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In this photo Afghan film producer and director Roya Sadat speaks during an interview with AFP at the Roya Film House in Kabul. — AFP photos



Roya Sadat speaks during an editorial meeting at the Roya Film House in Kabul.



Roya Sadat checks a film in an editing room at the Roya Film House in Kabul.

# Voice of the unknown woman: Afghan filmmaker Roya Sadat

For a generation, Roya Sadat has been a voice for Afghan women in one of the world's worst places to be one. One of the first female filmmakers to make her name after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, she has won plaudits at home and abroad for works such as "A Letter to the President", and "Three Dots", and "Playing the Taar". She has lived through the Soviet occupation-fleeing with her family for their lives at times-endured the brutality of civil war, and then the violent oppression of Taliban rule, where women existed only in the shadows and basic freedoms were lost.

Her great fear is a return to that kind of fundamentalism: The February 29, US-Taliban deal may be a potential first step for peace in a nation that for decades has only known war, but it offers no guarantees the few women's rights set out in the current constitution will be upheld. "I feel concerned when I remember how we had simply been forgotten during the five-year Taliban rule until 9/11 happened," says the 37-year-old, adding: "If the international community approaches [Afghanistan] as an open and shut scenario and abandons us again, there will undoubtedly be grave consequences."

Almost 39 percent of girls go to secondary

school according to World Bank figures for 2017, while USAid says that of the 300,000 students in universities, around one third are female citing figures from the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education.

These figures are predominantly for urban areas but twenty years ago it would have been all but impossible everywhere. "There are many good changes happening, coming from the heart of society," Sadat says, but concedes there is a huge amount to be done. Afghanistan ranks last in the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security index which measures well-being and self-reliance. In rural areas, female literacy can be less than two percent and rights are often even more constrained by conservative tradition.

**'Era of suffocation'**

She is not alone in fearing that the small inroads made in women's rights may disappear in urban centers young people have grown up listening to music, watching television, and more recently accessing the internet and social media. Many have only seen the Taliban on the news. Sadat, who has been writing stories, poems and plays since she was a little girl, recalls how her life ground to a halt

in 1996 as the Taliban rolled in. Schools closed, women were confined to their homes, the televisions and radios stopped playing. A precocious teenager she continued to write indoors, and read books on directing from her father's collection. She was allowed to work as a nurse as women could only get female medical help, and even set up clandestine cultural performances of her plays in the hospital, even though the head of it was linked to the Taliban. "It was very dangerous. I still find it hard to believe that we were able to," she says.

Her first work, "Three Dots", which tells the tale of a single mother who is forced to marry a warlord and become a drug smuggler, was penned during this period, but only made using simple equipment—once the regime changed and she could channel all the knowledge accrued from surreptitious reading, into real world creativity. This determination and persistence has defined her career, and she feels strongly that film has a social purpose. The mother-of-two explains: "I turned to cinema, when I had just come out of an era of suffocation, and had a world to express. "I strongly believe in cinema and that this is the most important art that can influence a positive

change in our society. But change cannot come overnight. The change has to come to the thoughts and minds of people."

**'Refuse to be silenced'**

In her twenties she set up an independent film company—Roya Film House with her sister Alka, and was awarded a scholarship to study film in South Korea. She has also written television dramas for prominent media firm Moby Group. Her stories are the stories of Afghan women. From the outset of her career she has faced questions from her family and criticisms from the community, but she argues that when locals come to see her work—they understand.

Her 2017 film "A Letter to the President" shows a woman slapping back at her violent husband when he hits her, before accidentally killing him. Sadat depicted an act of female rebellion in a country where women are often forced to stay in abusive marriages, but recalls how she expected a "bad reaction" because of the taboos surrounding female behavior. Instead the audience applauded during the slap scene.

**Her work is not without risks**

Cinema remains contentious in parts of the

country, and her productions, which shine a light on female inequality and repression, controversial. Hailed by the US for "refusing to be silenced" in the face of threats from conservatives, she was given the International Woman of Courage Award in 2017. She's committed to supporting the next generation of female filmmakers: the latest edition of her International Women's Film Festival in Herat, which first launched in 2013, received more than 2,500 submissions.

