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‘The Man Who Sold His Skin’: Tunisia’s dark Oscars nomination

It’s a troubling political fable shot with a sophisticated aesthetic, and Tunisia’s first-ever Academy Award nomination: “The Man Who Sold His Skin”. Part dark satire, part romantic drama, the film tells the story of lovelorn Syrian refugee Sam Ali (Yahya Mahayni) who is able to travel to Europe thanks to a Faustian pact. When a contemporary artist tattoos a European Schengen visa across his back, Ali finds himself able to cross international borders as a living work of art. Tunisian writer-director Kaouther Ben Hania ventured outside her native country to dive into two contrasting worlds-of refugees and contemporary art. “I couldn’t stand the victimization discourse on refugees anymore,” said the director, Ben Hania. “My intention from the start was to make him a contemporary hero who comes out on top and turns the adventure to his advantage.”

The story is partly inspired by the real-life tale of a Belgian man, Tim Steiner, who sold the right to tattoo his back, occasionally exhibit it, and recover the skin after his death, to the artist Wim Delvoye, who makes a cameo in the film. The movie, shot in France, Belgium and Tunisia, alternates between a grating and tender tone as it highlights the cruel absurdity of a system where objects can travel more freely than people. “The Man Who Sold His Skin” is shortlisted in the International Feature Film category for the Oscars, which are held on April 25. Monica Bellucci plays a “fake blonde” gallerist while Syrian actor Yahya Mahayni portrays a sweet freedom-loving dreamer who oscillates between joy and anger in a volatile situation.

‘Total dispossession’

While the refugee is “in total dispossession of his body” during part of the story, “he eventually regains possession of it”, said Ben Hania. The characters in the story “resemble me, pushed to the extreme”, she confided. Like the Syrian refugee, she said, she has faced “problems of papers to leave for France”. And like the eccentric artist in the film, she said, “I reflect on my work to the extreme”. Her earlier films have already won awards, including “Beauty and the Dogs” about a young woman’s quest for justice after being raped, and “Zineb Hates the Snow”, a documentary about a Tunisian teenager who migrates to Canada. The Oscar nomination “is huge,” admitted Ben Hania, who added that she regrets the lack of institutional support for cinema in Tunisia. The film was co-produced with 25 international partners, including in Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden, Tunisia and Qatar, and shot by Lebanese cinematographer Christopher Aoun (“Capernaum”). Raising the budget of 2.5 million euros (\$2.9 million) was “a challenge”, according to one of the co-producers, Nedim Cheikhrouha, who said the project almost collapsed a year ago due to lack of funds.

At the Academy Awards, “The Man Who Sold His Skin” has fewer promotional resources than other contenders, the producers said. Ben Hania—who says she is now working on a film “on the edge of genres” between documentary and fiction—hopes that the Oscar nomination will, at the very least, “make my next films a little easier”. “The Man Who Sold His Skin” was released this week in Tunisia and will screen in the United States from April 2, and in Sweden on April 23. —AFP



Tunisian director and screenwriter Kaouther Ben Hania (center), producer Mohamed Habib Attia (left), and Syrian actor Yahya Mahayni, attend the first screening of her film “The man who sold his skin” in the country, in the capital Tunis. —AFP photos

Britney Spears says she ‘cried for weeks’ over documentary

Britney Spears said she was “embarrassed” and “cried for two weeks” over her portrayal in a recent documentary about her career and mental health problems. “I didn’t watch the documentary but from what I did see of it I was embarrassed by the light they put me in,” she wrote on Instagram late Tuesday, in her first response to “Framing Britney Spears”, a documentary produced by FX and the New York Times released in February.



The film looked at the 39-year-old pop star’s career and the controversial conservatorship of her father, who was given legal guardianship over her finances in 2008 following a highly publicized breakdown, sparking the #FreeBritney movement by fans. “I cried for two weeks and well ... I still cry sometimes !!!!!” Spears wrote about watching the film. “My life has always been very speculated ... watched ... and judged really my whole life !!!!!” she wrote elsewhere in the message, which was accompanied by a video of her dancing to “Crazy” by Aerosmith. “It takes a lot of strength to TRUST the universe with your real vulnerability cause I’ve always been so judged... insulted... and embarrassed by the media.”

