



A SHOWCASE OF SYRIAN CINEMA

November 2006 - May 2007

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Syrian cinema is largely unknown to audiences in the region, whether the southern Mediterranean, or the Middle East. While some films may have featured in international film festivals, never before has a program focused on the rich cinematic output of Syrian filmmakers.

Considering the success and unprecedented critical acclaim the program has received thus far during its North American tour, ArteEast is proud to offer university campuses across the country a unique opportunity to discover and engage with this vibrant and diverse cinema, through the presentation of a specially curated, traveling showcase, from November 2006 to May 2007. It includes an array of features, documentaries and short films by the country's most celebrated filmmakers and emerging independent young talents. The program is the first to provide an overview of Syrian cinema, bringing forward the cinematic vocabulary of a national cinema to which the world has rarely turned its attention.

Furthermore, the program includes digitally re-mastered gems of Syrian cinema whose original prints were on the brink of complete deterioration. The program has allocated a special budget to have them subtitled in English for the purposes of this tour.

Background

Syrian filmmakers engage social and political tensions at work in contemporary society, while carving an independent, critical and often subversive cinema under the sponsorship of a state ruled by a single party that has been actively vested in suppressing dissent and promoting official dogma. Resisting seductive and lucrative temptations of market paradigms born in the increasingly ravenous appetite for world cinema, or more specifically third world cinema,

Syrian filmmakers have crafted a body of work that has not shied away from being deeply rooted in its locality. They have spurned the ready-made formulas favored by consumers (what about the filmmakers of 3rd world cinema, who produce it for the consumers?) of third world cinema. It is precisely because these filmmakers have been so staunchly true to themselves, and to the social and political world that they cast and represent that Syrian film also speaks in the universal language of cinema.

While Syrian cinema can be described as unabashedly national in its entrenchment within the local culture of Syria, and unabashedly Arab as well, it is also a cinema that is profoundly engaged with world cinema, particularly with regard to schools of cinematography, or styles. First and foremost Syrian film bears the hallmarks of Soviet formalism, as most Syrian filmmakers are graduates of film schools in the former Soviet Union. Critics worldwide have cited the kinship between their work and the legacy of Andreï Tarkovsky, as with the work of Riyad Shayya, Oussama Mohammad and Mohammad Malas, to cite a few examples. The work of Abdullatif Abdul-Hamid, on the other hand, has more often been compared to the legacy of the Italian neo-realist school, and parallels have been drawn between Nabil Maleh and Ettore Scola.

The Program

The showcase of Syrian cinema features films that are considered to be important landmarks in Arab cinema (*The Night*), emblematic in their rendering of a theme, style or approach and those that have earned wide popular acclaim (*Nights of the Jackals*). The showcase provides a glimpse into the wide array of genres animating the production of film in Syria, from romantic comedies (*At Our Listeners' Request* and *Verbal Letters*) to social and political satire (*Stars in Broad Daylight*), historical epics (*A Land for A Stranger*), auteur films (*al-Lajat*), and coming of age stories (*Dreams of the City*). These include the work of internationally renowned directors like Mohammad Malas, Nabil Maleh, Oussama Mohammad, Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid, Samir Zikra, as well as emerging filmmakers like Nidal el-Dibs, 'Ammar el-Beik, Husam Chadat and Hisham el-Zouki. The selection of films also includes a homage to pioneer documentary filmmaker Omar Amiralay, who has had an enduring influence on Syrian and Arab cinema, as well as short documentary films and first works by filmmakers who later all turned to making fiction films.

The program traces the various themes that have animated Syrian cinema for over three decades. It is intended to illustrate the fluidity with which Syrian filmmakers have been unabashed in elaborating a decidedly local cinema that is

yet deeply conversant with the wider regional Arab context. These include:

* The tragedy of Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict are a salient theme in Syrian cinema, not only in documentary films, as in Mohammad Malas' renown masterpiece *The Dream* (1981) but also in fiction films such as Mohammad Malas' *The Night* (1992) Abdullatif Abdel-Hamid's, *Verbal Letters* (1991) and *At Our Listeners' Request* (2003). These films address the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967 and the loss of the Golan in 1973, profound markers in shaping Syrians' consciousness

* A critique of the social, economic and political reforms enforced by the regime guided by the Baath doctrine, and their impact on everyday life, as with Omar Amiralay's *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (1974), Oussama Mohammad's *Stars in Broad Daylight* (1988) and Nabil Maleh's *The Extras* (1993).

* The openly defiant auteur cinema beginning in the mid-1980s that revisits the recent history of the country and its traumatic moments from the purview of collective memory, challenging the official narrative. Such films include Mohamad Malas' *Dreams of the City* (1983), Riyad Shayya's *al-Lajat* (1995) and Oussama Mohammad's *Sacrifices* (2002).

Program Implementation

ArteEast is offering the option of showcasing a full-program or of tailoring a shorter showcase that takes into consideration the interests and constraints of each institution.

The showcase of Syrian cinema will be touring the country for seven months, beginning in November 2006. The program is curated by Rasha Salti, an independent curator and free-lance writer, working between New York and Beirut (Lebanon). She has participated in the organization of the forum on cultural practices *Home Works* (2003 and 2005) organized every eighteen months by the Beirut-based non-profits arts organization Ashkal Alwan. Among the many shows she has curated are *Image Quest* (1995), the first film and video festival in postwar Lebanon to feature the work of emerging Lebanese film and video artists, and *For a Critical Culture: A Tribute to Edward Said* (1997). She is also the director of CinemaEast Film Festival.

Terms

ArteEast will be responsible for providing participating universities with all

DVDs, program notes and publicity materials. ArteEast will post information on its website about screenings at participating institutions and provide links to screening schedules. Please note that all films are in Arabic, and the DVDs we will be providing are subtitled in English.

Participating institutions will be responsible for covering the cost of shipping and insurance (DVDs will be shipped from, and returned to, New York), applicable screening fees, as well as an organizing fee owed to ArteEast in the amount of \$250. Institutions will also be responsible for any damage to the DVDs while in their possession and during shipping. Please consult your insurance carriers for details and requirements.

The showcase is being proposed to several universities in the country. If you are interested in hosting the program, please let us know at your earliest convenience so we can secure dates and coordinate traffic. As soon as we receive your reply, we will start working on an appropriate program for your institution.

Credits

All publicity materials for this program must include the following acknowledgement: This program is part of *Lens on Syria: Thirty Years of Contemporary Cinema*, a touring exhibition organized by ArteEast (www.arteeast.org).

ArteEast's logo should be used on all publicity materials and should be no smaller than half an inch in size.

Book

ArteEast is publishing a book with contributions from experts on Arab and Syrian cinema, as well as the filmmakers themselves, in order to address a long felt neglect for an engagement with Syrian cinema in particular and Arab cinema in general, as well as to give the vibrant artistry of Syrian filmmakers their due. The 180-page book will be available for purchase from Rattapallax Press, information pertaining to purchase of the book is available on the ArteEast website, at www.arteeast.org.

We look forward to hearing from you and are delighted to collaborate on this film program to provide your students with an opportunity to engage with a cinema and talent long overshadowed.

Sincerely,

Rasha Salti
Program Director