

Saudi filmmakers relish return of the silver screen

This file photo taken on October 20, 2017 shows Saudis attending a short film competition at King Fahad Culture Centre in Riyadh



Dubai

Saudi filmmakers and major cinema chains alike are basking in the news the kingdom will lift its decades-old ban on cinemas, opening a market of more than 30 million people.

At the Dubai International Film Festival on Tuesday, short-film directors talked shop on a seaside veranda, the city's iconic sailing boat-shaped hotel in the background. And Saudi Arabia was on everyone's mind.

Director Hajar Alnaim wore her national pride in the form of a green Saudi flag pinned to her black abaya. She gushed as she recounted how she received the big news Monday.

"I posted a picture of me on the red carpet on Facebook and someone told me, 'What a coincidence! This is a great picture on a great day' ... I

was like, 'what?'"

Alnaim took to Twitter to find out the buzz and was "shocked" to see her government had announced the immediate licensing of cinemas, with the first expected to open in March 2018.

The move is part of a modernisation drive by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is seeking to balance unpopular subsidy cuts in an era of low oil prices with more entertainment options – despite opposition from religious hardliners.

Alnaim admits that she was once susceptible to those hardliners, but a Saudi government scholarship – one of thousands of annual grants – to study film in Los Angeles changed her world.

"I wasn't accepting. I wasn't even able to convince my family to go to Bahrain and let me watch a movie before

I went to the United States to study film. My perspective has changed ... my family's perspective has changed," she said.

Alnaim says her short-film *Detained* – about a Syrian asylum seeker under interrogation by US Homeland Security over the actions of her father – offers a window into the Muslim perspective, and that of the West.

One decade ago, Saudi filmmaker Abdullah al-Eyaf captured the longing of his countrymen for the silver screen in a documentary.

"Cinema 500km" is the tale of a Saudi crossing his country's borders for the first time, just to see a film.

"It's funny, right?" remarked Hanaa Saleh Alfassi, a Saudi director taking part in the Dubai film fest.

"We're ready for a long time for all these bans to be

lifted," she said.

Alfassi's own film *Lollipop* also tackles restrictions, legal and social.

"It's a coming of age story about a girl who gets her period for the first time and decides to hide it from her family in order not to cover her face," she said.

Saudi women are required to wear a black abaya and veil, although in recent years some women have started showing their faces.

Alfassi's film was inspired by a pamphlet she used to see advising women to "protect" themselves by veiling, with an image of two lollipops.

"One is wrapped and has no flies and the other one is unwrapped and has flies."

But for her the message is misleading, because "in Saudi, most people are covered and they still get harassed".

When Alfassi's main character starts wearing the veil, she is "sexualised" by society and harassed by a friend's father. Spoiler alert: the harasser confuses the protagonist and his daughter.

Alfassi acknowledges that cinemas may start by screening "uncontroversial" selections, but she foresees the industry blossoming as Saudis become used to theatre-going.

"The cool thing about cinema is the film doesn't come to you. You're going to enjoy that film with strangers."

Major cinema chains are clamouring to break into the untapped Saudi market, where the majority of the population



Visitors enter Saudi Comic Con (SCC) held earlier this year in Jeddah

is under 25.

US giant AMC Entertainment on Monday signed a non-binding agreement with Saudi Arabia's vast Public Investment Fund to build and operate cinemas across the kingdom.

It will face stiff competition from regional heavyweights, namely Dubai-based VOX Cinemas, the leading operator in the Middle East.

The CEO of VOX parent company Majid Al Futtaim, Alain Bejjani, said on Monday his company was eager to expand into Saudi Arabia.

"We ... are

committed to developing Vox Cinemas in Saudi Arabia and (to) make sure that every one of our Saudi customers will have a Vox Cinema close to them where they will be able to experience what they have been experiencing outside Saudi Arabia – in Saudi Arabia," he said.

Bejjani predicts that cinemas will be "the cornerstone of a whole new economic sector", generating jobs and developing Saudi content and talent. (AFP)



Hajar Alnaim



Saudi filmmaker Ali Kalthami stands next to the poster for his film "Wasati" or "Moderate" and other Saudi short films recently shown at Cinema Akil in Dubai.