



Presents

THE PRESIDENT'S CAKE

A film by Hasan Hadi
105 mins, Iraq, 2025
Language: Arabic, English

Distribution

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SYNOPSIS

While people across 1990's Iraq struggle to survive, 9-year old Lamia has been selected to prepare a cake to celebrate the President's birthday. In a landscape of fear and scarcity, where basic ingredients are nearly impossible to find, Lamia sets out on a determined journey throughout the big city in search of eggs, flour, and sugar. Accompanied by her grandmother, her loyal friend Saeed, and her pet rooster Hindi, she navigates vendors and police officers along the way. *The President's Cake*, Winner of the Camera D'Or and Audience Award at this year's Cannes Film Festival, and the Official Iraq Entry for the Best International Film Academy Award 2025, embodies innocence, imagination, and inner strength.

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CAST

Baneen Ahmed Nayyef	Lamia
Sajad Mohamad Qasem	Saeed
Waheed Thabet Khreibat	Bibi
Rahim AlHaj	Jasim

CREW

Writer & Director	Hasan Hadi
Producer	Leah Chen Baker
Director of Photography	Tudor Vladimir Panduru RSC
Editor	Andu Radu
Production Designer	Anamaria Tecu
Costume Designer	Tamara Nouri
Sound Designer	Tamás Zányi

Produced by **TPC Film LLC**

FROM

HASAN HADI

The story comes from my childhood memories growing up in Iraq during Saddam's time. Every year, our teacher would walk in with a bowl and ask us to throw our names into it. He would then draw the name of the student responsible for baking the President's birthday cake and providing other items—fruits, decorations, cleaning supplies, and flowers. One year, I was picked to be the flower boy. I still have the photo of me holding the flowers somewhere in my library, and I remember my family's relief because all I had to bring was flowers. Of course, at the time, sanctions had made corruption so widespread that you could escape the draw if you offered the teacher a service—fixing his bike, giving him a haircut. Then you'd survive. But if you couldn't, your chances were slim.

What was the writing process like?

For my first feature film, I wanted to tackle a subject, world, theme, and characters that I am familiar with. I was determined to develop these memories into a film about that period in Iraq—depicting the daily reality of its people, but above all, celebrating the power of love and friendship. We have something in Arabic called “Maktoob”, meaning “it is written” or “destiny” which really means that you can't escape certain things because they're written on you.

The writing process didn't take so long. I knew the world and the characters that I was writing about. I knew that the film would have a taste of fabulism and natural realism in it. Eventually, I believe I arrived at a draft that I thought was ready to be shot, but as we started the pre-production and scouting for our cast, I almost put the script aside and surrendered to what the world was giving/gifting me. At one point, I felt making this film was like riding a wild horse: if I let the horse and the conditions control me while making this film, then it would be a disaster; and if I tried to fully control and restrict how the horse would run, then it would throw me off its back and I would've completely failed making this film. So it was a delicate balance between accepting what the world is giving you and how to use that to benefit your story and let it breathe life into my script. This is the first Iraqi film to tackle this important historical period.



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The film was shot entirely in Iraq—did that require extensive work of production design, given that it's set in the 1990s?

It was crucial to make the 1990s look authentic and realistic, so we shot in real historical locations. For example, we filmed in the Mesopotamian marshes—believed to be the birthplace of civilization and Gilgamesh. The people there still live with the same lifestyle as they did thousands of years ago. Shooting locations played a vital role in the film. While scouting, I'd enter a place and feel it speaking to me—that same night, I'd write new scenes with fresh inspiration. My DP brilliantly captured the 90s essence of Iraq. We tested both film and digital in real locations to find the perfect color palette. To minimize costs and production design, we had to construct some locations—like the supermarket—using period references and photos. I'm glad the film documented certain places, since Iraq lacks good visual records of its history. I hope the film can serve as a visual document of that era in Iraq.

