ARAB NEWS

The Voice of a Changing Region

Thursday, April 18, 2019 – Shaban 13, 1440 – www.arabnews.com



A year at the movies

How cinema made a comeback in Saudi Arabia

#WhatChanged

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Cinemas Anniversary

Timeline
How movies returned to the Kingdom

Dec.11, 2017
Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Information and Culture announces that as part of Vision 2030, commercial cinemas will be allowed to operate in the Kingdom for the first time in 35 years.

Jan. 12, 2018
The Saudi brand Cinema 70 begins a week of family screenings of animated movies at the Jeddah Culture and Arts Society, including "The Emoji Movie" and "Captain Underpants"(right).



March 20, 2018
Saudi Arabia's General Culture Authority announces the creation of the Saudi Film Council to develop the vital film sector in the Kingdom.

April 18, 2018
The first commercial screening in 35 years of a film in Saudi Arabia is attended by VIP guests: "Black Panther" is held in a concert hall converted into an AMC cinema in Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District.

April 26, 2018
The first new movie release to open in 35 years in Saudi Arabia, "Avengers: Infinity War" (right) opens in the AMC cinema in Riyadh, with sold-out screenings.



April 30, 2018
Majid Al-Futtaim Cinemas opens Saudi Arabia's first multiplex, VOX Cinemas in Riyadh Park Mall, with four screens, including the Kingdom's first IMAX.

May 8-19, 2018
Saudi Arabia joins the Cannes Film Festival for the first time, with a pavilion hosting talks and screenings organized by the General Culture Authority and Saudi Film Council. Guests include John Travolta and Kelly Preston.

Jan. 10, 2019
"Dunya's Day" (right), directed by Raed Alsemari, is the first locally made film to premiere in a commercial cinema in Saudi Arabia, with a screening at VOX Cinemas in Riyadh Park.

Jan. 28, 2019
The VOX Cinemas multiplex at the Red Sea Mall is the first cinema in Jeddah.



Jan. 30, 2019
"Dunya's Day" wins the Short Film Jury Award at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah.

March 6, 2019
VOX Cinemas opens its second multiplex in Riyadh in Al-Qasr Mall.

March 17, 2019
The third VOX Cinemas multiplex opens at The Roof in Riyadh.

March 21-26, 2019
The Fifth Saudi Film Festival held at Ithra as part of Sharqiah Season.

March 27, 2019
Culture Minister Prince Badr bin Farhan announces the Red Sea International Film Festival, to be held annually in Jeddah starting in 2020.

CINEMA KINGDOM

A magical first year at the movies

Films are no longer 'coming soon' — there are now six cinemas in Riyadh and Jeddah, with many more on the way across the Kingdom

By Jennifer Bell

The seats have been filled, the popcorn bought and, for the past 12 months, the magic of the movies has been casting a spell over the Kingdom, where the buzz of the big screen had been a dim and distant memory. It has been a year since, as part of the country's Vision 2030 program of reforms, Saudi Arabia lifted a 35-year ban on cinemas, paving the way for theater chains to unveil ambitious plans to open hundreds of cinemas, with thousands of screens, across the nation in the next decade. And moviegoers just cannot get enough of it, regularly packing out screenings at the first venues to open in Riyadh and Jeddah.

To mark the first anniversary, Arab News asked entertainment chiefs what they have learned from Saudi audiences since that historic first screening of Marvel's "Black Panther" on April 18, 2018 at the AMC cinema in Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District.

Superhero fantasies, comedies and action dramas have proved most popular with audiences, who have flocked to a mix of global box-office hits and regional films.

