



The Blue Caftan (Le Bleu du Caftan)

Directed by: Maryam Touzani

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Ali n' Productions, Velvet Films, Snowglobe

Production Companies:

Les Films du Nouveau Monde, Ali n' Productions,

Velvet Films, Snowglobe

International Sales: Films Boutique

Produced by: Nabil Ayouch

Production Manager: Azzedine Taoussi

Production Co-ordinator: Doha Arrafi

Production Accountant: Rachid Farkal

1st Assistant Director: Zakaria Atifi

2nd Assistant Director: Rajae El Jaouhari

Script Supervisor: Leenda Mamosa

Casting Director: Rajae El Jaouhari

A Screenplay by: Maryam Touzani

[Screenplay] In collaboration with: Nabil Ayouch

Dialogue Adaptation: Younes Chara, Zineb Ennaji

Director of Photography: Virginie Surdej

Camera Operator: Adil Ayoub

Supervising Editor: Nicolas Rumpf

Editor: Yassir Hamani

Art Director: Emmanuel De Meulemeester

Set Decorator: Rachid El Yousfi

Costume Designer: Rafika Ben Maimoun

Make-up: Jennifer Courouge

Original Music: Kristian Selin Eidnes Andersen

Sound: Nassim El Mounabbih, Claus Lynge,

Said Radi, Carlos E. Garcia

Dialogue Coach: Younes Chara

Cast:

Lubna Azabal (Mina)

Saleh Bakri (Halim)

Ayoub Missioui (Youssef)

Mounia Lamkamel (blue caftan client)

Abdelhamid Zoughi (doctor)

Zakaria Atifi (Bachir)

France-Morocco-Belgium 2022©

122 mins

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SIGHT AND SOUND

NEW RELEASES

The Blue Caftan (Le Bleu du Caftan)

In Salé, one of Morocco's oldest medinas, Mina and husband Halim run a traditional caftan store. Mina greets the customers and Halim works quietly in the background, hand-stitching each garment with the patience and precision of a master craftsman. While Halim's work is impeccable, his methodical process is undeniably slow. Rather than rely on the machines that most tailors now use, the couple hire young apprentice Youssef to help with customer demand. But as Halim teaches Youssef the trade, Mina notices a deeper connection forming between the two men. With queer narratives largely absent in Maghreb cinema, *The Blue Caftan* is a significant film in many ways, and one that is every bit as intricate and precious as the beautifully embroidered garments we see being created.

Michael Blyth

Maryam Touzani's *The Blue Caftan* bears witness to the romantic predicaments of Halim (Saleh Bakri), a bashful, gentle-mannered *maalem* (tailor) of unparalleled skill. His wife, Mina (played by the effervescent Lubna Azabal), heads their workshop in the old town of Salé, Morocco with a feisty, sharp-tongued approach to finicky customers. As a couple they are deeply in tune with one another, and there's particular joy in watching the scenes in which fits of giggles explode between them. Halim is palpably forlorn when Mina's cancer returns, tending to her with the utmost care. But their relationship is lacking one thing: sexual desire on Halim's part. He is cold to her advances, and their sole sex scene is distinctly miserable.

Instead, he finds sexual release in the steamy, convivial nudity of the local hammam. Yet these hurried, impersonal encounters are no match for the intimacy of the scenes in which he washes Mina's hair or feeds her tangerines as her illness worsens.

A more charged partnership presents itself with the arrival of a new apprentice, Youssef (Ayoub Missioui). His backstory is undefined, but he claims to have fended for himself from the age of eight. He's committed and cordial, though initially raises Mina's hackles, and returns Halim's shy glances with a more ardent affection. The love that ensues between the men is tender, and the tactile nature of their craft makes for many intimate student-teacher moments.