She remains hopeful that she can continue to challenge and speak for Afghans, arguing that film is uniquely placed to change hearts and minds. She explains: "Cinema can challenge inequality and injustice, it can turn social taboos into discourse, and it can invite people to dialogue. She adds: "Our people need to criticize themselves, to talk about things that are forbidden. I believe that this society needs a revolution of thought and this cannot be done except with the help of cinema."—AFP

## To play Maria Callas, **Monica Bellucci** confronts stage fright

It seems hard to believe, but Monica Bellucci—who has spent four decades in the limelight as a model and actress—says she suffers from stage fright. Now appearing on stage in Paris, incarnating opera singer Maria Callas, the Italian diva confesses experiencing pure "terror". "It is not that I was afraid of theatre, I am still afraid of theatre. I tremble," the 55-year-old told AFP. "Going on stage is almost a kind of violence that I put myself through."



In this file photo Italian actress Monica Bellucci poses during a photocall for the film "The Best Years of a Life (Les Plus Belles Annees D'Une Vie)" at the 72nd edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France. — AFP

Bellucci is playing the 20th-century opera star in a month-long show entitled: "Maria Callas: Lettres et Memoirs (Maria Callas: letters and memories) at the Bouffes Parisiens theatre until March 28. Film acting, said the actress who has played in two The Matrix movies and was a Bond girl in the 2015 movie "Spectre", is less intimidating. "When one makes a film, it is as if one is protected from the outside world. With theatre, one breathes in the public and the public breathes you in. There is a direct contact..." It is also less taxing.

With theatre, said Bellucci, one's concentration must last for the duration of the show. With film, scenes are shot one by one, with rests in between. Only once, in Gaspar Noe's film "Irreversible" has she shot a scene that lasted as long as 20 min-

utes, she said. In spite of her fear, Bellucci said she was captivated by Tom Volf's project on Callas, known for her tragic love affair with the Greek billionaire Aristotle Onassis almost as much as for her captivating voice.

**'Chemistry'**

The biographical show draws heavily on letters and writings by Callas, collected by Volf, who has also made a movie entitled "Maria by Callas". "The letters are so beautiful... it was impossible not to see into the soul of this wonderful artist," said Bellucci. For Volf, a sort of "chemistry" occurred between Bellucci and Callas on stage. The actress, he said, "interpreted with accuracy the strength and vulnerability of the diva. With her celebrity status, Monica was able to understand the woman behind the legend." Bellucci even wears one of Callas's dresses in the play. "What is incredible is that there was no need to make a single adjustment, it was as if it was made to measure," said Volf. The glare of the spotlight is another thing the two women shared.

Callas lived with details of her personal life splashed on the world's front pages—from her legendary success to her alleged capriciousness and the heart-breaking affair with Onassis who ended up marrying Jackie Kennedy, widow of assassinated US President John F. Kennedy. "She showed this smiling public image, and behind it was hidden a woman experiencing something quite different," said Bellucci. "When one is exposed, one is at great risk. Me, I try to protect myself... It is truly important to keep your feet on the ground and to keep a distance from your (public) image," said the actress whose separation from actor Vincent Cassel after a 17-year relationship also received wide press coverage. Does she mind being described as a diva, as was Callas before her? Bellucci laughs. "One of my daughters is named Deva. It is not a negative thing, in Italian, it means someone who takes the light from the sky!" — AFP



Madonna

## Injury forces **Madonna** to cancel Paris concert

Pop singer Madonna has cancelled a Sunday night concert in Paris because of an injury, the concert hall where she was due to perform announced. "We regret to inform you that tonight's Madame X concert at the Grand Rex is cancelled as a result of ongoing injuries," said a message at the venue's website. The Paris daily Le Parisien reported that Madonna had suffered torn ligaments in a knee and had struggled during Thursday's concert before bursting into tears.

