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The President's Cake (12a)

Dir: Hasan Hadi

with: Baneen Ahmad Nayyef, Waheed Thabet

Khreibat, Sajad Mohamad Qasem

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Synopsis: Iraq, 1990s. Nine-year-old Lamia is tasked with baking a birthday cake for President Saddam Hussein, a task fraught with danger should she fail. Sanctions mean basic ingredients like sugar and flour are nearly impossible to find. Accompanied by neighbour Saeed, her grandmother and her pet rooster, she leaves her home in the Iraqi marshes for the city bazaar in search of the things she needs, but finds that under an authoritarian regime, everyone is out for themselves.

In the early 1990s, Iraq was subjected to a wave of crippling sanctions in the wake of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait – sanctions that left the economy in tatters, plunged the middle and working classes into bottomless poverty, and led to a proliferation of corruption.

In the face of these extreme conditions, Saddam remained steadfast in conducting lavish celebrations for his birthday and forcing institutions nationwide to follow suit. Chief among the most bizarre undertakings imposed on schools were mandatory birthday cakes baked by students – a ritual that began in the mid-1980s and lasted until the fall of the Ba'ath party in 2003.

Iraqi first-time writer-director Hasan Hadi draws on childhood memories – shaped by his firsthand experience of the repercussions of the sanctions – in his striking, deeply moving feature, winner of the *Caméra d'Or* for best first film at Cannes in 2025.

Newcomer Baneen Ahmed Nayyef, in one of the most affecting child performances in recent Arab cinema, plays Lamia, an elementary school student residing in the marshlands south of Iraq with her elderly grandmother, Bibi (Waheeda Thabet). With Bibi made redundant from her job – a routine occurrence in the aftermath of the sanctions – the last thing Lamia needs is an additional financial burden.

Catastrophe strikes when Lamia falls victim to a class draw that imposes on her the job of making the notorious cake. At this time, the cake's ingredients, flour, eggs and sugar, were considered luxury items. Their scarcity in the pair's village propels them, along with Lamia's best friend Saeed (Sajad Mohamad Qasem) and an endearing cockerel, to embark on a hazardous odyssey to a nearby city in search of the necessary supplies.

Along their journey, the pair cross paths with a constellation of figures: a jovial soldier blinded by an American missile and en route to wed a woman he has never seen; a benevolent postman carrying

Saddam's fan mail; a predatory shopkeeper who attempts to trap Lamia; and a pregnant customer who agrees to sleep with a grocery shop manager in exchange for some of the supplies Lamia is seeking.

At once a road movie, a magic realist fable and an incisive portrait of the seldom-seen Iraq of the 1990s, *The President's Cake* recalls both Abbas Kiarostami and Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* (1955). But, far from pandering to a Western gaze, Hasan imbues his film with visual and narrative codes that are distinctly Iraqi, evincing a singular cultural and historical sensibility that was missing from previous Iraqi films.

A reference to the epic of Gilgamesh – one of humanity's oldest surviving works of literature – gestures toward the nation's submerged pre-Islamic heritage; the meticulous recreation of the Mesopotamian marshes as they were in the 1990s serves as an ode to a landscape obliterated and drained by Saddam in retaliation for the Shiite uprisings that originated there; the depiction of Ba'athist informant-teachers, instructed to report the slightest act of dissent, captures the moral erosion and pervasive desperation that came to define the period. *The President's Cake* functions as an evocation of collective trauma and the Stockholm syndrome that millions of Iraqi children like Hasan grew up internalising.

The characters in Hadi's Iraq fall into two camps: those struggling to preserve their humanity in an increasingly Darwinian terrain, and those already dehumanised by the indiscriminate sanctions carelessly imposed by an oblivious, detached West. Lamia belongs to the former camp: a determined girl struggling to carve out a place for herself in a world governed by a punishing malice she cannot yet comprehend.

Hadi deftly interlaces the starkness of sanctions-era Iraq with the marshlands' mysticism – a realm steeped in impending loss. The water he repeatedly returns to carries not only the ghosts of the nation's glorious past but also the fragile future and dreams of innocent lives like Lamia and Saeed. The marshlands' meditative, otherworldly vistas stand in glaring contrast to the city's exhaustingly cluttered hustle and bustle – a visual dialectic mirroring the divide between Iraq's smothered soul and its ruthless lived reality.

To Hadi's credit, *The President's Cake* never slips into the misery porn of say, the Lebanese drama *Capernaum* (2018). The director infuses his work with humour, resisting any moralising over characters whose transgressions are inseparable from their declining society. He further underscores the relative liberalism of pre-US-invasion Iraq towards sex and religion, crafting what may well be the most authentic cinematic portrait of the Persian Gulf nation to date. At a time when the West continues to impose sanctions on so-called enemy states, *The President's Cake* stands as a strong reminder of the human cost exacted by such policies.

