

## ARAB CINEMA'S BEST-KEPT SECRET

IS FINALLY GETTING THE NORTH AMERICAN RETROSPECTIVE IT DESERVES. THIS SHOWCASE, WHICH TOOK TEN YEARS TO ORGANIZE, WILL INTRODUCE VIEWERS TO AN ARRAY OF VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN AUTEURS (SUCH AS MOHAMMAD MALAS AND OUSSAMA MOHAMMAD) WHOSE INDIVIDUALLY IDIOSYNCRATIC WORK NONETHELESS FORMS A BONA FIDE NATIONAL ART FORM.

The first North American retrospective of a stellar period of Syrian cinema, from the 1980s through today, "The Road to Damascus" is a particularly timely and relevant program. The exhibition covers an impressive breadth of subjects. There are love stories, family dramas, historical epics, and political critiques. They offer up a range of emotions from outrage to joy, despair to hilarity. Included are works by Russian-trained master filmmakers, as well as independent works from a budding generation of filmmakers who have just begun to develop their own voice, their own vision of cinema and of Syria.

- Film Society of Lincoln Center

“An adventurous film series.”

Stephen Holden, *New York Times*

# THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

DISCOVERING SYRIAN CINEMA



SACRIFICES

I FIRST DISCOVERED SYRIAN CINEMA FOR MYSELF back in the early 80s. I had just begun to attend international film festivals such as Rotterdam and Cannes, and the Syrian cinema was, likewise, a kind of newcomer to the scene. Samir Zikra's *The Half Meter Incident* (sadly not included in this series) impressed me with its sly humour and candour about the 1967 Six Day War; but what really caught my — and many other people's — attention was Mohammad Malas's *Dreams of the City*. Exquisitely made and directed, the film offered one of the most skilful weavings of personal story and historical consciousness that I had ever seen.

Over the next few years Syria would reappear at festivals with works such as Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid's *The Night of the Jackals* and Oussama Mohammad's *Stars in Broad Daylight*, but then in 1992 came Malas's second film, *The Night*. Simply a masterpiece, *The Night* seemed the perfect next step beyond *Dreams of the City*; its innovative blending of personal and historical narratives was even more provocative, and his style was further enhanced by various surrealist touches. Clearly, something was going on in the Syrian cinema.

Happily, in 1995 I had the opportunity to visit Syria in the course of watching films for what became the Film Society's "Centennial of Arab Cinema" in November 1996. Beyond having the chance to see again friends such as Mohammad Malas, Omar Amiralay and Oussama Mohammad (both close collaborators with Malas on *The Night*, as well as fine filmmakers in their own right), I also got to see and review a large part of Syrian production from the mid-80s to the mid-90s, and to discover the impressive breadth that characterized that cinema. What first strikes one about Syrian films is simply just how well made they are.

Many of the filmmakers — including Malas and Oussama Mohammad — studied filmmaking at VGIK, the great Soviet film school in Moscow. All are fine exemplars 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. For their narratives, Syrian filmmakers often rely on allegory, the microcosm of a single family serving as stand-in for the nation. The films also don't shy away from making big statements. Historical events are never far off screen, and they often permeate even the most intimate of personal relations.

With an annual production never exceeding more than four or five feature films a year, many filmmakers are forced to wait years between projects (almost 15 years passed between Oussama Mohammad's first and second features); consequently, filmmakers are intensely aware that each film, each shot, really has 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, with films brimming with both personal expression as well as perceptive social analysis that are often startling in their courage and commitment.

- Richard Peña, Program Director, Film Society of Lincoln Center

**Acknowledgements:** This program is part of "Lens on Syria: Thirty Years of Contemporary Syrian Cinema," a touring exhibition organized by ArteEast ([www.arteeast.org](http://www.arteeast.org)), a non-profit arts organization based in New York that promotes the arts and cultures of the Middle East. The tour is travelling to various venues in North America from May to September 2006. Special thanks to Rasha Salti and Livia Alexander of ArteEast for their helpful assistance in making this Vancouver presentation possible, and to the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York, where the program was first presented, and from whom we have borrowed our exhibition title.

“Neglected — ignored even — Syrian cinema merits special attention for its originality, quality, and boldness.”

Cécile Boëx, *Film Comment*

### The Night

(al-Layl)

SYRIA 1992. DIRECTOR: MOHAMMAD MALAS

CAST: SABAH EL-JAZAIRI, FARES HELDU, RAFIQ SBEI'1, RIAD CHARHROUR, OMAR MALAS



A provocative blending of personal and political cinema, Syrian filmmaker Mohammad Malas's semi-autobiographical second feature is set in his native Quneytra, a border town, largely destroyed in the wars of 1967 and 1973, that lies in the Golan Heights. An attempt to understand the troubled past of a family and a nation, the film has a young man (the director's alter ego) reliving childhood memories as he visits the grave of his father. The father was a volunteer in the Arab armies that rose up in Palestine in the Great Revolt of 1936; he was also, to his family's everlasting shame, regarded as the local madman. Set against the turbulent events that convulsed Syria in the 1930s and 40s, *The Night* was one of the first Syrian films to be widely seen in the West (it was selected for the Berlin, Rotterdam, and New York film festivals). It won lavish praise from *Variety* for its accomplishment and its fascinating Arab perspective on the creation of the state of Israel. Malas's first feature, *Dreams of the City* (screening July 9) was equally visually stunning. "The film has a rare authority . . . Malas's pictorial style — something of a stylistic watershed in contemporary Arab cinema — is unique" (*Variety*). *Colour, 35mm, in Arabic with English subtitles. 116 mins.*

THURSDAY, JULY 6 — 7:15 PM

SUNDAY, JULY 9 — 9:30 PM

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