



3 films about Mahdi Karira, a puppeteer in Gaza

Dear National Centers, members and partners of UNIMA International, here is the file about films and documentaries on Mahdi Karira.

Context

In the context of a major international solidarity movement in support of puppeteers in Gaza, UNIMA International, in conjunction with THEMAA, is organizing a series of support activities: contributing to the drafting of applications for rescue and evacuation programs, relaying fundraising campaigns, providing online training, etc.

Among these activities, one focuses specifically on puppeteer Mahdi Karira. To support Mahdi, we are fortunate to be able to draw upon three recent films (2024-2025) made about his work. We have compiled them, and their directors and producers have agreed to grant the rights to organize screenings to raise funds for him. We invite you to join UNIMA International's support campaign by organizing one of these screenings.

The three films are as follows (detailed presentation below):



1- "We truly deserve life!" (Truly, we deserve to live!) - a recording of a sand theater performance directed by Catherine Gignac, based on Mahdi's testimony during the Float2Gaza event held at Floating Castle (Slovenia) in the summer of 2025.

Duration: 9'30"



2- The documentary Everything That Is, directed by Shourideh C. Molavi (2025), which follows Mahdi as he creates his puppets amidst the rubble of Gaza and features previously unpublished poems by the Palestinian poet Jawad al-Aqqad.

Duration: 20 min.



3- The short film "The Awakening," directed by Mahdi Karera with his puppets for the From Ground Zero project (2024), of which it is the 22nd and final chapter.

Duration: 4'57"

The puppeteers of Gaza project, organized by UNIMA International, and other actions undertaken in support of other puppeteers:

<https://www.unima.org/en/artists-of-hope-supporting-gazas-puppeteers/>

To learn more about the solidarity campaign for the puppeteers of Gaza organized by UNIMA International and other actions carried out in support of other puppeteers:

<https://www.unima.org/en/artists-of-hope-supporting-gazas-puppeteers/>



Instructions for organizing screenings

If you are planning to organize this event, here are the steps to follow:

1. REQUEST: Notify the coordination team of your intention to organize a screening by **providing the planned date(s) and location(s) of the screening:**

Clément Peretjatko – UNIMA Treasurer

 treasurer@unima.org

2. CONTRACT SIGNING: Once this contact has been established, the coordination team will send you a contract to sign, along with the mandatory information and communication materials for the event. This signed contract must be returned to Clément Peretjatko (treasurer@unima.org).

3. DOWNLOAD: Once the contract is signed, you will receive the links to download the movie files.

4- FEEDBACK: Once the screening and fundraising are complete, contact the coordination team (Clément Peretjatko / Raphaële Fleury) to:

- report the amount raised and
- provide some photos and testimonials from viewers (which we will share with the filmmakers and producers).

5- PAYMENT OF THE FUNDS: The filmmakers have kindly granted permission for the screening of their works on the condition that the proceeds are shared 50/50 between



Mahdi Karira (puppeteer) and Shorouk Alaila (camerawoman for the documentary Everything That Is), both based in Gaza.

In accordance with these conditions, you will transfer the proceeds of your fundraising, divided equally between the two parties, via the following links. Two QR codes linking to these two campaigns will be included in the communication materials:

50% for Mahdi, via his GoFundMe campaign:

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/hilft-mahdi-die-puppentheater-fur-gazakinder-aufzubauen>

50% for Shourouk, via the PayPal account of Shourideh C. Molavi, director of the documentary: "Shourideh Molavi" @EverythingThatIs

The coordination team will be responsible for verifying the deposit of the amounts declared in the two campaigns.

As a guide, in Gaza today:

- a tent site costs \$500/month
 - renting an apartment (in a partially destroyed building): \$1,000/month
 - clothing costs \$50 (winter is approaching)
 - feeding a family of 9 costs \$70/day
 - additional costs to the budget include: firewood for cooking, transportation, etc.
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Biography: Mahdi Karera



Mahdi Atiya Karira is a 46-year-old Palestinian puppeteer and writer. As Gaza lacks formal training institutions or a traditional puppetry scene, he learned puppet construction under Palestinian artists in Jerusalem, at cultural centers in the West Bank, and with experienced Egyptian puppeteers. He can proudly consider himself the first to have “introduced the idea of string puppets to the Gaza Strip.”

