

Lifestyle | Features



Egyptian film director Ali El Arabi (center) poses with his team and their award for the Best Arab Documentary Film 'Captains of Za'atari' during the closing session of the 5th edition of the Gouna Film Festival in Egypt's Red Sea resort of El-Gouna on October 22, 2021. — AFP photos



Egyptian film director Ali El Arabi poses with the award for the Best Arab Documentary Film 'Captains of Za'atari' during the closing session of the 5th edition of the Gouna Film Festival.



(From left to right) Lebanese film director Mounia Akl, producer Myriam Sassine, actress Yumna Marwan and actresses Jiana and Ciana, react as they receive the El Gouna Green Star award for their movie Costa Brava, during the 5th edition of the El-Gouna Festival.



Tunisian actress Darine Haddad tries to pick up her dog Yorkshire as a GFF official approaches him on the red carpet of the 5th edition of the Gouna Film Festival (GFF).

## Cartoon dreams: Netflix's Japan anime school targets demand

Armed with a set of pencils and a feather to sweep away eraser dust, Hitomi Tateno is training the next generation of anime artists at a new Netflix-funded academy as global demand for the Japanese genre soars. From runaway box office triumph "Demon Slayer" to recent Cannes sensation "Belle", anime has shaken off its reputation as a geeky subculture, drawing in hordes of new fans during virus lockdowns.

But Japan is facing a shortage of skilled animators, in part because most face years toiling in low-paying jobs to learn the ropes, meaning much of the painstaking frame-by-frame drawing work is outsourced overseas. That's something the US streaming giant thinks it can change with its WIT Animator Academy, which offers a group of junior artists free training and a stipend for living expenses as they learn.

George Wada, president of top anime production house WIT Studio, which is running the training with Netflix, compares it to other fast tracks into demanding industries. "If you become an apprentice with a top sushi chef, it may take years before you master all the recipes, but you can go to a sushi academy and finish the whole curriculum in one year," he explained. The six-month course focuses on "in-between" art—the frames between each "master" picture that create the illusion of movement.

Tateno, who has worked on top titles from Studio Ghibli's "Spirited Away" to cult classic "Akira", has built a successful career by in-betweening. "This job is like weaving a rug. It's very delicate and requires patience," the anime veteran told AFP as she checked lines drawn by a student. "Many aspiring animators want to quickly step up to a key animator position, and even if some want to specialize in in-betweening, not many can survive."

### The in-betweeners

There's no doubt about the growing demand for animators. More than 100 million households worldwide watched at least one anime on Netflix in the 12 months to September 2020, a figure that grew 50 percent year on year, the US entertainment behemoth says. The firm hopes the academy will "help the future of Japanese animators to spread their wings to the world through their works", with eventual plans to expand and offer tracks into other animation specialities.



Photo shows Hitomi Tateno, CEO of the anime school Sasayuri, holding colored pencils at her school in Tokyo. — AFP

## EGYPT FILM ON POVERTY RUFFLES FEATHERS TRIGGERING BACKLASH

Egyptian movie "Feathers" has drawn critical acclaim abroad but its unsettling depiction of poverty in the Arab world's most populous country has sparked heated debate at home. Veteran actor Sherif Moneer, who walked out of a screening at Egypt's El Gouna Film Festival this month, has led a patriotic backlash against the film for "presenting Egypt negatively".

But others have praised director Omar El Zohairy for shedding light on a genuine social problem in a way that is both artistic and constructive. On late Friday at the closing ceremony of the fifth edition of the El Gouna Film Festival, "Feathers" won the award for best Arab narrative film. "For me any artistic work will always generate differing views," a beaming Zohairy told AFP on the red carpet, addressing the issue after claiming the prize.

"The film is more important than any award," the director said. "The film is strong because of its feeling, artistic authenticity... and human values." "Feathers" tells the story of Om Mario (Mario's mother), a poor woman from the rural south who struggles to make ends

meet after her husband is transformed into a chicken. The absurdist narrative is performed by an amateur cast, mostly from the country's Coptic Christian minority.

It was the first Egyptian feature film to win a major award at the star-studded Cannes Film Festival this year. The film's opponents, who also include pro-government lawmakers, accuse Zohairy of creating an exaggerated image of squalor that bears no relation to contemporary Egypt. "The slums that we had and those that are disappearing now are better than the scenes represented in the film," Moneer, the actor, said in a television interview this week.