The Grand Rex did not say whether the 61-year-old star would be able to perform her other shows booked there. Madonna arrived in the French capital on February 22 and was scheduled to perform at the Grand Rex until March 11. The tour started in New York in September, and after dates in the United States moved to Europe with dates in Lisbon and London. Paris is the last stop on the tour. — AFP

## 'Invisible Man' sees its way to top of N America box office

Enough viewers saw "The Invisible Man" this weekend to propel it to the top of the North American box office, with an estimated \$28.9 million in ticket sales, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported Sunday. That result for the Friday-to-Sunday period more than justified Universal's bet on a remake of the famous H.G. Wells story—the studio spent a mere \$7 million to produce the film, which has already taken in \$20 million overseas and drawn strong reviews.

The thriller stars the visibly talented Elisabeth Moss as the ex-girlfriend of a man (British actor Oliver Jackson-Cohen) who seems to return to haunt her after supposedly committing suicide. Slipping from the top spot in its third week out was Paramount's adventure comedy "Sonic the Hedgehog," at \$16 million. Jim Carrey stars as the villainous Dr. Robotnik in the video-game-based film. In third place was 20th Century's "The Call of the Wild," starring Harrison Ford, at \$13.2 million.

The story is loosely based on the Jack London classic, set in the wilds of Alaska and Canada's Klondike region.

Fourth spot went to a new Japanese manga film, "My Hero Academia," from Funimation, at \$5.1 million. It tells the story of a young boy, often bullied, who finds his way into a prestigious high school for superheroes-in-training. And in fifth, still strong in its seventh week out, was Sony's "Bad Boys for Life," at \$4.3 million. The action comedy, starring Will Smith and Martin Lawrence, has passed the \$400 million mark worldwide.

Rounding out the top 10 were: "Birds of Prey" (\$4.1 million) "Impractical Jokers: The Movie" (\$3.5 million) "1917" (\$2.7 million) "Brahms: The Boy II" (\$2.6 million) "Fantasy Island" (\$2.3 million)—AFP



(From left) Michael Dorman, Aldis Hodge, Elisabeth Moss, Oliver Jackson-Cohen, and Storm Reid attend the Premiere of Universal Pictures' "The Invisible Man" at TCL Chinese Theatre. — AFP



Thom Yorke

## Thom Yorke announces rare solo acoustic set at All Points East

Thom Yorke is set to play a rare solo acoustic set at All Points East. The "Creep" hitmaker will be treating fans to stripped-back renditions of his band Radiohead's biggest hits and his solo material - including tracks from his recent third solo album 'ANIMA' - from the comfort of his piano for the very first time on his own at the Victoria Park festival in east London, where he'll be supporting Massive Attack on May 24. The dance group - comprised of Robert '3D' Del Naja and Grant 'Daddy G' Marshall - who curated the line-up have been mates with

Thom and his bandmates since the 90s'. Massive Attack also chose the likes of Nils Frahm, Young Fathers, Neneh Cherry, GAIKA and Skinny Pelembe to join them on their day. Thom's addition comes after Bombay Bicycle Club were announced as the headliners for May 22, when they will be joined by the likes of Everything Everything, Nadine Shah, Lianne La Havas, Loyle Carner, The Oriettes and Gengahr. The Ivor Novello-winners have curated a line-up with something for everyone and teased more artists will be unveiled shortly. They tweeted last week:

"London, big news! 'We're excited to say we'll be headlining @allpointseastuk on May 22nd. 'We've had a great time working with the festival to put together a line up of artists we love, with more names to be announced very soon. Hopefully there's something here for everyone.' The 'Always Like This' group reunited in 2019, following a four-year hiatus, to release their acclaimed LP 'Everything Else Has Gone Wrong'. Bombay's headline slot comes after the band hinted that they will play at Glastonbury this year. When quizzed by a fan about the possibility of

them playing at Michael and Emily Eavis' world famous festival at Worthy Farm for a fifth time by a fan, the group - Jack Steadman, Jamie MacColl, Suren de Saram and Ed Nash - replied: "Working on it." All Points East 2020 - which takes place between May 22 and May 31 - will also see headline performances from the likes of Massive Attack, The Kooks, Kraftwerk, Tame Impala, and The Wombats. —BangShowbiz