He founded the Khuyut Theatre (“Theatre of Threads”), where he trained around fifteen young people (including twelve women) in marionette construction and performance.

The troupe created nearly eighty puppets and primarily performed original plays written by Mahdi for young audiences. Besides his small home workshop, Mahdi also worked in a larger space at Holst Park in Gaza City, a community venue for children’s education and recreation. In early 2019, the Khuyut Theatre drew international media attention for its innovative reuse of materials under blockade conditions—for instance, extracting pigments from fishing gear to create paints.



Over the past two years, Mahdi's home, texts, most of his puppets, sets, and workshop have been destroyed in successive bombings of Gaza City. After the troupe's dispersal and the loss of its materials due to displacement and airstrikes, Mahdi began rebuilding a puppet theatre in Deir al-Balah. His new troupe consists of his own family—his mother, wife, and six children—whom he is teaching to construct and animate puppets. They have already created eighteen new figures from tin cans, scraps of fabric, and debris salvaged from bombed ruins.

Although working with cans from humanitarian aid is emotionally painful for him, Mahdi sees it as his duty to transform

this emblem of destruction into joy—to pass that joy on to the children he performs for and teaches. The expressive power of his latest creations inspired visual artist Roman Linacero to produce a mural dedicated to Mahdi's puppets at the *Plein Champ Festival* in Le Mans in 2014.

A short film by Mahdi concludes *From Ground Zero*, a film by Rashid Masharawi, shortlisted for the 97th Academy Awards and originally scheduled to premiere at the 77th Cannes Film Festival (the screening was canceled for political reasons).



Through the scope of his repertoire, the number and expressiveness of his puppets, the scale of his workshops, and the artists he has trained, Mahdi Karera stands as Gaza's leading puppet master. His work has earned him international recognition before and after the current conflict, with numerous press features, photo essays, documentaries, and exhibitions (including in Norway and Jordan) highlighting his artistic resilience.

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Mahdi Karira is one of three puppeteers from Gaza whom THEMAA (UNIMA-France) and Ma'an for Gaza supported in preparing their application for the PAUSE program (Collège de France), designed to facilitate the evacuation and period of respite for researchers and artists in danger. If selected, he will be hosted in Lyon (a consortium of organizations and companies centered around the Musée des Arts de la Marionnette - Musées Gadagne).

He is also developing a project for a mobile theater and cultural center in the form of a truck to travel throughout the Gaza Strip, bringing entertainment, culture, and care (particularly through art therapy) to as many people as possible across the territory. This project could provide employment for several people.

The funds raised through screenings will support these two projects, as well as ensuring the survival of Mahdi and his family while awaiting a possible evacuation.



Film 1 - "We truly deserve life!": about the filming of the sand theatre performance



Context

The performance took place on August 7, 2025, during an event entitled "Float to Gaza," organized by the Floating Castle Festival in support of Gaza. In this performance, international artists gathered at Sneznik Castle (Stari trg pri Ložu, Slovenia) and joined artists from Gaza via a live stream to present co-creations. The entire performance was projected onto the castle in front of a large audience. Catherine Gignac was on site, in front of the castle, to perform the live sand drawing while Mahdi told his story live from Gaza via video conference.



Credits

Story told live from Gaza: Mahdi Karira

Live translation at the castle: Husam Abed

Live sand drawing at the castle: Catherine Gignac

Live music from Gaza: Ahmad Mueen

Catherine Gignac

Catherine Gignac is a multidisciplinary artist working at the intersection of visual and performance arts. She creates sand theatre performances, a rare form of expression in which she draws live with sand on a light table, guided by music. Her drawings come to life and transform before the audience's eyes in a wordless, universal visual language. Catherine studied Fine Arts at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal (Canada) and in Florence (Italy), as well as French literature at McGill University. Her latest show, *Ballet des Ombres* (2025), is a wordless piece that unfolds like a visual poem, projected live on a large screen. This is her first full-length solo performance. She previously created *Rêve de sable*, a short sand theatre piece (2024). She can also be seen at work in *Jocelyn Sioui's Frétilant et agile* (2023).

