

JEDDAH: The surreal and real mix in director Mohamed Al-Salman's debut feature “Raven Song,” which played at the recent Red Sea International Film Festival in Jeddah and is the Kingdom’s submission for the Best International Feature Film at the upcoming Academy Awards.



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In the opening scenes, we see a young man named Nasser (Asem Alawad) being diagnosed with brain tumor. The only way out is a surgery, but he is told in no uncertain terms that it is a risky procedure.

Raven Song - Trailer

“Raven Song” is a product of the Saudi Film Commission’s Daw Film Competition, which supports local moviemakers. Al-Salman has to his credit several short films, including “Curtain” and “27th of Shaban,” which are available as part of the Six Windows in the Desert Collection on Netflix.

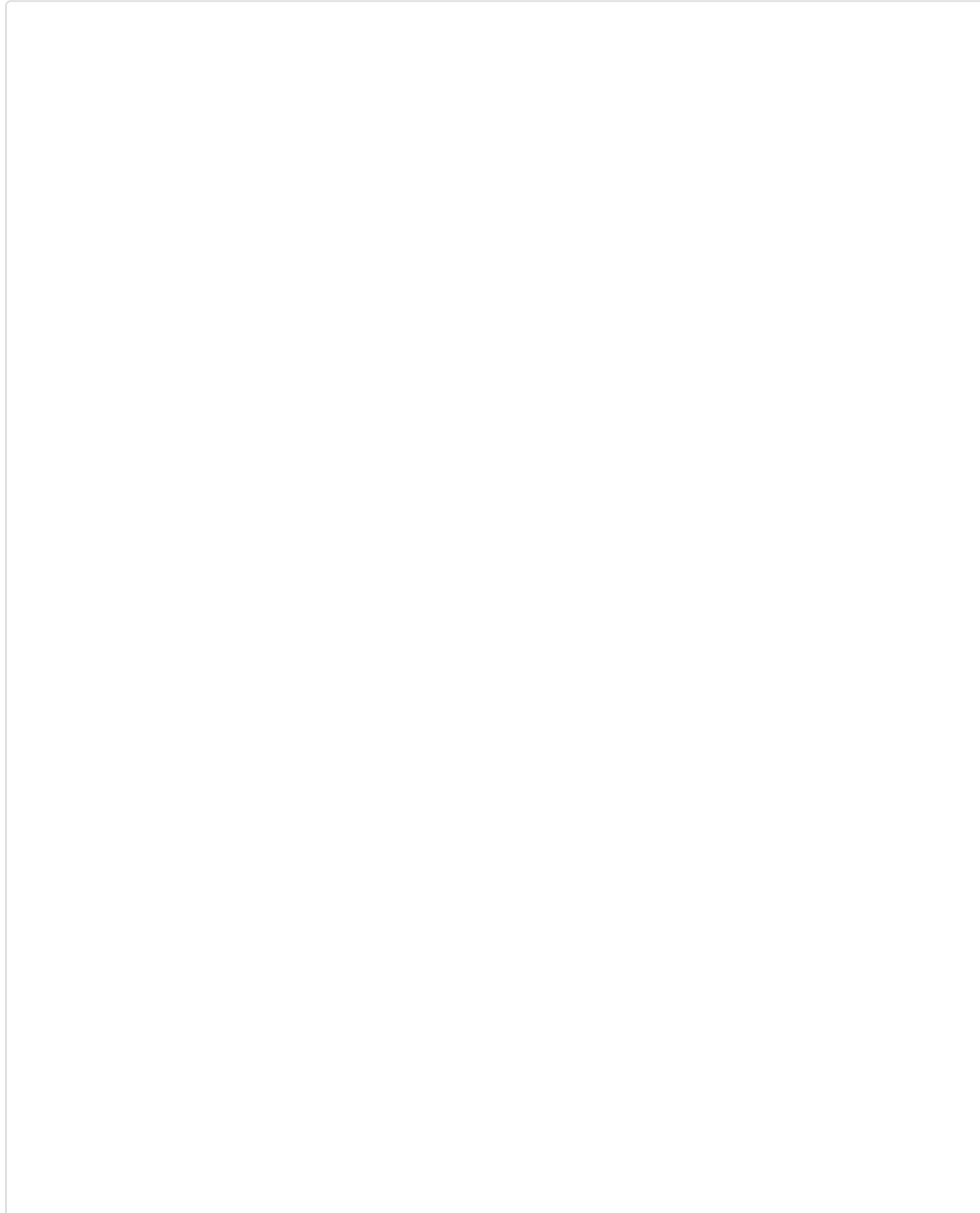
“Raven Song” is very culture specific — much of its premise lies in a reference to the turn of the century heated debate between Saudi poets about the correct approach to meter and rhyme that saw literature enthusiasts battle it out in Riyadh’s newspapers, pitching conservative classicists against free-form liberals. However, it could still find a place for itself at foreign film festivals after its run in Saudi Arabia as Al-Salman's work has an element of fantastic, universally appealing humor.



A still from 'Raven Song.' (Supplied)

Set in 2002, Nasser is considered by his father and others as a some sort of a “dumb goat.” When the old man breaks his son's lovingly collected cassette collection, the scene manages to come off as humorous due to its sheer absurdity. This is something that creeps into the narrative throughout the 1 hour 49 minute runtime — from bizarre medical professionals to other colorful characters, the film is not wanting for entertaining figures, some of whom delight in the briefest of cameos.

Nasser is left enthralled when, after his shocking diagnosis, he comes across an angelic mysterious woman (Kateryna Tkachenko) in a flowing white who appears in the lobby of the hotel where he works. His friend Abu Sagr (Ibrahim Khairallah) persuades him that the way to win her heart is with a poem that he must deliver as a song.



Some viewers could find that there is too much going on in the film — adding to a whole lot of incidents at the hotel is a serial killer, but it soon becomes apparent that much of what Nasser “sees” is pure hallucination, perhaps a fallout of the tumor. The

narrative wobbles despite the director's attempt to add style to his work. Visual delights, including brains falling from the sky and the imaginative use of raven and dove motifs, do help to movie on its feet, however.

All in all, we hardly feel a sense of affinity with Nasser. He remains too distant and too blank, as does the woman in white.