VOX Cinemas — Saudi Arabia's biggest movie operator, with plans to invest SR2billion ($533 million) to open 600 screens by 2023 — said it released 114 films across the Kingdom in the past year. The biggest money spinner was Marvel superhero movie "Captain Marvel," which broke through the billion-dollar global box-office barrier this month — followed by "Cold Pursuit," an American black-comedy action film starring Liam Neeson, and "Aquaman," another superhero movie, this time based on a DC Comics character

Rounding out the top 10 list was M. Night Shyamalan's fantasy-drama sequel "Glass," Egyptian comedy "Nadi Elregal Elsary," horror thriller "Us," science fiction thriller "Alita: Battle Angel," US superhero film "Shazam!", Egyptian comedy "El Badla" and Hollywood comedy-drama "The Upside," according to Cameron Mitchell, CEO of Majid Al-Futtaim Cinemas, of which VOX Cinemas is a subsidiary. "El Badla" had the distinction of being the longest-running film in the country over the past 12 months.

VOX Cinemas was granted its license to operate in the Kingdom in April last year and opened its first multiplex in Riyadh Park in the same month. It has four screens, including an IMAX screen and VOX Kids, the first dedicated children's theater in the Middle East.

"Since launching Saudi Arabia's first multiplex in April 2018, the Majid Al-Futtaim group has been delighted by the response from our guests in the Kingdom," said Mitchell. "In the 12 months since obtaining our license, Majid Al-Futtaim has built five locations with a total of 47 screens, and is planning to open at least another 70 screens this year, on track to reaching our goal of 600 screens in Saudi Arabia by 2023."

VOX now has three additional locations in Riyadh: a luxury cinema in Kingdom Tower, which opened this week; Al-Qasr Mall; and The Roof in Alyasmin District. This year the chain also opened the first multiplex in Jeddah, at Red Sea Mall.

"Our Saudi Arabian team is proving to be talented and passionate, and is offering a service level and entertainment experience comparable with the highest international standards, with particularly our VOX Kids and IMAX experiences delighting guests in Riyadh and Jeddah," said Mitchell.

"We are honored to be supporting the 2030 Vision of Saudi Arabia, which noted that 'culture and entertainment are indispensable to our quality of life,' and our teams will continue to work tirelessly to meet our vision of creating great moments for everyone every day."

Films are proving so popular that cinemagoers are having to book well in advance, and Mitchell said 95 percent of the tickets so far sold for Riyadh Park — which screened 82 films in 2018 — were booked online.

"We see this trend continuing with all new openings, as guests want to ensure they are securing seats," he added.

VOX now has 39 screens and plans to open a further 110 by the end of the year. These will include the first multiplexes in the Eastern Region and Tabuk.

Collectively, VOX and another leading operator in the region, Carnival Cinemas, plan to open nearly 1,000 screens across the Kingdom, according to experts at the Cinema Build KSA Forum in Riyadh this month, which was organized to explore opportunities in the emerging sector.

"Carnival envisions operating about 300-plus screens over the next five years in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," said Sunil Puthan Veettil, the company's managing director. "Our mission is to take a good-quality movie-watching experience close to the people in the country. For this, we have made a study of all the provinces and identified several locations, subject to approval. Our idea is to move to all these provinces to set up entertainment centers and to make Carnival synonymous with cinema across the country."

During the forum, Saudi officials estimated that by 2030, the number of cinemas in operation could be as high as 350, with as many as 2,500 screens.

Cinema operating licenses have also been awarded to: AMC Theaters, an American chain owned and operated by Wanda Group; the Al-Rashed Empire Cinema Consortium, which plans to build 30 theaters in the country over the next three years; and Lux Entertainment, in partnership with Cinepolis, the biggest cineplex chain in Mexico, Al-Hokair Group for Tourism and Development, a Saudi-based hospitality and entertainment group, and Al Tayer Group, one of the leading companies in the field of retail operation in the UAE and the wider GCC.

Lux announced in October plans for 300 screens in 15 cities across Saudi Arabia by 2030.

Other operators, including Gulf-based Novo Cinemas, which has announced it is in talks to roll out in Saudi Arabia, have also registered an interest.

