

## A World Cinema Road Less Traveled

*Film Society of Lincoln Center and ArteEast Present*  
*“The Road to Damascus: Discovering Syrian Cinema”*  
*May 5th-18th, 2006 at the Walter Reade Theatre*

NEW YORK -- April 21, 2006—The Film Society of Lincoln Center and ArteEast today announced the film series, **THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS: DISCOVERING SYRIAN CINEMA**, a showcase of over 30 Syrian features, documentaries and shorts screening May 5 - 18 at the Walter Reade Theatre. A particularly timely and relevant program, **THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS** includes nonfiction films, comedies, political dramas and historical epics, all representative of one of the richest—albeit lesser-known—of world cinemas.

One of the highlights of the series is a long-overdue tribute to master documentary filmmaker Omar Amiralay. Winner of numerous international awards for his films, Amiralay was the subject of a special homage at this year’s Cinéma du Réel Festival in Paris. While Amiralay’s subject matter ranges across the entire Arab and Muslim world, his camera always finds its way back home. **THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS** features some of the filmmaker's most renowned and compelling work, many films being screened in America for the first time, including his 1974 international breakthrough, *Everyday Life In A Syrian Village*, a documentary that remains banned in his native country to this day; *Film-Essay on the Euphrates Dam* (1970) and its companion piece, *A Flood In Bath Country* (2003); and 1997’s *A Plate of Sardines—Or, The First Time I Heard of Israel*.

Amiralay, along with fellow Syrian filmmakers Oussama Mohammad and Abdullatif Abdul-Hamid, will be in attendance at the screenings of their films during the opening weekend (Friday, May 5 through Sunday, May 7). In addition, the directors will participate in **Syrian Cinema Today and Tomorrow**, a panel discussion moderated by Film Society’s Program Director Richard Peña on Sunday, May 7, at 4:30 pm. The panel is free to the public.

The films selected for **THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS** cover an impressive breadth of subjects: some films offer highly critical views of Syria’s government and society, while others take positions on controversial subjects such as the Arab/Israeli conflict and the tragedy of Palestine. Although the work doesn’t shy away from making pointed political statements, Syrian filmmakers often rely on allegory, the microcosm of a single family serving as stand-in for the nation. Historical events are never far off screen, however, and often permeate even the most intimate relations.

“What first strikes one about Syrian films is simply just how well made they are,” explains Peña. “Many of the filmmakers studied filmmaking at VGIK, the great Soviet film school in Moscow. And all are fine examples of the VGIK ‘style,’ an approach that opts for carefully composed, almost iconographic shots—the opposite perhaps of the more fluid, hand-held style adopted widely after the explosion of the French New Wave.”

This shooting style is perhaps a natural outgrowth of certain realities of the Syrian film industry. With film production for the country not exceeding more than four or five features annually, many Syrian filmmakers are forced to wait years between projects (for example, 15 years passed between Oussama Mohammad's first and second features). As a result, Syrian filmmakers are acutely aware that each film—indeed, each shot—has got to count.

“Working under what can only be described as very difficult conditions—ranging from the watchful eyes of the censors to the lack of a real industrial infrastructure for film production—Syrian filmmakers have nevertheless managed to create a powerful and provocative cinema,” says Peña. “These are films brimming with both personal expression as well as perceptive social analysis that are often startling in their courage and commitment.”

ArteEast's Program Curator Rasha Salti adds “This showcase provides a unique opportunity to grasp the entire body of Syrian cinema and bring to the fore the hushed complicit conversation in which the filmmakers are engaged. The showcase reveals one of the interesting paradoxes that Syrian cinema emblemizes, namely, how a collection of stellar auteur films constitute a national cinema which otherwise has none of the objective attributes to be identified as such. Furthermore, the feat of Syrian filmmakers is to have told stories, forged characters and staged dramas that are unabashedly true to their reality and local culture all the while crafting a cinema that speaks to the universal experience of all around the world.”

Following its debut at the Walter Reade Theater, the series will travel to many cities throughout North America. Already scheduled are The Gene Siskel Film Center in Chicago; The Canadian Film Institute in Ottawa; The Pacific Cinematheque in Vancouver; The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; The Pacific Film Archives in Berkley (organized in collaboration with The San Francisco Arab Film Festival); The Georgetown University in Washington, DC; and The Northwest Film Center in Portland, Oregon. Complete tour schedule is available at [www.arteeast.org](http://www.arteeast.org).

Support for **THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS** has been generously provided by the Ousseimi Foundation (Switzerland) and the Department for Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures (MEALAC) at Columbia University. (Please see attached schedule for complete festival showtimes and film synopses.)

Tickets for **THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS** screenings are available at the Walter Reade Theater box office and online. Ticket prices are \$10 for adults, \$7 for students, \$5 for FSLC members, and \$6 for seniors for weekday matinees before 6 p.m. For more information and online tickets, log on to [www.filmlinc.com](http://www.filmlinc.com) or call (212) 875-5600.

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ONLINE PRESS OFFICE: Complete materials and hi-res images for **THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS**, as well as all Film Society of Lincoln Center events including the New York Film Festival (September 29 – October 15, 2006), may be downloaded from [www.filmlinc.com](http://www.filmlinc.com). Click on the press office; password is xx9c2t.

## **About The Film Society of Lincoln Center**

The Film Society of Lincoln Center was founded in 1969 to celebrate American and international cinema, to recognize and support new filmmakers and to enhance awareness, accessibility and understanding of the art among a broad and diverse film going audience.

As an independent constituent of the world's foremost performing arts center, the Film Society presents a 363-day season that includes premieres of new films from an international roster of established and emerging directors; major retrospectives; in-depth symposia and high profile events. Each year the Film Society welcomes an aggregate audience of more than 200,000 film aficionados, filmmakers and industry leaders of every nationality, age, economic and ethnic group.

The Film Society is best known for two world-class international festivals—the New York Film Festival (September 29 through October 15, 2006), and New Directors/New Films (celebrating new cinematic artists). It operates the Walter Reade Theater and publishes *Film Comment* magazine, covering the whole gamut of contemporary world cinema since 1962.

Each year the organization presents its annual Gala Tribute honoring legendary stars and industry leaders of our generation at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall. The Film Society also partners with Hollywood studios at various times of the year to present gala premieres and special live appearances.

The Film Society has been a pioneer among film institutions and one of the film world's most respected and influential arbiters of cinematic trends and discoveries. François Truffaut, R.W. Fassbinder, Jean-Luc Godard, Pedro Almodóvar, Martin Scorsese, Wong Kar-Wai, Wes Anderson—over the last four decades there is scarcely a major director who has not been introduced to American audiences by the Film Society.

## **About ArteEast**

ArteEast is a New York-based international nonprofit organization that supports artists from the Middle East and its diasporas, raising awareness of their most talented and groundbreaking work through public events, an online gallery and dynamic website. Its flagship program is the year-long screening and discussion series *CinemaEast*, named one of the top emerging film programs in the city by *New York Magazine* and now entering its sixth season. Through *CinemaEast*, as well as ArteEast's bi-annual film festival and traveling programs that reach communities through the US and Canada, the organizers have presented over 200 films and thirty directors to discuss their work since its founding in 2003.

ArteEast offers a unique multicultural approach to covering a wide spectrum of Middle Eastern artists and viewpoints rather than focusing solely on artists and projects from one nation, ethnicity, or region. To bring awareness to the widest audience in the US and internationally, ArteEast makes use of creative collaborations with cultural institutions, universities and community groups.

In conjunction with **THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS** film series, ArteEast and Rattapallax Press have published a new book, *Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with*

*Contemporary Filmmakers*. The first English-language volume of its kind, this timely collection offers critical essays and an historical overview of film production in Syria, and brings together words and texts from the country's most critically acclaimed and internationally celebrated masters of cinema. A rare glimpse into how these filmmakers have managed to create an intransigently independent cinema in spite of near-impossible conditions, *Insights into Syrian Cinema* (160 pps., b&w photos, \$15) is available for purchase from ArteEast, [www.arteeast.org](http://www.arteeast.org) or Rattapallax, [www.ratapallax.com](http://www.ratapallax.com).

## THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS: DISCOVERING SYRIAN CINEMA

### Detailed Program and Schedule Information

#### ***Stars in Broad Daylight / Nujum al-Nahar***

Oussama Mohammad, 1988; 115 minutes (NOTE: Filmmaker will attend screening)

**Friday, May 5: 1:30 pm & 6:15 pm**

In Oussama Mohammad's debut feature, a double wedding in a small village transforms into high drama when one bride runs away and the other refuses to go ahead with her marriage. Although the film was produced by the National Film Organization of Syria, and premiered at the Fortnight of the 1998 Cannes International Film Festival, *Stars in Broad Daylight* cannot be screened in its own country.

#### ***Everyday Life in a Syrian Village / al-Hayat al-Yaomiyyah fi Qariya Suriyyah***

Omar Amiralay, 1975

#### ***Blue-Grey / Azraq Ramadi***

Mohammad al-Roumi, Syria/France; 2004

Total: 113 minutes (NOTE: Filmmaker will attend screening)

**Friday, May 5: 3:45 pm; Saturday, May 6: 4:15 pm**

The first documentary to present an unabashed critique of the impact of the Syrian government's agricultural and land reforms, *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* delivers a powerful blow against the state's social and economic inequities and remains banned in Syria. The original print has been restored and digitized recently, and has been subtitled in English especially for this program. *Blue-Grey* follows filmmaker al-Roumi as he repeats a journey made with his family when he was only a boy across the Euphrates to the city of Aleppo, which would become the family's new home.

#### ***Film-Essay on the Euphrates Dam / Muhawalalah 'an Sadd al-Furat***

Omar Amiralay, 1970

#### ***A Flood in Baath Country / Al-Tawfan***

Omar Amiralay, Syria/France, 2003

#### ***The Chickens / al-Dajaj***

Omar Amiralay, 1977

Total: 96 minutes (NOTE: Filmmaker will attend screening)

**Friday, May 5: 8:45 pm; Thursday, May 11: 3 pm**

In 1970, Omar Amiralay made a short documentary, *Film-Essay on the Euphrates Dam*, in praise of the ruling Baath party's project to construct an impressive system of dams. Years later, after fatal construction flaws were uncovered, he returns to the site of his original film in the controversial *A Flood in Baath Country*. Taken together, the pair of films represents a searing

exposé of the devastating effects of 35 years of rigid Baath party rule on Syrian society. *The Chickens* is yet another of Amiralay's films that cannot be seen in his native country: under the guise of reporting on chicken farms, Amiralay documents the massive failure of Syrian government policies that have brought poverty and hunger to its people.

***Shadows and Light, the Last of the Pioneers: Nazih Shahbandar / Nouron wa Thilal***

Mohammad Malas, Oussama Mohammad and Omar Amiralay, Syria/France, 1994

***A Silent Cinema / Un Cinéma muet***

Meyar al-Roumi, Syria/France, 2001

***The Pot / al-Qarura***

Diana el-Jeiroudi, Syria; 2004

Total: 99 minutes (NOTE: All filmmakers, except Diana el-Jeiroudi, will attend screening)

**Saturday, May 6: 2 pm; Wednesday, May 17: 4:10 pm**

In 1947, Nazih Chahbandar set up a film studio fitted with film equipment that was almost all of his own making and produced and directed the first Syrian film with sound: *Shadows and Light* is an ode to those who have given everything they had to create cinema. *A Silent Cinema* is a courageous look at filmmaking in Syria today. *The Pot* is a short, unconventional documentary about Syrian women's experience of pregnancy and its impact on their relationships with their bodies in the shadow of a society that still regards them as mere vessels that carry progeny.

***At Our Listeners' Request / Ma Yatlubuhu al-Mustami'un***

Abdullatif Abdul-Hamid, 2003; 89 minutes (NOTE: Filmmaker will attend screening)

**Saturday, May 6: 6:30 pm; Tuesday May 9: 4 pm**

Tuesday in small-town Syria in 1969 means only one thing: gathering at the local grandee's house to hear the popular radio show "At Our Listeners' Request." Filled with a nostalgic soundtrack of classic Arabic ballads, Abdul-Hamid's poignant film is about the weekly broadcast that brings together a remarkable assortment of oddball characters, each of whom pursues their own dreams and romances.

***Dreams of the City / Ahlam al-Madina***

Mohammad Malas, 1983; 120 minutes (NOTE: Filmmaker will attend screening)

**Saturday, May 6: 8:45 pm; Wednesday, May 10: 2:30 pm; Friday, May 12: 2 pm**

"Mother, come and see how beautiful Damascus is!" cries little Omar to his mother, a young woman drained by mourning. Semi-autobiographical, *Dreams of the City* marked a turning point in Syrian cinema; it represented not only the emergence of a kind of "auteur" cinema, centered around a director's personal vision, but also a new, unsentimental, and at times critical look at the lives of the popular classes. A multiple award-winner that, perhaps more than any other single film, truly put Syrian cinema on the map internationally.

