



# — UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

QUINZAINÉ  
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT  
CANNES 2024

A Film by Matthew Rankin

PRESSKIT





89 MIN

CANADA

2024

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FARSI, FRENCH

#### SCREENINGS IN CANNES

SAT. 18th, 8:45 AM @ THÉÂTRE CROISSETTE (OFFICIAL P&I)

SAT. 18th, 3:30 PM @ OLYMPIA 8 (MARKET)

SAT. 18th, 5:30 PM @ THÉÂTRE CROISSETTE (WORLD PREMIERE)

SUN. 19th, 1:30PM @ OLYMPIA 5 (MARKET)

SUN. 19th, 10:30PM @ ARCADES 1 (OFFICIAL)

TUE. 21st, 3:30 PM @ LERINS 2 (MARKET)

# آواز بوقلمون

# — UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

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#### PRODUCTION

Metafilms  
[www.metafilms.ca](http://www.metafilms.ca)

Sylvain Corbeil  
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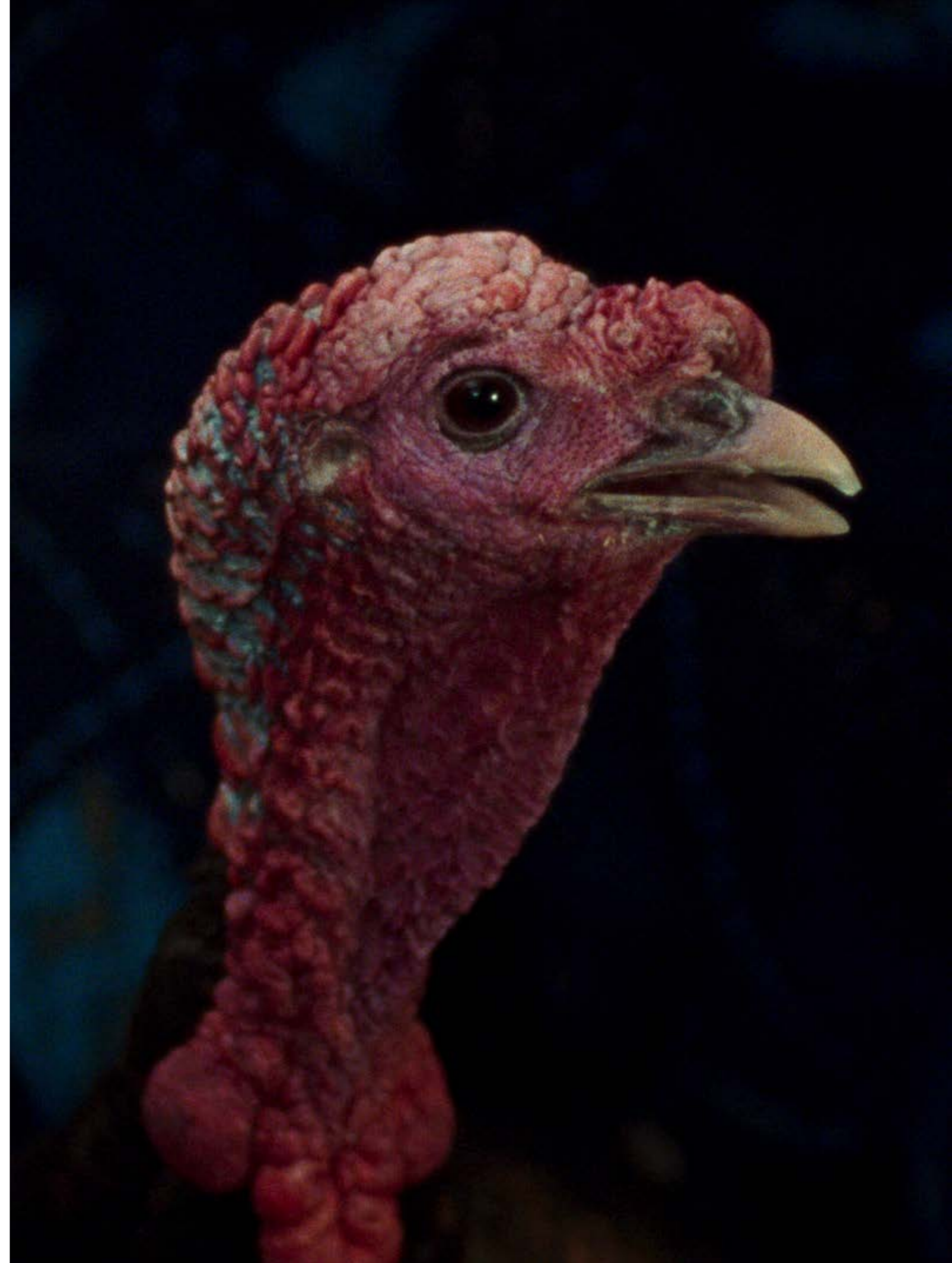


# — SYNOPSIS

In a mysterious and surreal interzone somewhere between Tehran and Winnipeg, the lives of multiple characters interweave with each other in surprising and mysterious ways.

Gradeschoolers Negin and Nazgol find a sum of money frozen in the winter ice and try to claim it. Meanwhile, Massoud leads a group of increasingly-befuddled tourists through the monuments and historic sites of Winnipeg. Matthew quits his meaningless job in a Québécois government office and sets out upon an enigmatic journey to visit his mother.

Space, time and personal identities crossfade, interweave and echo into a surreal comedy of misdirection.





# MATTHEW RANKIN INTERVIEWS HIMSELF



**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

*How do you explain this strange thing you have made?*

**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

I encourage people to think of it as cinematic Venn diagramme between Winnipeg, Tehran and Montréal. It's like a confluence of rivers. Or a Hawaiian pizza. It's a crazy duck-billed platypus of a movie: one part lonesome Québécois *cinéma gris*, one part surreal Winnipeg puzzle film, one part Kanoon-style Iranian poetic realism, all three of which reflect and refract through the prism of each other. *Une langue universelle* is not about any one of these places but about the métissage of all three.

Of course, Iranian cinema emerges out of 1000 years of poetry while Canadian cinema emerges out of 40 years of discount furniture commercials. And yet that the duality of our world, isn't it? The movie is working through notions of community and solitude, proximity and distance, the divine and the banal, the universal and the parochial. We are trying open up new ways of seeing and imagining our complicated, sad, beautiful, luminous world.

**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

*How did you make this?*

**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

I'm a big believer that filmmaking is a collective expression and that all the fun of filmmaking comes from making stuff with your friends. Our big scheme here was to create a living, breathing Irano-Québéco-Winnipegois brain which could produce its own singular thoughts. In this methodology, the director is the point of synthesis, more like an orchestra conductor, rather than some fulminating visionary in a Napoleon hat obsessed with world domination. I have no interest in celebrity or power or control. I do art because I long for connection with others. So the mode is very

open. I always think that movies are better when all creative collaborators feel free to really express themselves through prism of the film. Then it becomes a personal exercise for everyone (rather than transactional one) and the thing really comes to life.

In the script we wrote, for example, Bahram Nabatian, who plays the role of the singing turkey expert, Hafez Ghamghosar, does not break into song at the end. On the day of the shoot, Mr. Nabatian arrived on set and suggested that we film him singing classical Persian poetry and we said, "Of course, YES!" I changed the lighting scheme a bit, but otherwise we just followed what Mr. Nabatian wanted to do. We turned the camera on, he started when he was ready and called cut when he was finished. It was so beautiful, but in the moment, we actually had no idea how it would fit into the rest of the story. And yet, now, I just can't imagine our movie without Mr. Nabatian's poetic interlude. Along with the melodic framing that composers Amir Amiri and Christophe Lamarche-Ledoux devised for it in post-production, Mr. Nabatian's invocation of Saadi really became the emotional climax of the movie.

So, lots of spontaneous magic can happen when you are working in an open, free-spirited mode with lots of curiosity about what your collaborators think and feel. We were also so lucky to work with one of Québec's most daring and visionary producers, Sylvain Corbeil [Metafilms], who was the first to get behind all of our craziest ideas with full enthusiasm

**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

*Where does the story come from?*

**MATTHEW RANKIN:** It all comes from my meaningless life. The events of the story are drawn directly from my family history, numerous diary entries from my time in Iran and several mystifying dreams I had about my parents shortly after they died.