John Sullivan, director of The Light Cinemas, a British independent chain, said it recently joined forces with new cinema brand Muvi to launch the Kingdom's "very first all-Saudi Arabian cinema group," which plans to open 15 locations across the country, including in Riyadh and Dammam.

"I think it is crucial for property owners in particular to understand their responsibility for figuring out what the cinema will deliver to their assets, and how to deliver that, rather than abdicate their responsibilities to others," he said.

Regarding the investment opportunities that have opened up in the Kingdom, Sullivan added: "The market at the moment is emerging; we don't know where it will go. I've opened cinemas now in 30 countries around the world and every single one of them is entirely different, so you will not know what's happening in cinemas here for probably one to two years; then we will have a better understanding of the market."

Gino Haddad, the managing director of Empire Cinemas, said that the potential Saudi market "is estimated to be almost as big as the whole (of the rest of the) Middle East."

"So when the market opened up for cinemas, all the operators had full eyes on the Saudi market because it means big numbers," he added. "We are estimating the market at least to be up to 2,000 screens, and we are very much interested in developing this market.

"We also want to focus on the educational side of cinema; we want to help bring up the new generation to understand and to live with cinema and perceive it not only as entertainment, but also as their future careers."

The General Authority for Entertainment has indicated that SR267 billion is needed to build suitable infrastructure to serve the entertainment sector across the Kingdom, with expected investments in the sector expected to reach SR18 billion annually, according to a 2018 report from Flanders Investment and Trade.

This month, the Saudi government announced that SR131 billion will be invested in building cinemas and theaters, mainly in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam.

According to a study by PwC Middle East, a global advisory firm, the Kingdom's cinema industry — which will serve a population of more than 32 million, the majority of whom are under the age of 30 — is expected to generate $1.5 billion in annual revenue by 2030.

"The world is witnessing Saudi Arabia's confident steps toward an unprecedented era of social and economic reforms," said Leila Masinaei, a managing partner at Great Minds Event Management, which staged the Cinema Build KSA Forum.

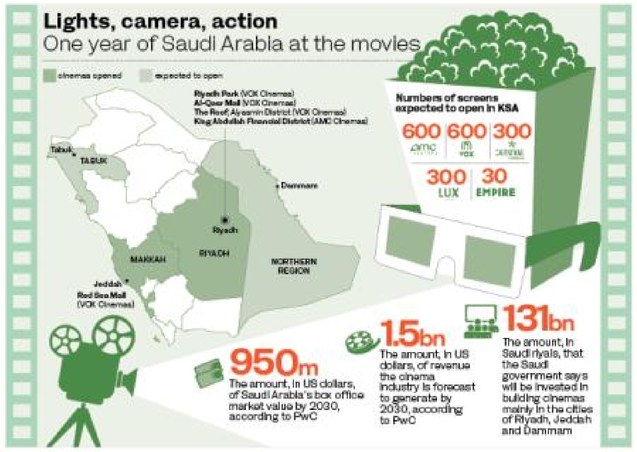
"The lifting of the cinema ban opens doors to untrodden ground for investments and lucrative revenue streams for the Kingdom."



John Travolta joins a discussion in Riyadh on the future of cinema in the Kingdom. AFP

> We want to help bring up the new generation to live with cinema and perceive it not only as entertainment, but also as their future careers.
>
> Gino Haddad
> Managing director, Empire Cinemas

Lights, camera, action
One year of Saudi Arabia at the movies



A BANNER YEAR FOR SAUDI FILMMAKERS

Beyond cinema openings, the past year was also a significant time for the Saudi film industry. The General Culture Authority (GCA) announced the creation of the Saudi Film Council last March, tasked with developing the Kingdom's film sector. It wasted no time, organizing the first Saudi pavilion at the Cannes Film Festival in May, at which it announced an incentive program to promote Saudi film locations and talent. It also held more than 200 international screenings of Saudi films in five countries.

Also in the past year, the GCA, represented by the Saudi Film Council, launched the first national library of film-shooting locations in the Kingdom, and introduced an intensive training course for Saudi filmmakers.