Mina is not oblivious to what's going on. At first she's resigned and indifferent, but as her illness sets in she becomes playfully encouraging. At one point she sends them off to the hammam together under the pretence of wanting some peace and quiet

In a standout scene, Mina invites both Halim and Youssef to dance with her, and their differing, intersecting relationships – lover, friend, companion – emerge, free of any animosity. Mina feels no need to compete, maintaining an unbreakable bond with Halim, and ultimately what transpires is an incredibly delicate balancing act. Not that the balance is perfect: Mina, though cherished, is not the recipient of desire, while Halim and Youssef must interact with a crushing discretion. But the relationships escape the overlapping confines of patriarchy, monogamy and homophobia, portraying a love that's generous and candid.

NEW RELEASES

Return to Seoul (Retour à Séoul)

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The Blue Caftan (Le Bleu du Caftan)

From Fri 5 May

Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power

From Fri 12 May

Plan 75

From Fri 19 May

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As with recent Pakistani triumph *Joyland* (2022), while a husband's infidelity might initially seem at fault, the men's behaviour is symptomatic of a vehemently homophobic and heteronormative society that gives them little other choice. Such societal bigotry is evident in the dearth of LGBTQIA+ representation in both Africa and the Arab world, which makes *The Blue Caftan* a significant contribution to queer culture in these regions. In fact it's only the second film to deal head on with gay relationships in Morocco, coming almost a decade after Abdellah Taïa's languid *Salvation Army* (2013), adapted from his autobiographical 2006 book, which saw him become the first openly gay writer and filmmaker in the Arab world.

Salvation Army addresses gay relationships but consists mainly of a series of vignettes of encounters between 15-year-old Abdellah and much older men; all of its interactions are transactional or exploitative. This is a dynamic also touched upon in the work of Nabil Ayouch, who is Touzani's husband and collaborator, credited as co-producer and co-writer on *The Blue Caftan*. His films *Horses of God* (2012) and *Ali Zaoua* (2000), both set in Casablanca, feature boys being sexually abused by older men.

British-Moroccan director Fyzal Boulifa's recent feature, *The Damned Don't Cry* (2022), teased at queer desire, but of the furtive, unconsummated kind, as well as the gay sex-tourism prevalent in Morocco and its reinforcement of colonial dynamics. But stories of mature, mutually enthusiastic and emotionally honest relationships between men have not been acknowledged. *The Blue Caftan's* painterly presentation of a tender, respectful rapport – not mired in toxic behaviour or linked to childhood abuse – is unprecedented in cinema from the Maghreb and incredibly rare in the wider region.

Halim is played by Saleh Bakri, who hails from Palestine, where same-sex relationships remain similarly overlooked in film. Next door, Egypt, which has historically been the largest and most influential film industry in the Arab world, has seen homoerotic tension, effeminate comic relief and queer-coded characters repeatedly employed in favour of more forthright depictions. South of the Sahara is the continent's largest film industry, Nollywood, with its explicit Christian overtones resulting in a tendency to equate queerness with divine punishment. Titles such as *Hideous Affair* (2010) and *Dirty Secret* (2010) speak for themselves.

South Africa stands out for its relative abundance of gay titles, though, frustratingly, these have featured all-white casts – *Moffie* (2019), *Skoonheid* (2011), *Kanarie* (2018) – with the exception of John Trengove's gripping *The Wound* (2017).

In fact, the first Sub-Saharan film to directly deal with homosexuality came from beyond the continent's major film industries. This was the Guinean drama *Dakan* (1997), whose director Mohamed Camara had to change hotels daily and leave screenings early to avoid being attacked. He even had a *fatwa* issued against him. These circumstances may partially explain why, a quarter-century on, *Dakan's* frank portrayal of a persevering gay relationship has barely been repeated in African cinema.

Towards the end of *The Blue Caftan*, Mina urges Halim 'Don't be afraid to love.' But Halim's trepidation is merited. He is aware of the denial, conservatism and criminalising legislation that surround him – a local and regional context which makes the film itself look all the more fearless.

Abiba Coulibaly, bfi.org.uk 14 March 2023