

# Review: 'Norah' makes Cannes history with its delicate handling of a Saudi story



CANNES: Director Tawfik Alzaidi's "Norah" made history when it was selected as the first Saudi film to screen on the official calendar at the Cannes Film Festival.



[For the latest updates, follow us on Instagram @arabnews.lifestyle](https://www.instagram.com/arabnews.lifestyle)  
(<https://www.instagram.com/arabnews.lifestyle>)

The film premiered at December's Red Sea International Film Festival in Jeddah before heading to the French Riviera last week, where it ran in the famed festival's Un Certain Regard section.

“Norah” is the story of a restless young woman (played with wonderful ease by Maria Bahrawi), who dreams of a life beyond her immediate surroundings.

Set in 1990s Saudi Arabia when conservatism ruled and the pursuit of all art, including painting, was frowned upon, a new world opens up for Norah when Nader (Yaqoub Alfarhan), a failed artist and teacher from the city, comes to her village. Despite the rigid rules of society, the pair form a platonic relationship, linked by a passion for the arts. What emerges is a story in which the characters inspire each other, played out against the backdrop of the scenic AlUla region in Saudi Arabia, a location that is becoming a major moviemaking hub.

Norah, brought up by her uncle and aunt after having lost her parents early on, listens to music and pores over magazines. She encourages Nader to follow his passion for drawing, and their affection for each other gradually develops into an unshakable union.

The director strives to walk a tightrope, maintaining an equilibrium between Saudi sensibilities and a daringly emotional outlook. He explores the hesitant heartbeats of Norah and Nader but stops short of entering any overt romantic territory. The love affair, in this case, is one with the arts — both lead characters yearn for the chance to creatively express themselves.

While the narrative carries on at a gentle pace, the tone and tenure seem ruffled and out of place in the finale — with a rather bizarre ending marred by uncertainty. Alzaidi loses his grip over the narration, which until then seemed to have traversed a smooth road.

---