Haifaa Al-Mansour

The Saudi film director is a Hollywood name, having directed her first English language film, "Mary Shelley" which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2017, and a Netflix special, "Nappily Ever After," in 2018.

Al-Mansour directed her first feature film, "Wadjda," selected as the Saudi entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 86th Academy Awards.

Al-Mansour, who has a master's degree in directing and film studies from the University of Sydney, Australia, told a panel at the World Economic Forum in January that misconceptions about Arab women needed changing. "All the scripts I get about Muslim and Arab women (imply they are) all victims and sad," she said. "But we are very sassy, we are very strong, so don't take us for granted."



Mahmoud Sabbagh

Born in Jeddah in 1983, the Saudi film director, producer and screenwriter grew up influenced by Egyptian films from the 1980s. He attended Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, where he studied documentary filmmaking and production.

In 2016, Sabbagh released his acclaimed debut feature film "Barakah Meets Barakah."



Shot in Jeddah, the film is a comedic love story that plays on strict Saudi social conventions in a dramatically candid way.

The film premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in 2016, the first feature film from Saudi Arabia to be screened

Danya Al-Hamrani

The Saudi-American director and producer is a managing partner and co-founder of Eggdancer, a Jeddah-based independent TV production company that was founded "to tell Saudi stories."

Al-Hamrani is best known for the documentary short "The Straight Path: Pillars of Islam," which she directed in 2005, and for her appearance on Anthony Bourdain's "No Reservations," in which she guided him around Jeddah.

With Eggdancer



partner Dania Nassief, she has produced corporate videos, short films and documentaries. Their recent work, "Rise: The Journey of Women in Saudi Arabia," premiered in January at the King Abdullah Economic City in Jeddah.

Ayman Jamal

The Saudi director, producer and screenwriter is best known for directing and producing the 2016 animation film, "Bilal: A New Breed of Hero." "Bilal" won Best Inspiring Movie on Animation Day at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival and Best Innovative Movie at the BroadCast Pro Middle East Award 2016. It was also nominated for Best Animated Feature Film at the 2016 Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSA), the region's highest accolade for film.



Along with 18 years of experience in creative communications, marketing and production, Jamal is an entrepreneur who has established eight companies in the past 14 years.

Bader Al-Homoud

A Saudi filmmaker living in Alkhobar, Al-Homoud is widely considered to be one of the most prominent cinematographers in the Gulf region.

A former student of architecture and interior design, Al-Homoud later found his calling in the film industry.

Al-Homoud has written and directed several short films and commercials, many of which have gained him awards from the likes of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival and the Gulf Film Festival.



Some of Al-Homoud's most notable works are the short films "The Bliss of Being No One" (2016), "Pen of Mirrors" (2014) and "Scrap" (2013).

Meshal Al-Jaser

Born and raised in Riyadh, Al-Jaser is one of the very first independent filmmakers in Saudi Arabia. He contributed his services to several breakthrough content production houses in Saudi Arabia, such as Folaim, which he founded, and Telfaz11.

Al-Jaser also directed the 2016 film "Is Sumiaty Going to Hell?", which showcased the struggles of Indonesian domestic workers in the Gulf. It ended up being a winner at the Los Angeles Independent Film Festival Awards and will be shown at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

Recently, he wrote and directed the short film "Under Concrete," about a child in Syria trapped by a house explosion, which won a Qomrah Award. He also directed the music video for Saudi musician Tamtam's song "Rise."



Top 10 films at VOX cinemas in Saudi Arabia

1 CAPTAIN MARVEL
"Captain Marvel," directed by the dynamic duo of Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, emerged at the top of the list, as Marvel Studios brought to life other blockbuster superhero films including "Black Panther" and the "Avengers" series. "Captain Marvel" tells the story of Carol Danvers (below, played by Brie Larson) as she is caught in a galactic war between two alien races.

