

Press Release



FREEDOM
TO CREATE
Prize

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Mohsen Makhmalbaf Wins 2009 Freedom to Create Prize

LONDON: Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the celebrated Iranian filmmaker and official overseas spokesman for 2009 Iranian presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi, has won the 2009 Freedom to Create Prize. The only prize of its kind, the Freedom to Create Prize celebrates the use of the arts to drive change and build the foundations of creativity in broken societies. Bianca Jagger, Founder and Chair of the Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation, presented Mr Makhmalbaf with his award at a high profile London ceremony at the Victoria & Albert Museum on 25 November 2009.

Commenting on his award, Makhmalbaf said, "When people of my country (Iran) get killed, imprisoned, tortured and raped just for their votes; every award I receive means an opportunity for me to echo their voices to the world: Asking for democracy for Iran and peace for the world."

Makhmalbaf has written and directed 18 feature films and six short films that have been widely presented in international film festivals over the past 10 years. Time magazine selected his 2001 film, *Kandahar*, as one of top 100 films of all time. In 2006, he was a juror at the Venice Film Festival.

Following this year's disputed Iranian elections, Makhmalbaf diverted his attentions from filmmaking to be the voice of defeated presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. As police and paramilitaries suppressed peaceful protestors with firearms, batons and pepper spray, and authorities closed universities, banned rallies and blocked websites, Mir-Hossein Mousavi turned to Makhmalbaf for support.

Makhmalbaf's rise to become leader of the new wave of Iranian cinema came from unlikely beginnings. When he was 15 he formed an underground Islamic militia group and was shot and jailed by the time he was 17. While imprisoned, Makhmalbaf educated himself and underwent an intellectual renaissance after which he distanced himself from violence, believing Iranian society suffers more from cultural poverty than anything else.

His nominating party, ZirZamin, an alternative Iranian media magazine said: "His works were nominated because they promote freedom, understanding, open societies, secular humanism and respect to others. His analysis and depiction tasks people to questions real in everybody's life and social realism. He is not only a film director but an educationalist, author and analyst."

Panellist Daniel Barenboim, acclaimed conductor and founder of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, said of Makhmalbaf: "His voice has been one of the most important artistic contributions from Iran to world culture over the last decades. His films have given international audiences a window into contemporary

Iran. His work in Afghanistan, both artistic and humanitarian, has added valuable facets to the understanding of this troubled country.

He has also fostered a new generation of Iranian filmmakers. Last not least, his support for the recent peaceful protests against the stolen Iranian elections made it more difficult for the regime in Tehran to silence the opposition. Especially in view of the deeply unsettling remarks and intentions of President Ahmadi-Nejad, his efforts to publicize dissenting views deserve support."

The second place prize winner is Burmese refugee women's group, The Kumjing Storytellers, who use giant paper maché dolls to represent their stories of ethnic persecution in Burma and the plight of migrants and refugees from around the world. Kumjing, a Tai women's name meaning 'precious jewel', is used to represent the women who have migrated to live and work in the Thai-Burmese border areas. Since July this year, the military regime has renewed a scorched earth campaign in central Shan state that has driven more than 10,000 villagers from their homes.

Troops have burned down over 500 houses, scores of granaries and forcibly relocated almost 40 villages. The women in The Kumjing Storytellers are among those who have fled to the Burma-Thai border region, often leaving their families behind. Not simply an artwork, but a living art action, The Journey of Kumjing is a performance in which these persecuted women can tell their stories, challenge discrimination and assert their human rights. Some 250 paper maché-dolls travel across Thailand and the world to raise awareness of their plight. "The message of the piece is one of courage, hope and inspiration. We want to humanize migrants in the eyes of society," say the women. The Storytellers also want to inspire society to change the way it thinks and behaves towards 'outsiders'.

The third place prize winner is Afghan female artist Sheenkai Alam Stanikzai, who uses video performance, installation and photography to tackle the subjugation and violent persecution of women in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. Stanikzai is one of a generation of Afghans who grew up during the Taliban which censored culture and banned music, and her art explores the re-emergence of Afghan spirit after years of oppression. Her installation piece features the myth Chel Dokhtaraan, a historical event when 40 Afghan women committed suicide by jumping into wells during an invasion. Stanikzai believes these 'honourable' deaths are "in the past." She explains: "What is happening today is that women, more than 40, are dying every day in different circumstances." Her work symbolizes the violent acts – public executions, floggings, stonings and hangings – that are being perpetrated today against females both in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries.

Prize founder and Chairman of R.F. Chandler, Richard F. Chandler said he was humbled by the bravery of this year's winners adding their courage and stories epitomised the daily sacrifices made by artists on frontlines from around the world.

"We celebrate not only the power of art to change lives, but also the bravery of artists who use their work to fight oppression and injustice and create a brighter future for all.

"The winners for the 2009 Freedom to Create Prize are global ambassadors for the power of creativity in building peaceful and prosperous societies."

Freedom to Create Youth Prize

The Freedom to Create Youth Prize, presented by leading human rights lawyer and member of the Freedom to Create Prize judging panel Geoffrey Robertson QC, was awarded to Poimboi Veeyhay Koindu (The Orphan Boys of Koindu). During deliberations, Mr Robertson said, "Here they are, enormous energy, using art to come to terms in their own way, the fact they were violated and drugged and forced to assassinate their own parents. Theirs is an outstanding use of arts to overcome the most barbaric of crimes." This group of

former child soldiers from Sierra Leone formed a theatre troupe under the guidance of David Alan Harris, a dance artist and mental health clinician specialized in torture rehabilitation. Posted to Sierra Leone by the Centre for the Victims of Torture to work with the boys, David shared with them a dance process called Rehearsing Connection, as part of their rehabilitation process.

