



DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

Cairo Station (Bab El Hadid)

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Director: Youssef Chahine

Production Company: Gabriel Talhami

Production Managers: Haig Kevorkian, Mohamad Haggag

Assistant Production Manager: H. Kirolos

Assistant Director: Mohamad Abou Youssef

2nd Assistant Director: M. Gamal Eldine

Dialogue Supervisor: Chaffik Rizk

Screenplay: Abdel Hay Adib

Dialogue: Mohamad Abou Youssef

Director of Photography: Alvize Orfanelli

Cameraman: Massoud Issa

Editor: Kamal Abul Ela

Negative Cutter: M. Saleh

Cutter: Shoushou

Sets: Abbas Helmi

Art Director: Gabriel Karraze

Make-up: Sayed Mohamad, Hamdi Rafaat

Laboratory Chief: Toutou Khoury

Music: Fouad el-Zahiry

Chief Sound Engineer: Aziz Fadel

Sound Assistant: A. Mohamad

Cast:

Farid Shawki

Hind Rostom

Youssef Chahine

Hassan el-Baroudy

Abdel Aziz Khalil

Naima Wasfi

Said Khalil

Abdel Ghani Nagdi

Loutfi el-Hakim

Abdel Hamid Bagdoui

F. el-Demerdache

Said el-Araby

Ahmed Abaza

Hana Abdel Fattah

Safia Sarhiat

Assaad Kellada

Sherine

Soheir

Esmat Mahmoud

Nawal Morsi

Gharib Moawad

Mohamed Mazhar

Galal Issa

Mahrous el-Garhi

Ahmed el-Tantawi

S. Abdel Aziz

Abdel Najdi

Nadia Lutfi

Mike & His Skyrockets

Egypt 1958

74 mins

Restored by Misr International Films.

DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

Daddy Amin aka Father Amin (Baba Amin)

Sat 1 Jul 15:30; Wed 12 Jul 20:30

Dark Waters (Seraa Fil Mina)

Sat 1 Jul 20:30; Sat 15 Jul 18:00

The Devil of the Desert (Shaitan el Saharaa)

Sun 2 Jul 18:20; Mon 17 Jul 20:40

The Blazing Sun (Seraa Fil Wadi)

Mon 3 Jul 20:20 + intro by season curator Elhum Shakerifar; Sat 15 Jul 12:30

SPOILER WARNING

 The following notes give away the film's ending.

Considered to be Chahine's masterpiece, *Cairo Station* was so sharply on point that the film was reviled by many on initial release. Its dark genius lies in the mood it creates, while remaining keenly attuned to the complexity of human emotion and desire. The film is also charged by undercurrents of toxic masculinity, particularly through Chahine's portrayal of Kenawi.

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With his eleventh film, Youssef Chahine was able to chart new territory for himself and for Egyptian cinema. At the age of 32 he was already established as a director of formidable talent and skill. His reputation was further enhanced with a film that many still consider his masterpiece. It is one of those rare instances in film history when forces converge to produce a work of art that is of lasting value.

The main action revolves around a cripple named Kinawi, who is a newspaper vendor working at Cairo's railway station. Everything about him – his limp, stutter, scrawny physique, tattered clothes, demeanour – depict him as a wretch. But he is witty, and a sharp observer of the world around him. Despite his handicap, he can even dance, practising his steps along the pavement. Above all, he has an eye for beautiful women, particularly their legs. Deprived of female companionship, he plasters the walls of his hovel with posters of semi-nude models. Beneath the rough surface, there is an imagination and a talent, for we see him retouching the photographs with his own sense of humour. In real life, he is drawn to Hannouma, a voluptuous young woman selling lemonade at the same station. But Hannouma is almost engaged to Abu Srei' (meaning Speedy), a tall, strong porter who is trying to organise a labour union. This does not deter Kinawi from proposing marriage to Hannouma...

The theme of social awakening permeates the film. Most prominent among the subplots is that of Abu Srei' trying to organise a labour union. The workers at the station are controlled by a primitive 'mafioso', who exercises favouritism with their schedule and pay. He threatens Abu Srei' and his followers with dire consequences. Undaunted, Abu Srei' explains that without a union to look after the needs of all those workers, a man, such as the one who was almost crushed by the train that morning, would have no way of earning a living. He makes an appeal to all those attending and he eventually has sway over many of them. A government official appears and ratifies the formation of the union. Then there is the feminist leader who is campaigning to raise consciousness among Egyptian women. We see her delivering a speech from the window of a stationary train and we hear her a couple of more times calling women to a general awakening.

The most touching subplot concerns a teenage girl who is at the station to say goodbye to her boyfriend who is travelling to Europe with his family. The big divide between their social backgrounds, in addition to the mores of the time, prevents them from openly spending the last hour together. They rely on signals, and steal their way for a few minutes of privacy. Kinawi is watching this love play, and the viewer does not know with whom to sympathise more, the frustrated young girl who cannot say goodbye to the one she loves, or with deformed Kinawi who has no one to love him at all. The last shot of the film is of the young girl standing on the railway track after her boyfriend had departed with his family to Europe, and after Kinawi had been hauled away to a lunatic asylum. Kinawi's fate had been sealed; hers is uncertain.

The railway station provides a setting for Chahine to examine a diversity of issues. The police, who should have better things to do, are forever chasing

My One and Only Love aka You Are My Love (Enta Habibi)

Tue 4 Jul 20:40; Sun 16 Jul 12:50

Cairo Station (Bab El Hadid)

Fri 7 Jul 18:00; Sat 29 Jul 15:00

Dawn of a New Day (Fagr Yom Guedid)

Sat 8 Jul 15:30; Wed 19 Jul 20:25

Saladin aka Saladin the Victorious aka Saladin and the Great Crusades (Al-Nasser Salah Al-Din)

Sun 9 Jul 14:30; Sat 29 Jul 17:00

The Land (El Ard)

Sun 9 Jul 18:00; Thu 26 Jul 18:00 + intro by filmmaker May Abdalla

The Sparrow (Al Asfour)

Mon 10 Jul 18:15 + intro by poet and essayist Montaza Mehri; Thu 20 Jul 20:50

Return of the Prodigal Son (Awdet Ell Ibn El Dal)

Fri 14 Jul 18:00; Sat 22 Jul 20:20 + intro by novelist Ahdaf Soueif

Alexandria... Why? (Iskindereya Leh)

Sun 16 Jul 15:10; Sat 22 Jul 11:30

An Egyptian Story (Hadouta Masriya)

Sun 16 Jul 18:15; Sat 22 Jul 14:40

The Sixth Day (Al Yom El Sades)

Tue 18 Jul 20:30; Mon 24 Jul 18:00

Alexandria Again and Forever (Iskindereya Kaman we Kaman)

Sun 23 Jul 18:10 + intro; Fri 28 Jul 18:15

The Emigrant (Al Mohager)

Mon 24 Jul 20:20; Sun 30 Jul 18:10

The Other (Al Akhar)

Wed 26 Jul 18:00; Mon 31 Jul 20:30

Destiny (Al Massir)

Thu 27 Jul 20:20; Mon 31 Jul 18:05

With thanks to



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Ciné Lumière will present a selection of Chahine titles throughout the summer: institut-francais.org.uk

the group of women who, like Hannouma, slave in the heat to sell a bottle of Pepsi to a thirsty customer. It would seem more decent to leave these young women alone to eke out a living than to chase them around like criminals. And how quickly characters in the film slap one another; on five or six occasions an argument is settled with a slap in the face. Even Abu Srei' who is normally polite and considerate, and who is an advocate for social justice, is not above slapping Hannouma when he hears of her dancing on the train to entertain her customers. As a group of young men rock and roll down the pavement, a couple of Muslim clerics invoke God's name to protect them from the devil.

Egyptian cinema depends mostly on dialogue. Actors and audiences alike derive much pleasure in verbal exchanges. But from the outset Chahine was a visual artist, and in *Cairo Station* he tells a story and reveals emotions mostly with images. This must have baffled his actors; it certainly displeased his audiences. The style, as much as the bleakness of the content, confounded the public, but not the professional critics. The violent reaction devastated him and drove him to blame himself. He had no right to talk above the audience's head or to risk other people's money. In time, though, especially after the film had been well received abroad, the audience's reaction shifted. It swung around and people learned to appreciate the film's value. This reversal of attitude taught Chahine a crucial lesson: trust your own creative instincts, for in time what now seems obscure will become apparent.

Besides being a landmark, *Cairo Station* charts the course Chahine's cinema would take. Sympathy for ordinary people and understanding of the plight of the individual are leitmotifs that can be traced back to this film. That Chahine was able to define and encapsulate his agenda at such an early age is remarkable. That he adhered to it for half a century attests to the clarity of his vision and the resoluteness of his purpose.

Though for entirely different aesthetic and social reasons, some foreign critics share with the Egyptian masses some reservations about *Cairo Station*. After calling Chahine's performance marvellous, one of them adds:

'This film from Egypt's most distinguished director is bursting with ideas and themes – worker exploitation, the corrupting influence of the Coca-Cola culture, the dangers of sexual repression. And that's the trouble. A Neo-Realist approach encloses what is essentially a melodrama, leaving no room to explore these themes and presenting characters drawn in broad simplistic strokes.'

One must agree with the praise, but take issue with its being 'essentially a melodrama'. Many national cinemas were using the genre of melodrama to deal with social issues, and *Cairo Station* is Egypt's superb contribution to that tradition. Chahine succeeds in providing a microcosm of his times, and in giving us a picture of Egypt with its longings and some of its warts. Yet one of Chahine's admirers finds *Cairo Station* lacking in depth 'The crucial limitation of both the De Sica-Zavattini team and Chahine at this period is the inability to go beyond mere description of individuals and offer an analysis of society as a whole.' A film artist is neither a social worker, nor a psychiatrist, nor a politician. It is not his job to put the world in order. It is enough for him to state the case and provoke a general debate.

Though *Cairo Station* is noted for its grim reality, Erika Richter situates the film within the context of the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, and 'senses a strengthening of self-confidence. The people we encounter during the course of a day ... porters, beverage vendors are full of demand for better life.' Despite such optimism, *Cairo Station* remains a protest against stifling conditions. That the Revolution gave hope is granted, but that seems hardly enough to save Egypt's misfits.

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