2 COLD PURSUIT
"Taken" star Liam Neeson is in yet another revenge flick about a father who lost his child to murderous goons, turning his life upside down. Norwegian director Hans Petter Moland based the film on his 2014 black comedy "In Order of Disappearance."

3 AQUAMAN
Powering through the waves of harsh reviews, "Aquaman" raked in more than $1 billion at the global box office, making it the eighth-highest-grossing live-action superhero film of all time. Directed by James Wan, the film follows Aquaman (Jason Momoa) as he fights to take back the legendary Trident of Atlan and fully embrace his fate as the protector of the ocean.

4 GLASS
A sequel to previous films "Unbreakable" (2000) and "Split" (2016), this thriller from director M. Night Shyamalan puts together an all-star cast — James McAvoy, Bruce Willis, Samuel L. Jackson and Sarah Paulson — to tell a complicated comic book story about a ragtag group of superhumans.





Laura Dern and Liam Neeson, above, in the revenge thriller "Cold Pursuit." Jason Momoa, below, fights to take back the Trident of Atlan in "Aquaman." Supplied

5 NADI ELREGAL ELSARY
One of only two Arabic movies on the list, "Nadi Elregal Elsary" ("The Secret Men's Club") is an Egyptian comedy directed by Khaled El-Halafwy. It follows a dentist named Adham (Karim Abdel Aziz) who joins the secret all-male group as he navigates a troubled marriage.



6 US
A gripping and gory thriller from the wicked mind of writer-director Jordan Peele, "Us" tells the story of a vacationing family who are haunted by their killer doppelgangers. It exceeded box office predictions, and solidified Peele's name as one of the best in the industry after his massive debut in "Get Out" (2017) that earned him an Oscar.

7 ALITA
Director Robert Rodriguez, who brought the "Spy Kids" series to the world, gives life to Japanese manga character Alita, a cyberhuman who goes on a journey of self-discovery in the treacherous streets of fictional Iron City. The film combines live-action and CGI technology to create visually stunning cyberpunk action.



8 SHAZAM!
Unlike other superhero movies, this one puts its snappy humor at the center of its storytelling. American actor Zachary Levi, who once voiced a Disney prince, takes the titular role, playing the superhero version of a 14-year-old orphan.

9 EL BADLA
Egyptian music sensation Tamer Hosny stars in this action comedy that he also directed. It follows a college student who attends a costume party dressed as a police officer. The story takes a wild and comic turn when he becomes the subject of a criminal investigation.



10 THE UPSIDE
Released elsewhere in 2017, this heartfelt comedy features an unlikely friendship between a paralyzed billionaire (Bryan Cranston) and a recently paroled ex-convict (Kevin Hart), whom he hires to take care of him. The film, directed by Neil Burger, was a remake of the French film "The Intouchables," released in 2011

Samuel L. Jackson (above, from left), James McAvoy and Bruce Willis in "Glass." Karim Abdel Aziz, below, joins a secret all-male group as he navigates a troubled marriage in "Nadi Elregal Elsary." Supplied

Mama, I'm 6 and I just watched an elephant fly in the big TV.

Lilly after watching the Disney classic remake of "Dumbo"



Spotlight

CINEMA KINGDOM

Lilly was in awe. And I was a very proud mom, indeed

A year on from cinema's historic return to Saudi Arabia, a mother recalls a moment of movie magic with her daughter

Rawan Radwan Jeddah

April 18, 2018 will go down as one of the most celebrated dates in Saudi Arabia's history with the first screening of a film in over 35 years in the capital Riyadh.

Those outside the Kingdom may struggle to understand the significance of this event, but for Saudis unable to attend a film screening on home soil for more than three decades, its importance was immediately apparent.

After spending over half of my life abroad, I returned recently to my home country to find ambitious plans and events taking place all around me — but the one thing I had my heart set on was attending a movie of my choosing with my young daughter.

