

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, Your Excellencies and distinguished guests.

Naturally, I would like to extend my gratitude this evening to Cultural Media Australia, and in particular its executive director Mr Naser Shakhtour, for ensuring that this showcase of creativity and celebration of culture takes place each year. The logistics and promotion involved in making this event as comprehensive and successful as it is are no small feat. A special mention of thanks must also be made to the Council for Australia-Arab Relations (CAAR) for supporting this well-deserved recipient.

I'll now be brief and resort to cliché. Palestinian cinema has come a long way. Truly. While the motifs of identity, nationalism and resistance have been staples of our fledgling film industry since at least the 1960s, expressed mostly through documentaries, it is only since the mid-1990s (or the advent of contemporary cinema in our occupied State) that we have seen a critical shift of focus to Palestinians as human beings, complete and complex as any other ethno-cultural group. Directors such as the magnificent Elia Suleiman, whose work you will be better acquainted with after this evening's screening, were the leading lights in this change of direction.

This brings me to *It Must Be Heaven*. I feel that this movie is the next stepping stone to the fountain of critical acclaim. *Wajib* and *The Reports on Sarah and Saleem* have also brought us closer. And while we are not seeking praise and affirmation from international film critics – because we know that Palestinian talent exists with or without them – the increasing attention of and nodding from those who know cinematic prowess when they see it, do, I think, mean something. And so, as we take the next step this evening, let us keep in mind that although the thorns of occupation and erasure have hampered the fruits of Palestinian creativity, they have not suppressed them. *It Must Be Heaven* will no doubt prove that, as Palestinians, we know who we are and what it is we want. And, who says we can't have comedy with self-reflection? Certainly not Elia...

Thank you all very much for being here this evening, and I do hope that you enjoy the movie.

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