David Alan Harris was in London to collect the award on behalf of the group. He comments, "The dozen youth members of Poimboi Veeyhay Koindu (PVK) and their adult facilitators are honoured over the awarding of the Freedom to Create Youth Prize. As former child soldiers, they have worked hard to move away from their horrific past and to find a pathway toward reconciliation with their community, so devastated by the 11-years' war. The PVK youths are deeply grateful for the chance to create a new project that will apply the monetary award associated with the prize in a way that will continue to foster community reconciliation and healing."

Most of the former boy soldiers were between five and ten years old when they were abducted and forced to watch the RUF kill their families. When nearing the last of his dance sessions with the boys, Harris asked them what they wanted to accomplish. Citing the need for forgiveness, the group created a performance, Healing and Forgiveness, for the community in which they would depict their roles in the war. Their resulting 25 minute play portrays the agony of the boys' forced recruitment and other coerced violence, eventually asking forgiveness from the local chief, neighbours and families. One youth, who had been forced to kill his own parents, introduced the performance, explaining to the audience that Healing and Forgiveness described: "How we were forced to do things; how we were punished; and how we punished others." Another boy spoke directly to the community: "We are your children. Please accept us back." At the end of the performance, the group were welcomed back into their community with open arms."

Freedom to Create Imprisoned Artist Prize

Cameroonian singer Lapiro de Mbanga has been awarded the Imprisoned Artist Prize. The popular singer, who was arrested in 2008, was charged with inciting youth unrest during the mass strikes and demonstrations in Cameroon. The government claims that one of Lapiro's songs, Constitution Constipeé, had incited demonstrations and contained objections to President Biya remaining in power after 2011. The award, presented by award winning documentary maker Nick Broomfield, was collected on Lapiro's behalf by Ole Reitov and Marie Korp of advocacy group Freemuse, his nominating party.

In September this year Lapiro was sentenced to three years in jail. He has become a symbol of peaceful resistance to the erosion of democracy in Cameroon, but has paid a significant price; imprisonment, deteriorating health and financial bankruptcy. Since his imprisonment at Douala Prison, Lapiro's family lives under extremely difficult financial constraints. His wife can only travel the six-hour bus journey once a week, and she and his five children are in danger. Sharing a cell with 50 others, Lapiro is not allowed to exercise, he endures appalling sanitary conditions and he is given insufficient food.

Lapiro sent a message to the ceremony via Freemuse. Thanking the judges and Freedom to Create for the award, he commented, "The prize is not just for me but for all artists who fight for freedom of expression. Winning the prize will help my family enormously. My wife and children are suffering a lot while I'm imprisoned."

Winner of the 2008 Freedom to Create Prize, Zimbabwean playwright Cont Mhlanga said of Lapiro: "It is sad that a comment on political behaviour can lead to such a level of abuse. What is the wisdom of human kind being subjects to political leaders if they will not be allowed to pass comment to how the leader's behaviours affects their daily lives? Viva Lapiro!"

The prize was judged by a panel of high profile artists, opinion formers, and human rights experts: Leading international human rights lawyer and jurist on the UN's Internal Justice Council Geoffrey Robertson QC;

composer and founder of West-Eastern Divan Orchestra Daniel Barenboim; co-founder, along with Koffi Annan, of global diplomatic group, The Elders, and founder of Indian women and micro-finance movements Dr Ela Bhatt; BBC arts correspondent Razia Iqbal; *Time Out* founder and chair of Human Rights Watch Tony Elliot; award-winning Anglo-Indian artist Sacha Jafri; New York-based arts lawyer Peter Stern; artist Ana Tzarev; and Zimbabwean playwright Cont Mhlanga, winner of the inaugural Freedom to Create Prize in 2008.

Notes to Editors:

There are three prize winners in the Main Prize category, who will share a prize pool of US\$75,000. The first place prize of US\$50,000 will be split equally between the winner of the award, and an organisation nominated by them to further the cause that their work has highlighted. The second place prize of US\$15,000 will be similarly divided equally between the winner and their nominated organisation. The US\$10,000 third place prize will be shared the same way.

The Youth Prize is open to artists who are under the age of 18. The US\$25,000 prize will be divided into two. The winner(s) will receive US\$10,000. The remaining US\$15,000 will be given to an organisation nominated by them to further the cause their artwork has highlighted.

The final category, the Imprisoned Artist Prize, focuses on artists who are imprisoned as a result of their art and the role of their work in highlighting injustice. This prize differs slightly from the other categories, in that the panel will place less emphasis on the artist's work and more on the personal risks incurred by them, the message conveyed through their work and its impact. A single prize of US\$25,000 will be directed towards securing the artist's release, advocating on behalf of them and their cause and offering support to their family.

About Freedom to Create:

Creativity is the foundation of prosperity
Prosperous societies are founded upon creativity, which expresses itself through new ideas, innovative products and services, and art and culture. Societies that foster and encourage creative expression are building strong foundations for economic, political and cultural development. These will be the societies that lead tomorrow's world, through innovation and enterprise.

Freedom to Create

Freedom to Create (www.freedomtcreate.com) is working to establish further building blocks for creativity. These activities include providing grants to support projects that harness the creative arts to improve lives on the frontlines of poverty, conflict and suffering; and the annual Freedom to Create Prize which recognises artists who promote creative freedom in the developing world.

R.F. Chandler (www.rfchandler.com), is a Singapore-based private investment group with more than 20 years' experience investing in emerging markets.

Support Freedom to Create Prize by joining the Facebook group: Freedom to Create Prize.