"The state has made great strides in eliminating slums and moving people to excellent alternative furnished housing... We are in a new republic now." Loyalist MP Mahmud Badr took to Twitter to condemn the "making of a movie depicting your country as if there was no development." Samir Sabry, a lawyer with a penchant for suing critics of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, filed a lawsuit against the film's producers for "insulting Egypt and

Egyptians".

### 'Shedding light'

But the rush of well-to-do Egyptians falling over each other to defend government policy and national pride over a movie about poverty was widely lampooned on social media. Economic rights researcher Osama Diab said the film's depiction of poverty was by no means exaggerated, based on the government's own figures. Around one in three of Egypt's 100 million people live below the poverty line. "It has been steadily on the rise in Egypt since the '90s, according to official figures," Diab told AFP.

In the past two years, COVID-19 had further deepened social inequality because of "the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the poor", he said. "The highest concentration of poverty is among women living in the countryside of Upper Egypt, which is ironically the setting of the film." Diab said poverty reduction had never been a priority for government economic policy, which had been set in agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

from seeing "No Time to Die". The industry is hoping that a string of new big-budget flicks - some made months ago but unreleased - will bring back the good times. The massive backlog will begin screening from Diwali weekend - the festival of lights in early November - with "Sooryavanshi" starring Akshay Kumar, one of Bollywood's biggest stars.

### Biryani banned

Bollywood, India's Hindi-language film industry, was worth \$2.5 billion in 2019 and is the world's most prolific. Movies in other languages are also big business. Maharashtra state and its capital Mumbai are among the last to re-open theatres, multiplexes and auditoriums, but for the industry it is "very, very important", film trade analyst Komal Nahta told AFP.

"Maharashtra contributes around 20 percent of the total all-India theatrical revenue and Bombay (Mumbai) is the nerve centre of Bollywood," Nahta said. Occupancy is being capped at 50 percent and no refreshments can be served, a far cry from pre-pandemic days when moviegoers at big multiplexes would be served biryani and ice cream in their seats.

Cinema-goers must wear face masks at all times, but while staff need to be fully vaccinated, there is no vaccination requirement for members of the audience. "The effects of the pandemic will linger but we are hopeful that 2021 will bring back the theatre-going audience," said Ajay Bijli, chairman of India's largest cinema chain PVR. Nahta predicted audiences "will return with a vengeance and therefore we will see collections probably which will be beyond everybody's imagination". — AFP



Bollywood actors Rajkumar Rao and Kriti Sanon (left) pose for pictures during the promotion of their upcoming comedy drama Hindi film 'Hum Do Hamare Do' in Mumbai. — AFP

## Adele storms back to top of UK charts with comeback single

British soul superstar Adele on Friday topped the British charts for the first time in six years with comeback single "Easy On Me", notching the highest first-week sales since 2017. The single, in which she shares with the world details of the traumatic years she has endured since last releasing a record, achieved 217,300 chart sales, the highest week one figures since Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You" in 2017, according to the Official Singles Chart.

It also drew 24 million streams in Britain during its first week of release, smashing the record set by Ariana Grande in 2019. Despite her years out of the limelight, her fans flocked online to hear her new song, which has already attracted almost 100 million views on YouTube. Her much-anticipated new album, "30", will be put out on November 19, the "Hello" and "Rolling in the Deep" singer announced last week. The 33-year-old from north London recently opened up about her "year of anxiety", in which her marriage fell apart. Recording began three years ago, she wrote on Twitter, at a time when her life was "a maze of absolute mess and inner turmoil". She broke a five-year silence with an interview for Vogue, published earlier this month, that spoke of living like a recluse as she battled with anxiety. — AFP

## Cinemas re-open in movie-mad Mumbai

Cinemas began re-opening in movie-mad Mumbai on Friday, the home of Bollywood, with theatres in India's tinseltown pinning their hopes on blockbuster releases from next month to pull back in the crowds. The pandemic torpedoed the industry worldwide but films have a special place in Indian culture, with stars enjoying almost divine status and people often queuing to watch the same movie multiple times.

Lockdowns and a devastating surge in coronavirus cases in April and May kept Indians away from the silver screen, putting dozens of small cinemas out of business and squeezing production firms hard. Many Indians turned instead to streaming platforms such as Netflix, which saw a boom in subscribers and hosted the releases of some new Bollywood films. On Friday, only a few cinemas took advantage of being allowed to open, showing older pictures as well as the new James Bond and US superhero caper "Venom", and punters were few and far between.

"I am an avid cinema enthusiast and I have been waiting for this day for a long time. The last movie I saw was in 2019, before the pandemic began. I am too excited to be back," said Smer Sagar, 18, fresh