



DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

The Sparrow

The Sparrow (Al Asfour)

Director: Youssef Chahine

Production Companies: Misr International Film, Office Catholique Intern, O.N.C.I.C.

Screenplay: Youssef Chahine, Lofti al-Khouli

Director of Photography: Moustapha Imam

Editor: Rashida Abdel Salam

Music: Ali Ismail

Cast:

Seifeeddin

Salah Kabil

Mohsena Tawfiq

Ali al-Sherif

Habiba

Mahmoud el-Milligi

Egypt/Belgium/Algeria 1973

107 mins

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

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 Momtaza Mehri; Thu 20 Jul 20:50

Return of the Prodigal Son (Awdet Eil 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

+ intro by poet and essayist Momtaza Mehri (Monday 10 July only)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

The following is a translation of the French text at the beginning of *The Sparrow*:

In the streets of Cairo, Algiers, Tunis and Baghdad, in fact in all the Arab capital cities, and in the smallest hamlets the young people stop me: 'Tell me, Youssef, what happened in June '67? Why was there such a defeat? Why? We were all ready to stick it out.'

*All these good people, the simple 'sparrows' that I love, who on 9 June 67 never hesitated for a moment to go down into the streets, they decided to face the enemy, and in the alleys of their districts they defied the impetus of what was happening. It is for them that we are trying today, with *The Sparrow* to clarify various aspects of national and international conditioning of which they have been the innocent victims. (Youssef Chahine)*

Chahine's oeuvre includes no film more powerful than *The Sparrow* in which he incisively addresses the Six Day War. Non-Arab viewers can use it as an entrée into the Arabs' psyche following that watershed in their history. Their comprehension of the trauma of those fateful days will deepen were they to witness the transformation that occurs on the faces, in the voices and images that Chahine explores and explodes on the screen. To the Arab viewers, however, it is not a film but an encapsulation of their darkest memory. Here Chahine uses the full power of his medium to render a precise picture of the social and political conditions that caused such a tragedy. Without showing the battle itself, or lambasting foreign deception, or criticising the regime for its irresponsibility, he turns his camera inward and backward on Egyptian society at large to uncover the fissure in its foundation.

During the early 1970s Egyptian cinema and theatre went through a period of hardship. In 1972 Sadat's government imposed severe restrictions on what could be seen or heard on stage or screen. It lumped all foreign and Egyptian films together, permitting only those that were fit for audiences of all ages, children and adults were treated as if they had the same mentality and taste. Ironically, on that same day, 14 June 1972, the Egyptian film critics announced the establishment of their own society which pledged to defend freedom of expression. During the same period, the film studios were producing five films that were destined to have their own battles with the censors. Most important among them was Chahine's *The Sparrow*.

The Sparrow eschews the conventional paradigm of a protagonist going through a crisis and reaching a resolution. Realising that an apocalypse is too big to be confined to one voice, Chahine relies on polyphony instead. At the outset we learn that a racketeer called Abu Khadr is being hunted. We neither see nor hear him, but we feel his presence everywhere. All those who are after him recognise that he is only an agent for a sinister group in high places. They still want to destroy him, each for his own reason. When his capture becomes imminent, and fearing exposure, his bosses arrange for his murder.

Foremost among those who are on Abu Khadr's trail is Youssef, an investigative reporter. The son of a former pasha who is now a wealthy businessman, Youssef is an idealist. His well-connected father tries in vain to dissuade him from attacking in print the monster who is responsible for dismantling and selling piece by piece a giant plant that was built to bring prosperity to an impoverished district. After six years, the plant, which was meant to employ 6,000 men, could not produce a toothpick. For six years Abu

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

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Khadr had every piece of equipment shipped out, with the threat of death hanging over the head of any informer. Then there is Ratouf, a young captain who still mourns his father's suicide. He despises his step-father and rejects any form of reconciliation. He too is looking for Abu Khadr for having killed an informer. Ratouf and his brother, Riyad, are two decent and patriotic young men, eager to perform their duty at home and at the front line. We learn more about Ratouf, for he is central to the story and brings us into contact with two other important characters. Shaykh Ahmad is an Egyptian *fellah* who had studied at al-Azhar and exudes goodness. He is frustrated because he wants to do his military duty but is always passed over by the army. Next time, they always tell him, and he gets drunk from not knowing when that will be. He wants to serve but cannot; and he certainly has no say in national policy. The only flaw in his character is his blind adherence to the time-honoured tradition of revenge. Obsessed with the idea that blood calls for blood, he plans to kill Abu Khadr for having killed his brother. But one of his wives informs on him, and even handcuffs him herself, because she would rather see him imprisoned than dead. That he is turned in by a woman insults his manhood. The fourth important character is Bahiyya, the living symbol of Egyptian wholesomeness. Her warmth and good nature cast a spell on us at first sight. In spirit, she is the same salt-of-the-earth Bahiyya whom we have encountered in *The Choice*. She is Chahine's favourite woman, and he calls her 'Mother of the world'.

The Sparrow is full of Chahine's distinctive compositions. One of the hallmarks of his style is conveying more than one meaning in every shot. One exquisite moment is captured at al-Azhar where a Muslim Shaykh recites verses from the Qur'an in support of the tradition of revenge. The scene is slightly overexposed and steam hovers over the believers. The windows are in view and the effect could be attributed to the rays of the sun that bathe the room. But this is not Chahine's intention. The steam is a visual metaphor of the fog that clouds the Shaykh's head. But the most celebrated shot is that of Bahiyya running down the street screaming 'No! We shall fight!' It is one of those images that remain indelible on a viewer's mind.

Looking back on it, Chahine says, 'I decided on the end of the film at the outset, because the end is the foundation of the film. It is my main idea. Everything in the story necessitates the last scene. Without it *The Sparrow* loses all relevance.'

Outside Egypt, Arab intelligentsia rallied on behalf of Chahine and his masterpiece. Support came from one significant gathering in Lebanon. Struck by the sheer power of the film (incidentally one month before Sadat ordered his forces to cross the Suez Canal), the Film Festival officially recognised the importance of the film, calling it 'an artistic event that deserves the pride of every Arab, especially every Egyptian.' The declaration appealed to the Egyptian authorities to rescind the order to have the film banned. And it urged all Arab countries to exhibit it at their finest theatres, 'particularly at a time when we Arabs desperately need freedom of self-expression so that we may face our reality with confidence, and look to the future with conviction and certitude.' Now *The Sparrow* is considered a modern classic. After calling it 'politically explosive' and praising its 'imaginative language', one foreign historian proclaims that with it 'Egyptian cinema has found its voice.'

Significantly, the idealist journalist is called Youssef, which is Chahine's first name. He is his alter ego searching for the truth and ringing alarm bells against evil. In the last shot we see journalist Youssef (representing film-maker Youssef Chahine) standing at the window (representing the film frame) and watching the horror below. The identification is total, and the role exemplifies Chahine's cinema.

Ibrahim Fawal, *BFI World Directors: Youssef Chahine* (BFI Publishing, 2002) Reproduced by kind permission of Bloomsbury Publishing. ©Ibrahim Fawal

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