Credits

Lamia	Baneen Ahmad Nayyef
Bibi	Waheed Thabet Khreibat
Saeed	Sajad Mohamad Qasem
Muthanna	Muthanna Malagi
Musa	Ahmad Qasem Saywan
Saeed's father	Maytham Mreidi
Jasim	Rahim Alhaj
Majdi	Thaer Salem
Clothing seller	Ali Khalaf
Rahma	Fatima Abouharoon
Bus driver's assistant	Mahmoud Mazen Lazen
Police captain's assistant	Aqeel Wadi
Izzat	Mohammed Rheimeh
Hiyam	Rokia Alwadi
Director	Hasan Hadi
Screenplay	Hasan Hadi
Cinematography	Tudor Vladimir Panduru
Editor	Andu Radu
Production design	Anamaria Tecu
Art direction	Luca Bucura

Iraq 2025. 105 mins

Take 2

It may contain fairy-tale ingredients, including a risky lottery, a pet cockerel confidante and children on a mission, but *The President's Cake* comes iced with the unsweetened reality of life under Saddam Hussein in 1990s Iraq. New York-based Hasan Hadi, who grew up in southern Iraq, steps up from short films with a confident and humanistic debut that is a kindred spirit of Iranian children's movies such as *The White Balloon* and the youth-focused work of Hirokazu Kore-eda.

Its winning central performances, increasingly moving story and ideas that are accessible to older children as well as adults should help *The President's Cake* go down well with distributors and audiences after its debut in Cannes Directors' Fortnight. The presence of *Nightbitch* director Marielle Heller and Oscar-winning screenwriter Eric Roth (*Forrest Gump*) as executive producers will further raise its profile.

Life in Iraq's Mesopotamian Marshes for nine-year-old Lamia (Banin Ahmad Nayef) and her grandmother (Waheed Thabet Khreibat) is far from easy. International sanctions on the country are biting deep, making food and medicine scarce and pushing prices through the roof – a situation that is economically brought home as we watch Lamia's grandma haggle over tomatoes. Fighter jets cutting across the sky in an otherwise idyllic scene of boats sailing through the marshes remind us that this is the real world, though, complete with all its dangers.

The population's struggle doesn't stop dictator Saddam Hussein from insisting everyone celebrates his birthday, with the film unfolding over the two days leading up to one such event. The despot is a recurring presence in the film, with photos and propaganda paintings of him adorning the walls almost everywhere – just one element of the precise production design from Annmarie Tecu. That, along with a soundtrack featuring music driven by traditional instruments from the likes of Khyam Allami and Omar Bachir, creates a vibrant sense of time and place.

For the kids at the local school, including Lamia and her best friend Saeed (Sajad Mohamad Qasem), Saddam's birthday means their names are put into a tin for a draw that seems as threatening as

anything in *The Hunger Games*. Those unlucky enough to be selected have to provide items for the celebrations or face dire consequences. Saeed is chosen to bring fruit while Lamia finds herself on the hook for the cake. Armed with a list of ingredients, a handful of saleable possessions – including a pocket watch that once belonged to Lamia's father – and the little girl's scene-stealing pet cockerel Hindi, Lamia and her grandma head off to the nearest city. A ride from a passing, jovial mailman (oud player and composer Rahim AlHaj proving he also has acting chops) is the first of a smattering of coincidences that pepper the story but these fit well with the drama's more fairy-tale elements and are used sparingly by the director. When Lamia realises her grandma has more than just shopping on her to-do list, she runs off with Hindi and, after encountering Saeed, becomes determined to buy the ingredients, while her ailing grandma attempts to persuade the police to look for her granddaughter.

The buzzing flies in Tamas Zanyi's (*Son Of Saul*) rich sound design are just the start of suggestions that something is rotting. Corruption is rife, whether it's taking apples from children or much worse. The youngsters approach every challenge with a purity that puts them at risk of exploitation, adding tension to almost all their encounters, even those that initially appear benign or helpful, especially when dealing with the patriarchy. The casual way in which they are taken advantage of by adults adds to the sense of the predatory being part of everyday life.

The harsher wider world is leavened by the children's friendship, and the writer/director drawing on his young stars' natural energy as their periodic staring contests become increasingly resonant. Tudor Vladimir Panduru's camera also pays close attention to Nayef, whose engaging performance is as much about her shifting body language and micro-expressions as it is about dialogue.

Hadi has an eye for detail, echoes and lyrical touches. Firecrackers and a cola bottle dropped from a height create bomb-like explosions, eggs hold a fragility, while a piece of cloth caught in an updraft carries a flutter of the spiritual. He injects traditional elements with unpredictability that reminds us in the real world happy endings often come with a question mark.

Amber Wilkinson: Screen International

Our next screening:

Friday March 27th, 2026. 7.30pm

It Was Just an Accident (Iran 2025)

Mechanic Vahid thinks he recognises a stranded motorist seeking help as the prison officer who tortured him. He kidnaps him and decides to take revenge - but because he isn't sure he has the right man, he decides to seek help from a group of friends and fellow victims.

Filmed in secret by Jafar Panahi Iran's most famous director, and distinguished by winning the Palme D'Or at Cannes in 2025 - Panahi's second such award - *It Was Just an Accident* is a powerful exploration of Iran's repressive and punitive culture and the impact it can have on those who offend the system.

Summer Season 2026

The Society will be holding a summer season of films at the Terry O'Toole theatre, North Hykeham.

Inspired by our screening of *Nouvelle Vague* (the last film of this season) 4 films - all linked to the New Wave - will be shown. The dates are; May 22nd, June 5th, June 12th and June 26th.

The cost for all 4 will be £17.50 per head. Details of the films and how to sign up will be available at our next film, *It Was Just an Accident*.