded Coast Salish Lands (Vancouver) from the living room to the dance floor, he's found a taste for fresh grooves and uplifting moods.

DJ Mikubat • With roots in Tehran and a growing presence in Vancouver's electronic scene, Mikubat is an innovative DJ and producer shaping a distinct sound. His signature style, "LangoBit," blends atmospheric textures with breaky, percussive rhythms, making him stand out in today's electronic music landscape. As one of the forces behind Miaan art and Golchin events, Mikubat is dedicated to reclaim cultural narratives, challenging Western hegemony in the music industry, and giving voice to the experiences of the Iranian diaspora.

Beiti • Beiti is a 'Vancouver'-based DJ whose selections are guided by intentionality and a desire to explore varying expressions of emotion within sounds. Through curated energies spanning House, Electro, and Tech House, her sets invite you to immerse yourself in an environment defined only by unbound movement on the dance-floor.

Hannah • DJ Hannah is a selector, event producer and music enjoyer based out of "Calgary"/Mohkinstsis. Shaped by a lifelong obsession with the discothèque, DJ Hannah brings the soul of a crate-digger and the energy of a dancefloor alchemist to every performance, spanning across all genres on the four on the floor spectrum. Since her club debut in 2017, she's become a mainstay in Western Canada's electronic music scene, with a presence that stretches from club residencies to major festival stages like Bass Coast and Shambhala. Hannah creates sonic experiences that are both intimate and expansive.

2026 Schedule

VANCOUVER PLAYHOUSE
600 Hamilton St

VIFF CENTRE
1181 Seymour St

VIVO MEDIA ARTS CENTRE
2625 Kaslo St

221A
825 Pacific St

Short Film Bundles

Panels / Workshops

Feature Films

Events

Thursday JAN 15	Opening Ceremony 📍 Vancouver Playhouse • 6:00 pm • 210 min • pg. 23					
Friday JAN 16	Khartoum 📍 VIFF Cinema • 5:00 pm • 81 min • pg. 06	There Was, There Was Not 📍 VIFF Cinema • 8:00 pm • 94 min • pg. 06				
Saturday JAN 17	Theatre & Romance 📍 VIFF Cinema • 4:00 pm • 131 min • pg. 12	Naharina 📍 VIFF Studio Theatre • 4:15 pm • 51 min pg. 07	Nature Lovers 📍 VIFF Studio Theatre • 5:30 pm • 105 min • pg. 13	Stories Through Spaces: On the Intersection of Theatre and Film 📍 VIFF Cinema • 7:00 pm • 80 min • pg. 24	Home Movies 📍 VIFF Studio Theatre • 8:00 pm • 84 min • pg. 15	Self-Care 📍 VIFF Cinema • 9:00 pm • 94 min • pg. 17

<p>Sunday JAN 18</p>	<p>Veiling & Visibility 📍 VIFF Studio Theatre • 4:15 pm • 120 min • pg. 19</p> <p>My Sweet Land 📍 VIFF Cinema • 4:00 pm • 86 min • pg. 07</p> <p>Cotton Queen 📍 VIFF Cinema • 6:00 pm • 94 min • pg. 08</p> <p>It's Complicated 📍 VIFF Studio Theatre • 6:30 pm • 84 min • pg. 20</p> <p>Writing Hawa 📍 VIFF Cinema • 8:00 pm • 84 min • pg. 08</p>
<p>Monday JAN 19</p>	<p>Industry Rendezvous: Film Funding Workshop 📍 221A • 11:00 am • 240 min • pg. 27</p>
<p>Tuesday JAN 20</p>	<p>Cultures of Belonging: Nader's Girl Screening and Q&A with director Omar Mouallem • pg. 28 📍 SFU Harbour Centre—Labatt Hall • 5:30 pm • 180 min</p>
<p>Wednesday JAN 21</p>	<p>Editing in the Archive with Deena Charara and Chantal Partamian 📍 VIVO Media Arts Centre • 12:00 pm • 360 min • pg. 30</p>
<p>Thursday JAN 22</p>	<p>Where the Wind Comes From 📍 VIFF Cinema • 6:00 pm • 99 min • pg. 08</p> <p>Queer Shorts 📍 VIFF Cinema • 8:30 pm • 69 min • pg. 22</p>
<p>Friday JAN 23</p>	<p>THIS IS A LOVE LETTER — MENA Underground Sounds 📍 VIVO Media Arts Centre • 9:00 pm • 240 min • pg. 31</p>



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