

Venice Film Festival—Filmmakers powerfully denounce Israel’s genocide in Gaza

Stefan Steinberg
10 September 2024

The Israeli genocide in Gaza was denounced by a number of filmmakers at the awards ceremony of the 81st Venice International Film Festival held last Saturday.

Accepting the Luigi de Laurentiis “Lion of the Future” prize for best first film, US director Sarah Friedland told the assembled: “As a Jewish-American artist working in a time-based medium, I must note, I’m accepting this award on the 336th day of Israel’s genocide in Gaza and 76th year of occupation.”

Friedland continued to the loud and prolonged applause of the audience:

I believe it is our responsibility as filmmakers to use the institutional platforms through which we work to redress Israel’s impunity on the global stage. I stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine and their struggle for liberation.

Friedland also won the best director award in the Horizons (Orrizonti) section of the Venice festival for *Familiar Touch*. The film’s chief character is Ruth, an 80-year-old woman and former cook who suffers from dementia and has been moved into a nursing home. To the frustration of her nearest relatives, Ruth sometimes fails to recognise her own son, while perfectly remembering her favourite recipes. American actor Kathleen Chalfant, who plays Ruth, won the festival’s award for best actress and also used her acceptance speech to refer to the catastrophic events in Gaza and make a call for “peace, freedom and justice.”

Friedland’s comments in Venice have brought on a torrent of abuse from pro-Zionist, pro-genocide forces.

Her remarks were echoed by those of Palestinian filmmaker Scandar Copti, accepting the Horizons best screenplay prize for his film, *Happy Holidays*, which deals with four characters with very different cultural backgrounds living in Haifa, Israel. Again, to loud applause, Copti declared:

I stand here deeply honoured, yet profoundly affected by the difficult times we’re living through over the past 11 months, our shared humanity and moral compass have been tested as we witness the ongoing genocide in Gaza. This painful reality reminds us of the devastating consequences of oppression, which is a theme in our film. Our film looks at how moral narratives can bring us together as communities, but also can also blind us to the suffering of others.

In the course of the Venice event, a number of actors and filmmakers expressed solidarity with the victims of Israel’s genocidal operation in Gaza, now being extended across the West Bank and threatening to engulf the entire Middle East. On the festival’s opening day, on the red carpet, Italian actor Lino Musella wore a “Free Palestine” T-shirt. He was accompanied by actress Laura Morante, who carried a fan with the handwritten message: “Stop the Gaza genocide. More than 40,000 killed, over 16,000 children.”

One day later, US director Neo Sora, son of Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, attended the photo-call for his film *Happyend* wearing a kaffiyeh and a Palestinian flag badge on his lapel, with a tag bearing the words “Free Palestine.” Other members of his film

team also expressed their support for Palestine.

On the same day, a guest of Italian writer Antonio Scurati wore a T-shirt with the slogan: “Stop the Massacre.” Scurati is the author of a best-selling and widely translated biography of the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, the first volume of which, *M: Son of the Century* (2018), has been turned into an Italian television series with the same title.

Additional expressions of solidarity with the besieged Palestinians in Gaza were offered by Tunisian director Mehdi Barsaoui and actress Fatma Sfar, who with other film team members held up a banner that read “Stop the Genocide.” Barsaoui is the director of *Aicha*, which screened at the festival.

Support also came from veteran Italian actor Fabio Testi, who held up a large sign in Italian that read “16,500 children killed in Gaza, stop the massacre.”

Before the festival began, some 350 film workers signed an open letter protesting the inclusion of two Israeli films in the selection. In their letter, the film professionals criticised the festival management for not taking a stance on the situation in Gaza. The letter read:

We, the undersigned artists, filmmakers and cultural workers, reject complicity with the Israeli regime of apartheid and oppose the artwashing of its Gaza genocide against Palestinians at the 81st Film Festival in Venice. The Venice Film Festival has remained silent about Israel’s atrocities against the Palestinian people. This silence outrages us deeply.

In the event, the festival’s artistic director, Alberto Barbera, rejected the letter and defended the presence of the two films—*Of Dogs and Men* by director Dani Rosenberg and *Why War* by Amos Gitai, whose comments will be dealt with in a separate article.

At the Berlin International Film Festival in February, the German Culture Ministry—headed by a Green Party official—reacted with horror to the principled comments made by Palestinian Basel Adra and Israeli Yuval Abraham, who won the Audience Prize at the festival for their film *No Other Land*. Adra used his acceptance speech to condemn the slaughter in Gaza and call upon the German government to stop sending arms to Israel.

During the Cannes Film Festival in May, France 24 wrote that festival organisers were “at pains to prevent Gaza war protests from taking place on the Croisette,” the seaside setting for the festival. Nevertheless, despite the combined efforts of the festival organisers and a bevy of attention-seeking and provocative #MeToo activists, a number of courageous film workers and activists were able to carry out a series of pro-Palestinian protests.

As the Venice film festival came to a close, protesters chanting “Stop the Genocide” briefly disrupted the opening ceremony at this year’s Toronto International Film Festival.

The manifold and public protests by filmmakers at the Venice festival against the genocidal policy of the Israeli government express the growing anger and disquiet of large numbers of artists and creative workers, whose sentiments in turn reflect the mounting revulsion on the part of broad layers of the working class in Europe and across the globe at the massacre taking place in Gaza.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the state forces and the media to silence or ignore this opposition. However, the response of the respective cultural authorities and governments in France, Germany and Italy to the latest wave of protest is the same—censorship, violent state repression and recourse to increasingly authoritarian forms of rule.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact