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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Film Series: **Syrian Cinema**
Date: **September 8-30**
Where: Remis Auditorium, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The MFA Film Program is proud to present a 12-program retrospective of **Syrian Cinema, September 8 through 30**. Culminating ten years of work, this retrospective of Syrian cinema presents some of the best films of a remarkable and underrepresented body of work. Syrian cinema is rich and complicated, charged with the subversive energy of auteurs working within a slow and repressive national film system. All films in produced in Syria and in Arabic with English subtitles.

Highlights include:

- Mohamad Malas' lyrically blends personal history and political commentary in *The Night*, Sept. 8, and *Dreams of the City*, Sept. 10, the first auteur film in the Arab world.
- Omar Amiralay is one of the most acclaimed Arab documentary filmmakers. His scathing critiques of the Baath regime's social policies have resulted in the official banning of his documentaries *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village*, Sept. 9, and *The Chickens*, Sept. 16.
- *The Extras*, by Nabil Maleh, Sept. 17. This universally praised film's star crossed-lovers elicit compassion as they deftly illustrate the individual's struggle to control one's social and emotional destiny.
- Oussama Mohammad's poetic and absurd surrealism evoke both Andrei Tarkovsky and Ettore Scola. *Sacrifices*, Sept. 23, "is not a story but an unsettling, fragmentary mood piece, evoking the yearnings, angers and frustrations of people who are stuck in limbo. These pictures, one by one and in timed succession, may be cryptic, but they also feel full and complete." - Stuart Klawans, The Nation. *Stars in Broad Daylight*, Sept. 29, "is absurdly, inventively funny, when it's not being harshly satiric or heartbreaking." - Stuart Klawans, The Nation. This film has never been officially screened in Syria.

"Syrian cinema is one of [Arab cinema's] best kept secrets, but also the most mature, individualistic, independent-minded and accomplished." – Rasha Salti, retrospective curator.

Tapes and images are available.

Tickets: MFA members, seniors, and students \$8, general admission \$9; reduced price for select early screenings applies. Tickets for the entire twelve-program series: \$72, \$84.

This program is part of “Lens on Syria: Thirty Years of Contemporary Syrian Cinema,” a touring exhibition organized by ArteEast (www.arteeast.org), a non-profit arts organization based in New York that promotes the arts and cultures of the Middle East.

The Night

Fri, Sep 8, 7:45 pm

The Night by Mohammad Malas (*al-Leyl*, 1992, 116 min.).

Recognized as one of Syria’s most influential filmmakers, Malas sets his second feature in his native Quneytra, a border town in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights devastated by 1967’s Six Days War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. *The Night*’s protagonist attempts to reconcile his and his nation’s past at the grave of his father, a veteran of the 1936 Great Revolt in protest of Jewish immigration to Palestine. Continuing the blend of personal vision and national identity begun in *Dreams of the City*, Malas’s autobiographical second feature was among the first Syrian films to find an audience in the West.

Everyday Life in a Syrian Village

Sat, Sep 9, Noon

Everyday Life in a Syrian Village by Omar Amiralay (*al-Hayat al-Yaomiyyah fi Qariya Suriyyah*, 1974, 85 min.). Amiralay’s unrelenting indictment of institutionalized poverty has remained banned in Syria for more than 30 years. Recently restored and digitized, the documentary *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* contrasts interviews with peasants living on the banks of the Euphrates with those of bureaucrats, police, and healthcare workers to create a scathing portrait of an era of failed agricultural and land reforms. It was six years before Amiralay was allowed to work in Syria again, although his follow up, *The Chickens* (screening Thu, Sep 14 at 6 pm), is no less subversive.

Verbal Letters

Sat, Sep 9, 1:45 pm

Verbal Letters by Abdullatif Abdul-Hamid (*Rassa’el Shafahiyyah*, 1991, 105 min.). An irreverent and lively coming-of-age story loosely based on Cyrano de Bergerac, *Verbal Letters* translates the classic story of awkward adoration and mistaken identities to the orange groves of a small Syrian mountain village. The birdlike Ismail, with his beak nose and thick black glasses, is too shy to approach the stunning Salma, and enlists a friend as his go-between in winning her heart. What follows is a comical farce that mixes the lowbrow with the surreal on its way to a resolution that is both tender and full of humor.

Dreams of the City

Sun, Sep 10, 3:15 pm

Dreams of the City by Mohammad Malas (*Ahlam al-Madinah*, 1983, XXX min.). A masterful blending of the personal and the political, this somewhat autobiographical film

established Malas as Syria's foremost auteur. In the 1950s, Adib and his younger brother Omar are forced to leave their home in Quneytra, in the Golan Heights, after their father dies. Their young mother brings the family to her father's house in Damascus, although his cruelty forces the young family to fend for themselves. Adib is overwhelmed and mesmerized by the magic and violence of a city struggling against military coups. An unsentimental look at 20th-century Syria and its working class, *Dreams of the City* put Syrian cinema on the international map.

Three Documentaries by Omar Amiralay

Sat, Sep 16, 1:45 pm

A prominent and self-proclaimed apolitical civil society activist, Amiralay is known for his unblinking criticism of Syrian government and his involvement in the events of the 2000 Damascus Spring, a brief period of intense political and social debate. In *The Chickens* (1977, 40 min.), Amiralay masterfully exposes the exploitation of farmers in the "pilot village" of Sadad as they fail at state-subsidized chicken farming. *A Film Essay on the Euphrates Dam* (1970, 10 min.) and *A Flood in Baath Country* (2003, 46 min.) are about the lives of those who live and work near the Asad Dam. Indicative of Amiralay's trenchant views, *Flood's* working title was *Fifteen reasons why I hate the Baath Party*. (*Everyday Life in a Syrian Village*, screening Sat, Sep 9 at noon, is the centerpiece of the trilogy.)