During the Great Depression, my Grandmother and her brother found a two-dollar bill frozen in a Winnipeg sidewalk (an enormous sum in 1931) and events unfolded for them much as they do for Negin and Nazgol. Similarly, my father devoted his life to advocating for the unloved city of Winnipeg and its humble monuments, very much like Massoud in the film. And then of course there is me and my impersonation of myself. When I finished my first feature, *The Twentieth Century*, I was so badly in debt that I spent a grim and spirit-withering year in Ottawa making propaganda films for the Canadian government. So it's many intricate layers of identity, many versions of self.

When I was 8 years old, for example, I was completely obsessed with [early 20th Century American comedian] Groucho Marx<sup>[1]</sup>. Every morning before going to school I would paint a large moustache and eyebrows on my face using my mother's eyebrow pencil. The Winnipeg School Division swiftly appointed a fleet of child psychologists to beat this strange fixation out of me and I spent most of Grade Three locked in the school supply closet dressed as Groucho. Anyway, the character of Morteza (so charmingly portrayed by young Parsa Ghahforokhi) is also me and other weird versions of me are scattered throughout. The biopic has long been a major preoccupation of my work as a filmmaker and I describe *Une langue universelle* as a kind of autobiographical hallucination.

**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

*I understand that you grew up in Winnipeg and now live in Québec, but how have Iran and Farsi entered your sphere?*

**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

My first port of entry to Iran was through its cinema – particularly its “meta-realist” school including Forugh Farokhzad, Sohrab Shahid Saless, Mr. Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, the Makhmalbaf Family – as well as the films

for children produced by Kanoon in the 1970s and 80s. As a young person, I travelled to Iran with the naïve hope of studying cinema with the great masters. This didn't happen, but I met a lot of really amazing people and my life has continued dialoguing with Iran ever since then, through art, friendships and my ongoing and very slow-motion learning of Farsi.

The decision to make the film in Farsi emerged organically from the story itself. My Grandmother's childhood adventure trying to extract the two-dollar bill from the ice reminded of a Kanoon-style fable about children facing adult dilemmas and even bore some uncanny resemblance to Mr. Panahi's *The White Balloon* (1995) and Mr. Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House* (1987). So my first idea was to tell my Grandmother's story in the style of Iranian meta-realism. But it was the idea of going one step further and actually telling her story in Farsi with an Iranian cast that the project found its poetic identity. Every other idea flowed from that re-imagining.

More than anything, however, this film exists because of [executive producers, screenwriters, actors] Pirouz Nemati and Ila Firouzabadi. Both are brilliant artists and two of my closest friends and we have collaborated on several different film projects together. Pirouz has been a longtime advocate of this project and really insisted we make it, even in my most anguished moments of self-doubt. Much of the humour, poetry, insanity and intercultural fusion at work in *Une langue universelle* is very much an expression of our friendship together. They too, through me, are in dialogue with “Winnipeg” as I am, through them, in dialogue with “Iran,” and together we have created a something altogether new.



Matthew as Groucho, circa 1988

**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

*Is this a political film?*

**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

No. Our movie is inspired by a very great longing for wider human connections; for deeper notions of family, belonging and solidarity than what our increasingly mean and miserly age would assign to us. Across the political spectrum, crazed ideologues and Instagram gurus are building newer and taller and more rigid Berlin Walls, zealously organizing vast populations into binary opposites. We reject these oppositional modes. We are working from a premise of no borders and universal solidarity. Our movie is about how “there” is also “here” and how everybody around you is also you. I love that gentle line in *The Colour of Pomegranates* (Parajanov, 1969) “*We were looking for ourselves in each other,*” and that became kind of a tuning fork for us. Or, as Pirouz once said to me, “All I hope for in life is love, world peace and a few laughs.”

**MATTHEW RANKIN: I**

*Is it true you are trying to become the Hossain Sabzian<sup>2</sup> of Winnipeg?*

**MATTHEW RANKIN:**

[Laughs] In devising the “ecstatic blandness” of my character's garb, our brilliant costume designer Negar Nemati took some inspiration from Sabzian's all-beige outfit Mr. Kiarostami's *Close Up* (1990). Sabzian and *Close Up* are definitely hovering over this film. In particular, I share that film's skepticism about the possibility of “authenticity” in the artificial language of cinema. It's always a magic trick with a heavy dose of cheating, no matter how true it seems. And Sabzian's fraudulent impersonation of Mohsen Makhmalbaf is not far removed from my own fraudulent impersonation of myself.

