



See You at Jackson's Cinema House!

MAEBASHI CITY COORDINATOR FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (CIR)
JACKSON BANNISTER'S ACTIVITY REPORT

OCTOBER 2026

Maebashi Cinema House, a mini-theater in Maebashi City. Jackson, a film-loving CIR, watches one hand-picked recommendation from the theater manager and brings you a review.
Movies transcend borders! See you at the cinema!



OCTOBER'S MOVIE

The President's Cake

2025 IRAQ/QATAR/USA 

Jackson Bannister

I work as a Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) in Maebashi City, Gunma Prefecture, engaging in activities to deepen mutual cultural understanding between Japanese and non-Japanese residents.



Films are another family

~Discover new cinema in Maebashi—connecting films, people, and the community.~

In order to foster bonds within the local community through film, we decided to open Maebashi Cinema House.

Although small, our theater shares a wide variety of films from the heart of Maebashi. Our program spans a wide range of genres, including high-quality independent and mini-theater films that rarely receive screenings, hit titles that have completed their runs at multiplex cinemas, family-friendly films that parents and children can enjoy together, and classic masterpieces from the past. Through this selection, we hope audiences will discover new films.

This is the kind of "Cinema House" we aspire to build.



MISSION

3F, Maebashi Plaza Genki 21 Annex, 1-16 Chiyoda-machi 5-chome, Maebashi City

THE مملكة القصب PRESIDENT'S CAKE

**The realities of war and dictatorship,
seen through one girl's search for a cake.**

For October's issue, I had the chance to see *The President's Cake*, which is currently playing at Maebashi Cinema House!

Like most Americans, I've seen plenty of films and other works about the Gulf War of 1991. Almost all of them, however, tell the story from an American perspective. Even those that critically examine the war or question the motives of the American military rarely stop to consider the people whose lives were directly shaped by the war: ordinary Iraqis.

This is what “The President’s Cake,” the Caméra d’Or winner at the 2025 Cannes Film Festival and the debut feature from up-and-coming Iraqi director Hasan Hadiq, attempts to explore. The film tells the grim, yet at times comedic, story of a 9-year-old girl named Lamia as she tries to find the ingredients to bake a cake for the “President,” Saddam Hussein, on his birthday after being selected from among her classmates in a draw—a task she must complete under the threat of death. This takes place while Iraq is under sweeping United Nations sanctions, contributing to severe shortages and soaring prices for food, medicine, and other necessities. As Lamia attempts to gather her ingredients, she must rely on her own wit to navigate a society that has all but broken down after years of war, economic hardship, and social decline.

Hadiq paints a clear picture that, even before the U.S. invasion, ordinary life in Iraq had already been deeply affected by years of war, authoritarian rule, and economic decline. He rarely needs to explicitly tell us how pervasive Saddam’s rule was; his portrait is simply there in almost every scene of the film. Hadiq also makes a point of showing how,

despite Islam being the country’s majority religion, Saddam Hussein had, by this point, become an almost omnipresent figure in the lives of Iraqis. He even draws an interesting parallel between Saddam’s cult of personality and religious reverence, with characters occasionally following his name with an expression of blessing, echoing the way Muslims traditionally invoke blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad.

Visually, “The President’s Cake” has the feel of an older film. Hadiq shoots the film in a widescreen format and uses a vignette around the edges of the frame, giving the film a distinct sense of nostalgia that complements its otherwise timeless-looking setting. This is especially effective in the scenes set in Lamia’s hometown in the historic Iraqi marshlands. Cinematographer Tudor Vladimir Panduru does an excellent job capturing the beauty of the countryside, from its waterways to its lush vegetation, and the film’s visual style makes these scenes feel almost idyllic. Yet there is an underlying sadness to these images: following the 1991 Gulf War, the marshlands would suffer massive drainage and destruction as part of Saddam Hussein’s campaign against

the region's population. Knowing what would soon happen to this beautiful landscape gives these scenes a bittersweet quality and makes Panduru's cinematography all the more poignant.

However, the aspect of this film I want to highlight most is the acting. Child actor Baneen Ahmed Nayyef, who plays our protagonist Lamia, gives an absolutely incredible performance in every scene she appears in. Considering this is her acting debut, I was surprised by how rarely I felt like I was watching a child simply reciting lines from a script. Her character is filled with subtle emotions and intensity, shaped by growing up in such a harsh environment, while still retaining the naivety fitting of a 9-year-old child. The rest of the cast also does a great job in their respective roles, especially considering that almost all of them were first-time actors.

One reservation I have with the film, however, is its historical chronology. Although the film is explicitly set in 1990, certain details and events felt more consistent with the conditions of Iraq during or after the 1991 Gulf War. I also felt that the appearances of certain characters became somewhat repetitive at times, while some of the film's emotional moments did not quite resonate with me as strongly as I think they were intended to.

Overall, despite some story beats falling flat for me and some questions about its historical chronology, *The President's Cake* is a beautifully shot and directed film that succeeds in showing how authoritarianism, war, and economic deprivation can gradually erode the social bonds of ordinary people. Most importantly, it tells a story about the Gulf War that I rarely see in American cinema: not the story of the soldiers who fought it, but of the civilians who simply had to live through it.