**Syrian Cinema Today and Tomorrow**  
**Sunday, May 7: 4:30 pm, Free admission**

As part of this series, the Film Society will present a panel discussion on Syrian filmmaking today and the prospects for Syrian cinema in the future. Among those participating in this discussion will be filmmakers Omar Amiralay, Oussama Mohammad, and Abdullatif Abdul-Hamid.

***Sacrifices / Sunduq al-Dunya***

Oussama Mohammad, Syria/France, 2003; 113 minutes (NOTE: Filmmaker will attend screening)

**Sunday, May 7: 6:30 pm; Monday, May 8: 9 pm**

Oussama's second film—made almost 15 years after his highly-acclaimed *Stars in Broad Daylight*—focuses on a family as a microcosm for larger society. Living in a house precariously perched on a mountainside, three related families await the death of their common patriarch, as well as for the announcement as to which grandson will be designated his heir.

***Nights of the Jackals/Layali Ibn Awah***

Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid, 1989; 102 minutes (NOTE: Filmmaker will attend screening)

**Sunday, May 7: 9 pm; Tuesday, May 9: 2 pm**

One of the most widely screened Syrian films, *Nights of the Jackals* follows the life of a peasant family, whose days are spent plowing fields and whose nights are punctuated by the menacing howling of jackals. A powerful and resonant story of a father's obsessive control and fear over his family, the film is also a reflection of the 1967 war with Israel's impact on the Syrian people.

***The Extras / Al-Comparss***

Nabil el-Maleh, 1993; 105 minutes

**Monday, May 8: 2 pm & 6:30 pm**

“An often funny and ultimately devastating viewing experience propelled by two standout performances,” says Lisa Nesselson of *Variety* of Nabil Maleh's fourth feature. An international award-winner, *The Extras*, about an aspiring actor and garage mechanic's romantic involvement with a pretty young widow, is a tender love story set in a watchful society.

***The Dupes / Al-Makhdu'un***

Tewfik Saleh, 1972; 107 minutes

**Monday, May 8: 4:15 pm; Friday, May 12: 6 pm**

One of the seminal works of the Syrian cinema was shot by one of Egypt's finest filmmakers, based on a work by an acclaimed Palestinian author set largely in Iraq. Tewfik Saleh (*Street of*

*Madmen, The Rebels*), adapting Ghassan Khanafani's 1962 novella, *Men in the Sun*, together with its author, creates a dense interweaving of past and present, fiction and documentary, in this harsh condemnation of the treatment of diaspora Palestinians by their fellow Arabs. This spare black-and-white film set in 1958 is a work of enormous emotional power, as well as one of the first Arab films to deal seriously, albeit controversially, with the Palestinian issue.

***The Dream / Al-Manam***

Mohammad Malas, 1981

***Journey into Memory / Rihla fi al-Thakira***

Hala Mohammad, Syria/Qatar, 2006

Total: 90 minutes

**Friday, May 12: 4:15 pm; Wednesday, May 17: 8:30 pm**

Shortly before embarking on his first feature film, *Dreams of the City*, Mohammad Malas made *The Dream*, a touching documentary shot in Sabra and Shatila, Palestine refugee camps in Lebanon. Horribly, most of the participants in the film would be killed just a few months after the film was shot in the infamous massacre at the camps led by the Lebanese Phalangist Forces. Commissioned as part of al-Jazeera's series documenting the experience of political prison for writers, poets, novelists and playwrights in the Arab world, *Journey into Memory* is the second film Hala Mohammad has contributed to the series. We are invited to join writer Yassin el-Hajj Saleh, poet Faraj Bayraqdar and writer and playwright Ghassan Jeba'i as they ride in a car from Damascus to Palmyre (Palmyra), the ancient city where one of Syria's most chilling prisons is located.

***A Land for a Stranger/Turab al-Ghuraba'***

Samir Zikra, 1998

150 minutes

**Saturday, May 13: 1:30 pm; Tuesday, May 16: 2 pm**

One of the most ambitious productions in Syrian film history, the historical epic *A Land for a Stranger* depicts the latter years of the life of Abdel-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1852-1902), an important intellectual figure in the late Ottoman world and a strident critic of what he saw as an emerging tendency toward rigid religious fundamentalism in the Muslim world. Winner, Best Arab Film, Cairo International Film Festival, 2004.