Learn more: <https://www.art-catherine.com/>



Film 2 - About the documentary Everything That Is

Logline

Mahdi Karira, Gaza's singular puppet maker, transforms the rubble of war into puppets, offering a profound reflection on the role of art amid genocide.

Synopsis

Mahdi Karira, the most experienced puppet master in the occupied Gaza Strip, guides his audience through Gaza's devastated streets as he turns grey, lifeless rubble—often bearing traces of destroyed Palestinian homes and bodies—into living characters.

Using remnants of war—such as cans, wood, and fragments of bombed family homes—Mahdi creates puppets and dolls for performances in displaced persons' camps, bringing moments of joy to those enduring Israel's ongoing campaign of genocidal warfare in Gaza.

While his own family lives in a tent alongside his puppets, Mahdi shares his reflections on art, displacement, poetry, and survival in times of genocide. The film combines his narrative with original footage shot by the director inside Gaza, portraying the daily, systematically engineered colonial landscape. These images are accompanied by previously unpublished poems by Gazan poet Jawad Al-Aqqad.

Together, these elements document the urgent, ongoing work of a generation of Palestinian artists in Gaza, striving to represent their communities beyond the colonial and humanitarian lens of suffering and displacement.



Link to the trailer:

<https://vimeo.com/1125256393/50daa98040?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

Biographies of the Filmmakers

Shourideh C. Molavi – Director & Producer

Shourideh C. Molavi is a visual artist, scholar, and practitioner based between New York City, Stockholm, and Palestine. She serves as Senior Lecturer at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights. For over a decade, she has also worked as the dedicated Palestine researcher for Forensic Architecture, connecting their investigations with the work of civil society, artists, grassroots movements, filmmakers, and human rights defenders.

Her career spans more than twenty years of academic, legal, and field research in Palestine/Israel, focused on human and minority rights, particularly the relationship between law, violence, and power—all of which inform her urgent artistic documentation of human relations and creative resistance.

Shurouq Alaila – Footage

Shurouq Alaila is a Palestinian journalist, producer, and researcher reporting from the Gaza Strip. After her husband, Roshdi Sarraj—co-founder of the production company Ain Media—was killed in the ongoing war, she assumed leadership of the company. Despite repeated displacement, she continues to document the war's devastating impact on Gaza's civilians.



Laura Poitras – Executive Producer

Laura Poitras is an Academy Award– and Pulitzer Prize–winning filmmaker and journalist. Her latest film, *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*, premiered in competition at the 2022 Venice International Film Festival, where it won the Golden Lion for Best Film—the second documentary ever to receive this honor. It was nominated for both an Academy Award and a BAFTA, and won an Independent Spirit Award.

Her film *CITIZENFOUR* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary, as well as BAFTA and DGA awards. Poitras’s reporting on the NSA’s global mass surveillance programs earned the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service and the George Polk Award for National Security Reporting.

Her earlier film *My Country, My Country*, the first in her *Post-9/11 Trilogy*, documented the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Poitras is a 2012 MacArthur Fellow and a founding board member of the Freedom of the Press Foundation.

Henry Plavidal – Editor & Producer

Henry Plavidal is a New York– and Paris–based editor, producer, and screenwriter. A relative newcomer to the industry, he is currently co-writing and co-producing a film with the producer of *The Green Knight* (2021) and *A Ghost Story* (2017).



Film 3 - About the short film “The Awakening” and the From Ground Zero project

The project

From Ground Zero is a compilation of 22 short films made in Gaza. Initiated by Palestinian filmmaker Rashid Masharawi, this project was created to give a voice to 22 Gazan artists to tell stories of the ongoing war.

The Ground Zero project was launched by Rashid Masharawi, a Palestinian filmmaker from Gaza, during the war that erupted after the attacks of October 7, 2023. This project arose from the observation that the voices of Gazans are rarely heard, that it is essential to have records of lived experiences to preserve memory, and that the history of the occupation of Palestine cannot be rewritten without taking into account the experiences of Palestinians, particularly those of Gaza.

