

Review: Ali Kalthami's 'Mandoob' is a visual feast set in Riyadh



CHENNAI: Ali Kalthami's "Mandoob," which screened at this month's Red Sea International Film Festival in Saudi Arabia and premiered at this year's Toronto International Film Festival, is a fascinating tale, layered and luminous, of life in Riyadh.

"I was always drawn to underground subcultures in cities, and I know Riyadh has many of these underground labyrinths and intersections and social phenomenon that not many see in everyday life," Kalthami said in the director's note.

"Mandoob" tackles frustration in a situation where opportunities mix and mingle with people's desires and dreams. One of those people is Fahad Algadaani (Mohammed Aldokhei), weak in mind and spiri but determined to save his ailing father battling his kidney ailment. When he loses his job in a call center largely because of his own carelessness, Fahad gets involved in a completely avoidable mishap.

Hell bent on finding a way out of this mess, he seizes an opportunity as a night delivery man. On his endless journeys in the streets of the Saudi capital, he grapples with his own personal dilemmas. Often his path is lonely and tiresome, and he wishes he could disappear from the face of Earth.

But he has responsibilities: His divorced sister, Sarah Algadaani (Hajar Alshammari) and her little daughter Yasam (Amani Alsami) among them.

The movie is a visual feast, depicting an alluring Riyadh shot night and in the rain, with the lights making a strange ethereal pattern on screen. The streets and traffic also allowed the director to pay homage in his opening shot to one of his favourite films, Federico Fellini's "8½."

Above all, "Mandoob" serves as a powerful social commentary revealing the contrast between the city's poor and rich. One scene captures this in all its enormity — when an awestruck Fahad enters a posh penthouse, where the owner is hoisting a gala party, it clearly mirrors the deep social disparity at play.
