

# A SHOWCASE OF SYRIAN CINEMA

## *university tour*

### > programs features

#### *program 1:*

***Stars in Broad Day (Nujum an-Nahar)***, by Oussama Mohammad (Syria, 1988, 115 min, Color, DVD)

A double wedding in a small village turns to high drama when one bride runs away and the other refuses to go on with her marriage. The drama unveils the fragile balance holding together a family strained by an abusive father now replaced by the successful but corrupt eldest son, a pathologically enraged second son, and the troubles of the youngest son, rendered deaf by a violent blow his father dealt him as a child. Ultimately tragic, the film is rife with biting humor and sharp political critique as it exposes how the violence of arbitrary and absolute power in a patriarchal society seeps into the unit of a family. *Stars in Broad Daylight*, Ousama Mohammad's first long feature, remains banned from screening in Syria because of its subversive representation and critical voice. Selected at the «Quinzaine des Réalisateurs» at the Cannes Film Festival in 1988.

#### *program 2:*

***Just Get Married!*** by Husam Chadat (Syria/Germany, 2003, 20 minutes, Color, DVD)

Hilarious and heartwarming, *Just Get Married!* tells the story of Mr. Sharif, a Syrian living in Germany, whose student visa has finally run out. Desperate to find a way to stay in the country he has come to love, his futile attempts find him revisiting past girlfriends, responding to personal ads, and pleading with strangers. Eventually he learns that home is where you make it.

***Verbal Letters (Rasa'el Shafahiyyah)***, by Abdullatif Abdul-Hamid (Syria, 1991, 105 min, Color, DVD)

Set in the bright orange groves of a small village in the Syrian countryside, *Verbal Letters* has earned Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid frequent comparisons to French author Marcel Pagnol (*Jean de Florette*, *Manon des Sources*). The film, about love friendship, loyalty and the magic of the first kiss, is loosely adapted from the story of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. A young man with an oversized nose is too embarrassed to approach the beautiful young woman he has fallen deeply in love with. He dispatches his most trusted friend to recite to her his love letters, but she falls for the friend. The film is an ode of tenderness and humor to childhood, coming of age, the enchantment of the first love, and the pains of learning multiplication tables.

#### *program 3:*

***They Were Here*** (Innahum Kanu Huna) by 'Ammar el-Beik (Syria, 2002, 12 min, Color, DVD)

Coming to terms with the end of the industrial era, *They Were Here* is an elegant and eloquently composed study that reverberates with lives lived, fading images and relics of retrospection. El-Beik makes a tightly drawn piece about public space, private contemplation and an ephemeral sensibility.

***The Night (al-Leyl)*** by Mohammad Malas (Syria, 1992, 125 min, Color, DVD)

*The Night* is set in the village of Quneytra, which borders on the Golan, a key battlefield in the 1967 war between Syria and Israel. We are led to the grave of the filmmakers' father, an old Syrian fighter who joined the volunteer armies in Palestine in the Great Revolt of 1936. Trying to exorcise feelings of shame and humiliation that have long accompanied the image of his father and the village occupied by Israelis during the war of 1967, Malas tries to restore his father's history and give him a more honorable death. But tracing the outline of a memory tortured by burning questions finds only bitter answers. The film is Malas' second feature, often perceived as the 'prequel' to his first, equally visually stunning, *Dreams of the City*. The film earned five awards, including, The Golden Tanit at the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage, in Tunisia in 1992, and the Silver Palm at the Valencia Film Festival, Spain, 1993.

*program 4:*

***Sacrifices (Sunduq al-Dunya)*** by Oussama Mohammad (Syria/France, 2002, 113 min, Color, DVD)

A fantastic and visually captivating cinematic fable, *Sacrifices* reflects on how violence and power legitimize themselves, producing rituals and a vocabulary to perpetuate themselves. It portrays the life of a large family held together by the absolute power of its patriarch, the grandfather, who fertilized the land, started the family, built the house and planted a large tree around which their lives revolve. The film opens as the grandfather is dying, and the family surrounds him in anguish and uncertainty. Life begins with death, young men are born as the patriarch expires, and fathers and heroes come back from the war only to dissolve into mud. Selected at Cannes Film Festival's «Un Certain Regard».

d o c u m e n t a r i e s ( 4 p r o g r a m s )

*program 1*

***Step by Step (Khutwa Khutwa)*** by Oussama Mohammad (Syria, 1977, 25 minutes, Black and White, DVD)

Each day children trudge the muddied village paths to go to school, but as *Step by Step* makes painfully clear, their only real escape from crushing poverty is to join the army. A frightening, captivating and insightful portrait of how the Baath regime transformed generations of peasants into citizen-soldiers and sent the poor in droves to provincial cities as migrant laborers. This short film was Mohammad's graduation project at the VGIK film school and foretells his cinematic style and thematic obsession with the language of violence in society. The original print has been restored and digitized, and subtitled in English especially for this program.

***A Plate of Sardines (or The First Time I Heard of Israel)*** by Omar Amiralay (Syria/France, 1997, 18 min, Color, DVD)

«The first time I heard of Israel, I was in Beirut, the conversation was about a plate of sardines. I was six years old, Israel was two.» In the company of filmmaker Mohammad Malas, Omar Amiralay revisits the ruins of the destroyed village of Quneytra. The film has been subtitled in English especially for this program.