**MATTHEW RANKIN:** *Thank you.*

**MATTHEW RANKIN:** No no, thank you.

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groucho\\_Marx](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groucho_Marx)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Close-Up\\_\(1990\\_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Close-Up_(1990_film))

# BIOGRAPHY

## MATTHEW RANKIN

Matthew Rankin was born in Winnipeg and studied history at McGill and Université Laval. As a young filmmaker, he travelled to Iran with the deluded hope of studying cinema with the great Iranian masters. While this naïve effort failed, Matthew is the director of some forty short animated, documentary and fiction films which have been presented at Sundance, SXSW, Annecy, TIFF, the Berlinale, Cannes Critics Week and on the Criterion Channel. His first feature, *The Twentieth Century*, was awarded the 2020 FIPRESCI Prize at the Berlin Film Festival and proclaimed Best Canadian First Feature at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival. Matthew has variously worked as a commercial animator, editor, actor, Cornish Monkey Shed Cleaner and GT6 Media Officer for the Dominion Parks & Historic Sites of Canada. He is not entirely certain where he lives but is frequently spotted in Montréal.



# — SELECTED

## FILMOGRAPHY



2022	<i>Municipal Relaxation Module</i> Short Film – TIFF
2022	<i>You Are in Bear Country</i> Series
2019	<i>The Twentieth Century</i> - Berlinale Fipresci Award Winner 2020 & TIFF Midnight Madness
2017	<i>The Tesla World Light</i> Short Film – Cannes Critic’s Week
2014	<i>Mynarski: Death Plummet</i> Short Film – Sundance
2011	<i>Tabula Rasa</i> Short Film – Criterion Channel
2010	<i>Negativipeg</i> Short Film – Sundance
2008	<i>Cattle Call</i> Short Film - Sundance





# CAST & CREW

<b>Negin</b>	Rojina ESMAEILI
<b>Nazgol</b>	Saba VAHEDYOUSEFI
<b>Omid</b>	Sobhan JAVADI
<b>Massoud</b>	Pirouz NEMATI
<b>Matthew</b>	Matthew RANKIN
<b>Monsieur Bilodeau</b>	Mani SOLEYMANLOU
<b>Monsieur Castonguay</b>	Danielle FICHAUD
<b>Hafez Ghamghosar</b>	Bahram NABATIAN
<b>Bus Driver</b>	Ila FIROUZABADI
<b>Woman with Turkey</b>	Hemela POURAFZAL
<b>Pirouz</b>	Dara NAJMABADI

<b>Director</b>	Matthew Rankin
<b>Screenplay</b>	Matthew Rankin, Pirouz Nemati & Ila Firouzabadi
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Isabelle Stachtchenko
<b>Production Design</b>	Louisa Schabas
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Director</b>	Florelle Del Burgo
<b>Casting</b>	Marilou Richer & Ila Firouzabadi
<b>Costume Designer</b>	Negar Nemati
<b>Makeup Design</b>	Marie Salvado
<b>Editing</b>	Xi Feng
<b>VFX</b>	Sam Javanrouh
<b>Sound</b>	Pablo Villegas & Armin Firouzabadi



# CAST & CREW

<b>Sound Design</b>	Sacha Ratcliffe
<b>Sound Mix</b>	Bernard Gariépy Strobl
<b>Original Music</b>	Amir Amiri & Christophe Lamarche-Ledoux
<b>Color Grading</b>	Julien Alix
<b>Post-Production Supervisor</b>	Mélanie Gauthier
<b>Production</b>	Metafilms
<b>Producer</b>	Sylvain Corbeil
<b>Executive Producers</b>	Pirouz Nemati, Ila Firouzabadi, Daniel Berger, Aaron Katz & Matthew Rankin
<b>Line Producers</b>	Catherine Boily & Rosalie Chicoine Perreault
<b>Country</b>	Canada
<b>US Distributor</b>	Oscilloscope Laboratories
<b>Canadian Distributor</b>	Maison 4:3
<b>International Sales</b>	Best Friend Forever

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