I also tried to layer the film further with the shooting locations. I like for locations to be part of the story, to provoke a certain feeling or convey a specific point about the story or the world we're living in. I'm interested in creating frames where the background supports the foreground and they exist in a relationship together - even if it's a toxic or paradoxical relationship. For example, the checkpoint scene takes place with the Zighourat Ur in the background - a site where, according to legend, Ibrahim was saved from death. At the same time, we see young people in coffins being transported, having lost their lives in war. Or the restaurant scene, it takes place at the restaurant where Saddam used to eat when he was young.

How did you direct the actors on set? Were there many rehearsals, then takes? Or did you give them a lot of freedom to improvise? What's truly magnificent about the “acting” is that they feel so authentic—yet their authenticity doesn't come from a documentary-like style. We feel that they are not simply “playing themselves,” but fully embodying their roles.

All of our cast were non-actors (except two women who had brief appearances on TV before). Some of them couldn't read or write; they would come to the set having prepared nothing for the scene. But there were zero rehearsals with any of our actors. ZERO. In fact, none of my actors knew what the full story was. We tried to shoot pretty chronologically to preserve some raw emotions in the scenes. We did a different kind of rehearsal, which was designed to get to know my actors very well and develop a trusting bond with each other, because with non-actors, it could be very delicate. These are non-trained people who haven't developed any tools to protect themselves from vulnerable moments, and they could take anything as a sign of them doing a

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“bad job”, and hence, get blocked. For example, they could get very nervous if we decided to do another take, thinking it was their mistake, and get very self-conscious.

Instead of rehearsals with the kids, we would just play games, exercise together, dance, talk about ourselves, and tell each other stories. We would make up a scene and act it out together, then allow them to go into a deep emotional place. What starts as a game could easily turn into a serious scene, with lots of emotions flowing. One thing I discovered about kids is that they hate being spoken to as if they’re just kids—it feels really offensive to them. And they’re just as smart, if not smarter, than adults.

With my adult actors, I only gave them a few rules. First, if we did many takes, it wasn’t because of them, but probably due to a technical reason. Second, they were in the scene until they heard “cut”. Third, there are no mistakes—this isn’t an exam, and they weren’t expected to deliver a specific pre-planned answer. I needed to learn more about them—their personalities and lives—in order to incorporate that into the story and scenes. That way, they weren’t acting; they were simply being themselves. All my characters are almost who they are in real life, with slight adjustments.

How long did the shoot last, and what was the experience like shooting a feature film in Iraq today?

We had a long shoot. The experience of shooting a feature film in Iraq is bittersweet and full of contradictions. On one hand, we lack the fundamentals of filmmaking such as production services, specialized crew, equipment, facilities, etc., and on the other

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hand, it's the easiest country to shoot a film in. You can get permits to shoot for free in locations that almost any big-budget film would pay millions to access. People are also friendly. The idea of shooting a film is still rare and interesting for people, so they're happy to offer help and support when they can.

The difficulties of daily life for the Iraqi people are shown in many aspects and through rich details. But at the same time, I felt that social and political criticism wasn't the film's primary focus. Was that intentional?

I'm not interested in making a film that "preaches" or a film that serves as propaganda for politicians. Although the subject matter is very tempting and invites turning this film into a political piece, that's not what I do or am even interested in doing. I'm interested in genuine human emotions, struggles, connections, and stories. In this film, I tried to avoid anything overtly political and was very much interested in showing authentic characters and a period of Iraq that has never been depicted before. Yes, I'm aware there's still some politics in the film, but that's the natural result of making a film about Iraq under Saddam, sanctions, and wars. I was also very keen to have everyday Iraqis as "heroes" rather than war soldiers, as usually depicted in films about Iraq.

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WRITER & DIRECTOR

HASAN HADI

Hasan Hadi is an Iraqi writer/director. Hasan grew up in southern Iraq, during wartime, and over the years worked in journalism, production, and as an adjunct professor at NYU's Graduate Film Program. He received the Gotham-Marcie Bloom Fellowship, the Black Family Production Prize and the Sloan Foundation Production Award. He is a 2022 Sundance Lab Fellow and the recipient of the 2022 Sundance/NHK Award, SFFILM Rainin Grant, and Doha Film Institute Grant for his feature debut, THE PRESIDENT'S CAKE.