It was my escape from reality. Two hours in a cinema, shrouded by darkness and popcorn in hand, was what I needed to disconnect from the noisy and distracting world outside. I have been to too many movies to count, but to visit a cinema at home, that truly is one for the books.

My 6-year-old daughter Lilly and I decided on "Dumbo." Since we are both fans of Disney movies, it was only fitting that our first visit to a cinema in Saudi Arabia would be to watch this classic remake.

With a click of a mouse, I was able to book and buy three tickets online, with no need to queue.

Arriving at Jeddah's Red Sea Mall VOX theaters, Lilly was in awe. The magnificent life-size poster of Dumbo greeted us as we rode up the stairs. "Mommy, it's real! He's still a baby with big blue eyes," Lilly said, running toward her uncle and reaching for the big bucket of popcorn.

VOX cinemas really had gone all-out to ensure the cinema experience matched that in the US with a seemingly limitless choice of popcorn flavors, candy, chocolates and more.

"It is my first time, mommy, and your one million trillionth time," Lilly said. "I can have chocolate and popcorn together."

The halls were packed with excited film fans, all talking about the movies they were about to watch. Children running around excitedly, and the mix of savory and sweet popcorn were a nostalgic reminder of good times spent in cinemas as a child.

Walking ahead of a group of children, I could hear squeals of delight. With Lilly holding my hand tightly, we walked to room number 9 and opened the door.

The place was packed, but it was great to see how everyone stayed in their designated seats. I could see Lilly's eyes grow wide as the commercials began and little jolts from the surround sound system shocked her slightly — my feelings exactly. She jumped with glee as she saw Disney's Cinderella Castle appear on screen.

Throughout the film, I would catch glimpses of my young one laughing as Dumbo peeked out of a bundle of hay, showing his great big ears, and then pouting with sadness at the scene where his mother is taken away.

A heavy sense of nostalgia hit me right there and then. I was only a year older than Lilly when I saw my first movie. My mother and father took me to see the Disney classic "The Lion King." I recall laughing at Zazu when the hippo sat on him, jumping in our seats with popcorn flying as we danced to the music, and feeling intense sadness when Mufasa was killed.

My emotions were raw and real, and this was the experience I wanted my daughter to have. To see and feel, to enjoy the cinema just as much as I do.

As with any children's movie, my little one's curiosity was at its peak, and every now and then Lilly would point and ask questions, or notice the strong resemblance between the CGI form of the adorable flying elephant and the cartoon. A child with a good eye for detail, and a "proud mom moment" right there.

Thirty minutes in to the film, I could sense the agitation of the young viewers around me. Curiosity got the better of one boy who zoomed past, skipping down the steps and trying to touch the screen.

A young girl twirled with her dress in front of the viewers, imitating a scene from the film, while another boy squealed past me with his dress shirt open, running to the door with his father in tow, as he screamed "bathroom!" with everyone laughing.

By the end of the film, parents and children were cheering and clapping together as the credits appeared. I looked to my left to see excitement in my little one's eyes.

"We definitely need to do that again, mom!" she said.

"Definitely? When did you grow up so fast?" I replied.

"Mama. I'm 6 and I just watched an elephant fly in the big TV. I can say big words, too."

Looking around, I saw the smiling faces of children and parents, couples holding hands, fathers and sons excitedly reviewing their favorite scenes, and little ones covering their eyes as they adjusted to the outside light.

It's the little things that count, and to add our first shared movie experience in our home country to our list of firsts makes it even more special.



After returning to my home country, the one thing I had my heart set on was attending a movie of my own choosing with my young daughter.

The writer and her daughter Lilly share popcorn on their first cinema outing. Arab News

LILLY'S REVIEW

I watched "Dumbo" with mom and Uncle Faris. I saw a baby elephant fly and I want one for my birthday. I want to go to the jungle and look for Dumbo and his mom. I want to fly with him. The movie was loud, but Uncle Faris covered my ears. Can we go again, please?

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