***There Are Many Things Left I Would Like To Say... (Hunak Ashiya' Kathira...)*** by Omar Amiralay (Syria/France, 1996, 50 min, Color, DVD)

A few months before the passing of his friend and close collaborator dramaturge Sa'adallah Wannus, Amiralay listens to his friend's somber and relentless words, a farewell to a generation for whom the Arab-Israeli conflict has been the source of all disillusion.

*program 2*

***Before Vanishing (Qabl al-Ikhtifa')*** by Joude Gorani (Syria/France, 2005, 20 min, Color, DVD)

In *Before Vanishing*, filmmaker Joude Gorani travels from the beginning to the end of the Barada river that surrounds the capital city of Damascus. Often deemed iconic of nature's wondrous beauty, we discover how the Barada river has suffered from exploitation, neglect, pollution and unplanned urbanization. The film also uncovers the transformation of the river's social life and provides an intelligent measure of the distance between ideology and reality in contemporary Syria.

***Everyday Life in a Syrian Village (al-Hayat al-Yawmiyyah fi Qarya Suriyyah)*** by Omar Amiralay (Syria, 1974, 90 min, b&w, DVD)

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 jab at the state's conceit of redressing social and economic inequities. Interviews with farmers, health workers and a police officer contrast the peasants' regard for the state with the mindset of state representatives toward those peasants. Sa'adallah Wannus, a prominent Syrian playwright and essayist collaborated with documentary pioneer Amiralay on the project. The film remains banned in Syria. The original print has been restored and digitized very recently, and subtitled in English especially for this program.

*program 3*

***The Chickens (al-Dajaj)*** by Omar Amiralay (Syria, 1977, 40 minutes, Black & White, DVD)

Produced by Syrian television, this film too remains banned in Syria. Under the guise of documenting chicken farms, the filmmaker delivers a scathing critique of his government, and foretells the massive failure of its policies that have brought poverty and hunger to its people. The original print has been restored and digitized very recently and subtitled in English especially for this program.

***Film-Essai on the Euphrates Dam (Muhawalah ‘an Wadi al-Furat)*** by Omar Amiralay (Syria, 1970, 10 minutes, b&w, DVD)

This first film by the veteran documentary filmmaker Omar Amiralay follows the construction of a dam on the Euphrates river that is supposed to bring tremendous improvement in the lives of villages around it. Thirty years later, the filmmaker will revisit the site in *A Flood in Baath Country*, and the enthusiasm once generated by the Baath. The original print has been restored and digitized very recently, and subtitled in English especially for this program.

***A Flood in Baath Country (Al-Tawfan)*** by Omar Amiralay (Syria/France, 2003, 46 min, Color, DVD)

In 1970, Omar Amiralay made a short documentary, *Film-Essai on the Euphrates Dam*, in praise of the ruling Baath party's project to construct an impressive system of dams. Today, after fatal construction flaws have been discovered, his controversial new film explores the metaphorical implications of such weakness. Without commentary or criticism, Amiralay's film exposes Baath party propaganda and its debilitating effects on the people of al-Mashi village, 400 kilometres (250 miles) northeast of Damascus. The camera moves slowly from students to teachers to government officials, with everyone reciting the exact same praises for the president and slogans glorifying the Baath party. The film is the harshest indictment yet of the regime, portraying the devastating effects of 35 years of rigid Baath party rule on Syrian society.

*program 4*

***The Wash*** by Hisham el-Zouki (Syria/Norway, 2005, 8 minutes, Color, DVD)

Taking the dirty laundry takes on new meanings in *The Wash*. Two immigrants in Norway, working as cleaners for a company entrusted to prepare the site for the visit of the U.S. president, are suddenly thrown into disarray when blood begins to drip from the U.S. flag hanging high on its mast. *The Wash* is crafted like a caustic allegorical fable about perceptions of the U.S., and leaves the viewer with an open-ended field of interpretation.

***The Pot (al-Qarura)*** by Diana el-Jeiroudi (Syria, 2004, 20 min, Color, DVD)

A short unconventional documentary, *The Pot* creates the space for women to express themselves freely about being pregnant in the shadow of a society that still regards their bodies as a vessel to carry progeny. It is the filmmaker's first film.

***Blue Grey*** by Mohamad el-Roumi (Syria/France, 2003, 23 minutes, Color, DVD)

Filmed in northern Syria, in the region known as the upper Euphrates, the filmmaker treks the reverse trajectory that carried him as a child and his family, on the ferry crossing the Euphrates, as they migrated to the city of Aleppo. The villages he returns to, have now vanished with the construction of the artificial lake of Tishreen. With tenderness and melancholy the film bids farewell to a life right before its vanishing, it carries the sorrow of people in the moment preceding their uprooting and displacement.

***The Dream (Al-Manam)*** by Mohammad Malas (Syria, 1981, 45 min, Color, DVD)

Filmed in Sabra and Shatila, Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, shortly before the massacre in 1982, this documentary's principle reference is dreams, and not lived reality. It plays on this double register, where women, children, elderly and combatants speak the reality of their everyday, transposed eerily, in dreams, nightmares and premonitions. Ultimately they converge on what the Palestinians have lost: their homeland and a life with dignity.