In this context, it is not easy to imagine a thriving creative space, yet it exists. The Gaza Strip has its artistic talents, which nothing should prevent from flourishing. This is how the idea of composing a 112-minute film from about twenty very short stories, averaging three minutes each, was born. This allows for a multiplicity of perspectives, ensures the feasibility of filming, which is necessarily short and scattered throughout the Gaza Strip, and illustrates creative fertility by borrowing from different genres: fiction, documentary, docudrama, animation, and even experimental film. The film From Ground Zero concludes with The Awakening, Mahdi's short film.



Selections and Awards

The film was shortlisted to represent Palestine at the 97th Academy Awards in December but was not nominated. The 77th Cannes Film Festival had planned to screen it, but it was ultimately rejected for political reasons. Masharawi screened the film outdoors in protest. The world premiere took place on July 5, 2024, at the fifth Amman International Film Festival, followed by screenings in mid-July at the 70th Taormina International Film Festival, on September 9 at the Toronto International Film Festival, and on September 28 at the 17th Toronto International Palestinian Film Festival.

Other festivals that have screened *From Ground Zero* include the Cairo International Film Festival; the Valencia Mediterranean Film Festival (October 2024); and the Antenna Documentary Film Festival in Sydney in February 2025.

Synopsis of *The Awakening*, a short film by Mahdi Karira

Amid the devastation in Gaza, director Mahdi Karira weaves a haunting story using puppets, intertwining fragments of memory, war, and survival. *Sabaya / The Awakening* unfolds the story of Abu Al-Majd, a man who lost his memory during the 2014 war. Nearly a decade later, as new waves of bombing strike in 2023, the trauma brutally brings him back to consciousness. To his shock, he discovers he has a wife and son he doesn't remember.

As his memories slowly resurface, his wife recounts their life under siege: years of displacement, loss, and resilience, from 2014 to 2024. Unable to reconcile himself with this harsh reality, Abu Al-Majd begs for the solace of oblivion. But while he longs to erase



the pain, his family insists on remembering: memory, they say, is their homeland's last refuge.

Sabaya / The Awakening is a poetic exploration of the consequences of war on identity and family, where the struggle to forget clashes with the duty to remember. Through puppetry and allegory, the film addresses a universal question: when reality becomes unbearable, is memory a burden or the only thread that keeps us alive?

Link to the trailer:

<https://youtu.be/Qu1ynfL1g70?si=ojUmbZZfPB1wAEh>

The Production Team:

Rashid Masharawi

Rashid Masharawi is a renowned Palestinian filmmaker whose films, which ironically depict daily life in Palestine, have won numerous awards and been screened at many international and Arab film festivals for decades. In 1996, he founded the Cinema Production and Distribution Center in Ramallah to train young Palestinian filmmakers and develop Palestinian cinema. More recently, he founded the Masharawi Fund for Gaza Films and Filmmakers, which currently supports over twenty filmmakers in Gaza, notably through the "Ground Zero" project.



Laura Nikolov and Coorigines Production

Coorigines Production is a film production company dedicated to promoting intercultural exchange and rarely heard voices. Focused on independent, global cinema, Coorigines seeks to foster cultural dialogue and offer unique perspectives through its films. Founded in 2023, the company draws its identity from the diverse background of its founder, Laura Nikolov, who studied history and film in Paris. Her previous roles, including director of an Alliance Française and consultant for film festivals, enrich Coorigines' vision and approach. Notable projects include collaborations with filmmakers Rashid Masharawi and Denis Gheerbrant, and most recently, the project From Ground Zero, a collection of 22 short films shot in Gaza in 2024. Committed to cultural and artistic diversity, Coorigines Production actively participates in numerous international festivals, including Cannes and TIFF, where its projects have received awards. Currently, the company is developing several projects, both documentaries and feature-length fiction films, which explore the thoughts and perspectives of people from around the world, including the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

Michael Moore, Executive Producer

The film is championed by Michael Moore as executive producer: "These filmmakers have accomplished a cinematic miracle. They have created a brilliant film amidst what Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have now declared to be genocide."

Learn more: https://www.coorigines-production.fr/from-ground-zero_v1/

Link to the full film press kit:

<https://kdrive.infomaniak.com/app/share/901589/b3b4261e-2d4a-4400-9b1f-aab57e8d4e9a/files/22241>