Under the Ceiling

Sat, Sep 16, 3:45 pm

Under the Ceiling by Nidal Dibs (*Tahta al-Saqf*, 2004, 90 min.). The reveries of 40-something professionals in Damascus fall from the leaking ceiling of Marwan's apartment as he mourns the death of his friend Ahmed, and revives his passion for Ahmed's widow, Marwan's former lover, Lina. "A poetic collage [of] attractively enigmatic scenes," according to *Variety*, the film follows a cast of friends, neighbors, ghosts, and abandoned dreams drifting, as if time-traveling, through his apartment. Will Marwan reconnect with the energy of his younger days or will he and Lina continue to accept the weight of fizzled revolutions and abandoned ideals? *Under the Ceiling*, Nidal's first feature, is preceded by Houssam Chadat's short comedy *Just Get Married!* (Germany, 2003, 21 min.) in which a Syrian student in Germany has a week to find a local bride before his visa runs out.

The Extras

Sun, Sep 17, 3:45 pm

The Extras by Nabil Maleh (*al-Comparss*, 1993, 105 min.). Bit-part actor and garage mechanic Salem and attractive widow Nada are seemingly interested in each other, but under the watchful eyes of her family and a critical society, they are unable to be alone together. "A mood of comic paranoia dominates the film, which is heavily laced with Salem's flaming fantasies of steamy erotic delights and disastrous interruptions," says the *New York Times*. Renting an apartment for an afternoon tryst, Salem constructs a *mise-en-scène* that even includes a mock wedding in the hopes of legitimizing their stolen hours together. The results are funny, frustrating, and ultimately devastating.

Al-Lajat

Thu, Sep 21, 4:15 pm

Al-Lajat by Ryad Chaia (1996, 90 min.).

In southern Syria's barren, rocky As Suwayda region, the characters of *Al-Lajat* cling to haphazard dreams of love and freedom. ArteEast describes the tragic tapestry of interrelated stories: "an orphaned girl begs the moon to bring her happiness, a young teacher finds a long yearned-for embrace in her companionship, and an old aunt—burdened by her own tragic story—fears that her loved ones may have to relive it." *Al-Lajat* is documentary filmmaker Chaia's only fiction feature to date.

Sacrifices

Sat, Sep 23, Noon

Sacrifices by Ousamma Mohammad (Syria/France, *Sunduq al-Dunya*, 2002, 113 min.). Mystical, comic, sensual, and strange, Mohammad's second feature, *Sacrifices* is a surreal fable set in an Alawite village among Syria's Mediterranean mountains. When an aging patriarch dies without naming an heir, his this family story "collapses into an unsettling, fragmentary mood piece, evoking the yearnings, angers and frustrations of people who are stuck in limbo." (*The Nation*) Visually breathtaking, the film's dense political and religious symbolism and layer upon layer of fantasy and absurdity can be traced, as Cécile Boëx suggests in *Film Comment*, to the Syrian government's increased censorship since the 1990s. Selected for *Un Certain Regard* at Cannes.

At Our Listeners' Request

Sun, Sep 24, 4 pm

With *Our Hands*

At Our Listeners' Request by Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid (*Ma Yatlubuhu al-Musstami'un*, 2003, 89 min.). Every Tuesday night in 1969 in a small Syrian village, a quirky cast gathers at the local bigwig's home to listen to the popular radio show, "At Our Listeners' Request." Small town romances, schemes, and dreams interweave with poignant pop ballads as the radio brings news of such unimaginably far-off events as Americans landing on the moon and bombs exploding on the border with Israel. "The film is an homage to the "radio days" of the Arab world, when the medium brought the world closer together and conquered the imaginations of all" (ArteEast). *At Our Listeners' Request* is preceded by Abdul-Hamid's short documentary *Our Hands* (*Aydeena*, 1982, 14 min.).

Stars in Broad Daylight

Fri, Sep 29, 7:45 pm

Stars in Broad Daylight by Ousamma Mohammad (*Nujum al-Nahar*, 1988, 115 min.). Set in a remote Alawite village in the Lattakia region, *Stars in Broad Daylight* brims with incisive humor and a subtly sharp appraisal of life under the Baath regime. Under the domineering control of the eldest brother, a family prepares for a double wedding ceremony. When one bride flees, the other refuses her arranged marriage as well, and the tensions that hold the family together begin to collapse. "Ultimately tragic, the film [...] exposes how the violence of arbitrary and absolute power in a patriarchal society seeps into the unit of a family" (ArteEast). Hailed by Lawrence Wright in *The New Yorker* as "perhaps the greatest film to come out of Syria," *Stars in Broad Daylight* has remained under a de facto ban at home.

A Land for a Stranger

Sat, Sep 30, Noon

A Land for a Stranger by Samir Zikrah (*Turab al-Ghuraba'*, 1998, 150 min.).

One of the fathers of modern Islamic political thought, Abdel-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1852-1902), whose radical calls for democratic reform in the late 19th century Ottoman Empire led to his exile in Egypt, is the subject of this sweeping biographical and historical epic. *A Land for a Stranger* is the most ambitious production of Syrian's National Organization for Cinema to date and won Best Arab Film at the Cairo International Film Festival in 2004.

The media sponsor is The Boston Phoenix.