**Short Fiction Films**

***Step by Step / Khutwa Khutwa***

Oussama Mohammad, 1977

***A Moment of Joy / Lahthat Farah***

Walid Hreib, 2001

***White / Abiad***

Antoinette Azriyeh, 2000

***Just Get Married!***

Husam Chadat, Syria/Germany, 2003

***The Wash / Vaskeriet***

Hisham el-Zouki, Syria/Norway, 2005

Total: 75 minutes

**Saturday, May 13: 4:30 pm; Thursday, May 18: 4:15 pm**

A selection of short films from some of Syria's most renowned directors, this program includes: *Step By Step*, Oussama Mohammad's graduation project for the VGIK film school in Moscow; the hilarious and heartwarming *Just Get Married!* About a Syrian living in Germany whose student visa has finally run out; and *The Wash* about two immigrants in Norway, working as cleaners for a company entrusted to prepare the site for a visit from the U.S. president, who are thrown into disarray when blood begins dripping on the American flag hanging high on its mast.

***Passion / Bab el-Maqam***

Mohammad Malas, Syria/Tunisia/France, 2004; 102 minutes

**Saturday, May 13: 6:30 pm; Wednesday, May 17: 2 pm & 6:15 pm**

The most recent film by Mohammad Malas—based on an actual event—is an unsettling look at how close centuries-old prejudices and conventions lay just beneath the surface of an otherwise secular-seeming society.

***The Night / Al-Leyl***

Mohammad Malas, 1993; 115 minutes

**Saturday, May 13: 8:40 pm; Monday, May 15: 5 pm, Thursday, May 18: 8:30 pm**

The story of the troubled beginnings of a family as well as a nation, *The Night* is set in the village of Quneytra, a border town on the Golan and a key battleground during the 1967 war. Winner of the top prize at the Carthage Film Festival as well as the Silver Palm at the Valencia Film Festival, Malas' second feature is a kind of prequel to his first, the equally stunning, *Dreams of the City*.

***Al-Lajat***

Ryad Chaia, 1996; 84 minutes

**Monday, May 15: 1 pm & 7:15 pm**

Ryad Chaia's powerful debut feature is the story of Salma, a young woman living in a remote Druze village in southern Syria in the late 1940s. Left alone after her husband unaccountably leaves home, Salma becomes interested in the newly arrived schoolteacher; their plans to escape, however, invite the wrath of both her family as well as of the community.

***Exodus / al-Tirhal***

Raymond Boutros, 1997; 108 minutes

**Monday, May 15: 2:45 pm & 9 pm**

Set in the late 40s and early 50s in the city of Hama, *Exodus* captures an exceedingly turbulent period in the modern history of the Arab world. Relating the story of a simple stone carver, *Exodus* powerfully depicts the effects of major historical and political upheavals on the everyday lives of the working poor—how events far from their control seem to conspire to make their lives ever more difficult.

***A Plate of Sardines — or The First Time I Heard of Israel / Tabaq el-Sardin***

Omar Amiralay, Syria/France, 1997; 17 minutes

***There Are So Many Things Still To Say... / Hunalika Ashiya' Kathira Kana Yumken an Yatahadath 'Anha al-Mare'...***

Omar Amiralay, Syria/France, 1997; 50 minutes

***Over the Sky of Damascus/Fawqa Sama' Dimashq***

Fuad Nirabie and Edgar Jinbachian, Syria/Canada, 2004; 40 minutes

Total: 107 minutes

**Thursday, May 18: 2 pm & 6:15 pm**

“The first time I heard of Israel, I was in Beirut, and the conversation was about a plate of sardines,” says filmmaker Omar Amiralay. “I was six years old, Israel was two.” *There Are So Many Things Still To Say...* is a farewell to a generation for whom the Arab-Israeli conflict has been the source of all disillusion. A documentary film that hovers between fiction and non-fiction, *Over the Sky of Damascus* follows a filmmaker who seeks to weave his own story within the labyrinths of old Damascus to capture the echoes of everyday life from behind its walls. This internal journey gradually comes to include the experience of an exiled Syrian writer, as well as the poignant testimony of one of Syria’s most famous political prisoners, on a visit to Canada after 18 years in prison.

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