Spears filed last year to remove her father Jamie Spears from the conservatorship and give sole power over her estate to a financial institution. Her court-appointed lawyer said she was “afraid” of her father. A judge ruled in February that both Spears’ father and Bessemer Trust would oversee the pop star’s finances, denying Jamie Spears’ bid to keep sole power to delegate investments, though the case is ongoing. —AFP

Croatia acts to save its iconic Istrian goat

With wavy horns and a sturdy build, the Istrian goat stands proudly on Croatia’s national flag. But in the pastures where the white-furred animal hails from, the breed is almost nowhere to be seen. For centuries, the domestic goat was a staple of rural life in Croatia’s Istria peninsula, an enchanting region home to rolling hills and picturesque coastline. But from a population in the thousands in the mid-20th century, the goat’s numbers have dwindled down to a few dozen, prompting local authorities to launch a conservation program with the help of local breeders.

“It is crucial to preserve the Istrian goat since it is an indigenous breed,” said Ivan Milohanic, a 32-year-old bus driver, whose herd of goats includes some 20 of the heavy-set white Istrians. The goats are milked by hand and graze for a few hours daily at a meadow close to the Milohanic family’s farm house, where he also grows olives, grapes and hosts tourists. “Also, there is a strong interest in genuine natural products,” he added, noting the health benefits of the goat’s milk and meat. Milohanic, one of a handful of local breeders raising the goats, started years ago and aspires to run a small cheese factory in future.

Milk and meat

The animals were for many years a key food resource, providing milk and meat for villagers too poor to afford a cow or sheep. “There was practically no farm without some goats,” said Boro Mioc, a professor at the Zagreb University Faculty of Agronomy, who is helping the revitalization project. Known as agile and intelligent, goats were the first animal to be milked by man, he added. In times of hardship, such as during wars or hunger, the “poor man’s cow” helped villagers survive due to their modest needs regarding food and shelter. They were also easy to bring along if the owner needed to flee. “Goats were always a symbol of poverty but also of the preservation of family,” said Gordan Subara, of the government’s agency for Istria’s rural development, in charge of the rehabilitation project. The death of a goat was once a tragedy for an average Istrian family. But laws in the 19th and 20th centuries practically banned keeping the animals, which were considered forest-destroying pests, causing the population to shrink dramatically. In recent decades, the movement of people to urban areas and development of tourism as a source of income have further reduced reliance on the animals.

‘Return our debt’

The local revitalization project started in 2010 with experts carrying out a genetic analysis to confirm the Istrian breed still existed with a view to adding it to Croatia’s list of indigenous and protected species. That fol-

lowed two years later. Local authorities are now studying around 30 breeding goats to prevent mating of close relatives, with hopes that artificial insemination can also help double the population annually to reach 1,000 within a decade. “The most important goal is to return our debt towards this animal, whom we proclaimed a pest without justification,” Subara told AFP. This year, they also plan to buy up any Istrian baby goats in the region to prevent their slaughter. While Istria has changed hands several times over the centuries, the goat has remained an enduring symbol, featuring on the region’s coat of arms while it was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italy. After Croatia’s independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, a yellow goat with red horns and hooves was incorporated onto both Istria and the national flag, as well as both coat of arms. Preserving that symbolism is also very important,” Subara stressed.

Tourist attraction

Another ray of hope for the goats may lie in tourism. Olga Skopac, whose farm is nestled between the picturesque hilltop town of Labin and the coastal resort of Rabac, used two does and a buck to clear her land a few years ago instead of machinery. Now the animals are an additional draw for the tourists who stay in apartments on her farm. “We are renewing a traditional rural household” on nature’s doorstep, said the energetic 66-year-old, who with her husband grows olives and keeps some 20 Istrian sheep, three donkeys and several goats. —AFP



Croatian breeder Ivan Milohanic poses next to some of his goats at a meadow in Veleniki.