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DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

TUDOR VLADIMIR PANDURU RSC

Tudor Vladimir Panduru is a Romanian cinematographer. Tudor collaborated with Palme d'Or winner Cristian Mungiu on BACALAUREAT and RMN, both screened in Cannes' Official Competition. He also shot METRONOM (Best Directing, Un Certain Regard, 2022), MY HAPPY FAMILY (Sundance, Berlinale), and MALMKROG (Best Directing, Berlinale Encounters). A graduate of I.L. Caragiale National Film and Theatre University, Tudor holds a Master's in Cinematography.

EDITOR

ANDU RADU

Andu Radu is a Romanian editor and colorist with over two decades of experience across feature films, documentaries, and commercials. A graduate of Bucharest's National University of Theatre and Film and co-founder of post-production studio Abator in Bucharest, his recent work includes THE PRESIDENT'S CAKE (2025), R.M.N. (2022) and ÎNTREGALDE (2021). Andu has collaborated with award-winning directors and contributed to numerous festival-acclaimed films across Europe and beyond.

PRODUCTION DESIGNER

ANAMARIA TECU

Anamaria Tecu is a production designer from Romania. Her recent credits include THE PRESIDENT'S CAKE and MILK TEETH (Venice, Toronto).

COSTUME DESIGNER

TAMARA NOURI

Tamara Nouri is a Baghdad based visual artist, designer, and researcher with extensive experience in fine arts, fashion, and film production design. As a costume designer, her work explores the intersections of character, culture, and identity, blending traditional craftsmanship with contemporary visual storytelling. She has contributed to several acclaimed films, including THE PRESIDENT'S CAKE (2025), THE BLIND FERRYMAN (2026), SONGS OF ADAM (2024), SON OF BABYLON(2009) and AHLAAM (2006).

SOUND DESIGNER

TAMÁS ZÁNYI

Tamás Zányi is a sound designer and mixer known for his work on award-winning films including SON OF SAUL (2015), which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. With over 25 years of experience in film, television, and immersive audio, he is the founder of S.A.I.N.T. Audio studio in Budapest—one of Central Europe's leading hubs for creative sound design. His sound work has earned international recognition, including the Vulcan Award at Cannes Film Festival and a Golden Reel Award from the MPSE.

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LEAH CHEN BAKER PRODUCER

Leah Chen Baker is an Independent Spirit Award-nominated producer and filmmaker. She produced Jamie Dack's feature debut, *PALM TREES AND POWER LINES*, which premiered at Sundance 2022 and won the U.S. Dramatic Directing Award. Leah was selected as a 2022 Sundance Institute Producing Fellow, Mark Silverman Honoree and Sundance Institute Catalyst Fellow. Her work has been recognized by DGA, Women in Film and won Academy-qualifying awards and acquired by HBO, Focus Features and eOne. She earned her MFA from NYU's Graduate Film Program and is a Media Services Producing Award recipient and a member of the Producers Guild of America.



ERIC ROTH EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Eric Roth is an Academy Award-winning screenwriter and seven-time nominee. His credits include — *FORREST GUMP*, *THE INSIDER*, *MUNICH*, *THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON*, *A STAR IS BORN*, and *DUNE* — winning for *FORREST GUMP*. Eric's recent projects include Martin Scorsese's *KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON*. Other notable credits are *THE GOOD SHEPHERD*, *ALI* and *THE HORSE WHISPERER*.



MARIELLE HELLER EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Marielle Heller is an award-winning director, writer and actor. Her humanistic directing style is felt in her Academy Award-nominated films, *A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD* and *CAN YOU EVER FORGIVE ME?*. Her directorial debut, *THE DIARY OF A TEENAGE GIRL*, earned her an Independent Spirit Award. As an actor, her character Alma Wheatley in *THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT* made her an instant audience favorite. Heller's production company, Defiant By Nature, was established in 2019.