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Armenian Film Festival Sparks LGBT Outrage, Cries Of Censorship

Armenia's Golden Apricot international film festival has run into controversy as rights activists accuse organizers of censorship for scrapping part of the event that featured two films dealing with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) themes.

The two features, Listen To Me: Untold Stories Beyond Hatred and Apricot Groves, were scheduled outside the competitive portion of the weeklong festival under the rubric Armenians: Internal And External Views.

Festival organizers, however, canceled the entire slate of 36 films by Armenian directors, as well as foreign productions about Armenia and Armenians, to be shown in the section, saying only that they "apologize for any inconveniences."

The move immediately sparked a backlash from filmmakers and rights groups who said it was a thinly veiled attempt at censorship reminiscent of the Soviet era and the Ottoman Empire.

"We condemn the actions of both the Union of Cinematography of Armenia, that has dared to censor the special program of the Golden Apricot International Festival because of the themes broached in the films Listen To Me: Untold Stories Beyond Hatred and Apricot Groves," more than 100 of the country's filmmakers, artists, and rights advocates said in a letter to the organizers.

"Golden Apricot should immediately restore the screening of all films regardless of the format. Otherwise the Golden Apricot International Festival should accept that they are the ones who are legitimizing the censorship and changes in the festival."

Facing Prejudice

Though homosexuality has been legal in Armenia since 2003, the subject is still taboo within Armenian society, which is firmly guided by the Apostolic Church.

The country does not recognize formalized same-sex relationships performed locally, has no antidiscrimination laws, and gay men are declared mentally ill and unfit for military service.

In the documentary Listen To Me, written by Hovhannes Ishkhanyan and directed by Gagik Ghazerah, 10 members of the LGBT community relate their experiences of coming out to their friends, families, and community.

Included in the group is Tsomak Oganezova, the owner of a gay pub in Yerevan that was firebombed and vandalized with Nazi symbols in 2012. Oganezova has said she left Armenia after the attacks "to be with those like me."

Pouria Heidary Oureh's *Apricot Groves* is about Aram, an Iranian-Armenian trans man who has lived in the United States since childhood. The story follows him as he returns to Armenia to meet his girlfriend's conservative family and make preparations for their marriage.

Both films have already been featured at festivals around the world.

"Understanding the fact that this is not only discrimination against the Armenian LGBT community, and a violation of freedom of expression and freedom to create, but also a slap to Armenian cinematography, we are calling upon the Ministry of Culture of Armenia, the staff, and sponsors, and partners of the...festival to put all their efforts to restore the whole...program," supporters wrote in a petition to Culture Minister Armen Amiryan*, the Cinematographers Union, and festival organizers.

'Officially Sanctioned Hate'

Given the hostile conditions they face, many LGBT people say they remain closeted to avoid discrimination and violence.

In 2015, a local tabloid outed dozens of LGBT advocates, calling on readers to shun them and providing links to their Facebook profiles. The victims filed suit against the publication, but the court ruled in favor of the paper and made the plaintiffs pay \$100 in fees.

That incident came after a 2012 study was published showing 55 percent of Armenians would reject a friend or relative if they came out.

"Hate speech in Armenia is rising day by day," activist Mamikon Hovsepyan said after being one of the journalists outed by the tabloid. "The homophobic media has the support of government officials and promotes aggression and hate toward LGBT people."

This year, jury members at the Golden Apricot festival include Britain's Hugh Hudson, who directed the Oscar-winning 1981 epic *Chariots Of Fire*, and Dutch director Tom Fassaert.

***CORRECTED from original Version.**

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