



DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

Alexandria Again and Forever (Iskandariya, Kaman wa Kaman)

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Director: Youssef Chahine

Production Companies: Misr International Films,
Paris Classics Production, La Sept

With the participation of: Ministère de la Culture et
de la Communication, Le Ministère des Affaires
Étrangères

Producers: Marianne Khoury, Humbert Balsan

Production Co-ordinator: Hussam Aly

Associate Director: Yusry Nasrallah

1st Assistant Director: Essam Aly

Script Supervisor: Radouan el-Kachef

Screenplay: Youssef Chahine

Script Contributors: Yusry Nasrallah, Samir Nasri

Director of Photography: Ramses Marzouk

Camera Operator: Samir Bahsan

Assistant Operator: Yehia Abbas

Editor: Rashida Abdel Salam

Assistant Editor: Mohamed Zarka

Art Director/Props: Onsi Abu Seif

Costume Supervisor: Nahed Nasrallah

Costumes Created by: Amr Khalil

Make-up: Évelyne Byot, Hassan Taha

Music: Mohamed Nouh

Title Song: Rabi el-Banna

Music Recording: Raafat Samir

Choreography: Ingy Essolh, Ingy el-Solh

Sound: Olivier Schwob, Olivier Varenne

Mixer: Dominique Hennequin

Sound Editor: Olivier Ducastel

Cast:

Yousra (*Nadia*)

Youssef Chahine (*Yahia*)

Hussein Fahmy (*Stelio*)

Amr Abd el-guelil (*Amr*)

Hisham Selim (*Magdy*)

Tahia Carioca (*Tahia*)

Hoda Sultan (*Nadia's mother*)

Ragga Hussein

Seif el-din (*Mohamed bey*)

Abla Kamel (*museum curator*)

Hassan el-Acl

Ahmed el-Hariri

Menha el-Batravi (*Gigi*)

Tewfik Saleh (*Tewfik*)

Zaki Abd el-wahab (*Guindi*)

Mohammed Tewfik (*himself*)

Salah Zulficar (*himself*)

Mohamed Fadel (*himself*)

Hossam El Dine Mostafa (*himself*)

Ali Badrakhan (*himself*)

Maher Salim

Mohamed Henedi

Ahmed Hegazi

Ezzat el-machad

Khaled Hamza

Tewfik el-Kordy

Ibrahim Hassanein

Mohamed Gebril

Mohga Abdel Rahman

Ussama Taha

Yasser Maher

France/Egypt 1990

109 mins

Now an ageing director, Yehia becomes infatuated with star actor Amr, which threatens to damage their professional relationship and fuel his depression and writer's block. But a fateful meeting during the 1986 filmmaker strike fires Yehia's imagination. The final part of the Alexandria trilogy is a characteristically rowdy ride, full of longing, dance, and the trials and pleasures of artistic collaboration.

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Alexandria Again and Forever is perhaps Chahine's least accessible film, yet he himself says 'I think it's my favourite.' While quirky and fantastical, its importance lies in the revelation of many key facets of Chahine's complex personality. In *Alexandria... Why?* he deals with his youth and the pursuit of a dream. In *An Egyptian Story* he reviews his life as death becomes imminent. Here he is an internationally acclaimed film director, yet still shadowboxing his own demons. Thus, *Alexandria Again and Forever* is more like Fellini's *8 1/2* than either of the other two films in the trilogy.

In *Alexandria Again and Forever*, Chahine's obsession with *Hamlet* is pronounced. The film begins again with a song, but this time it is a startling rendition of 'To be or not to be...' *Hamlet* sung in Arabic is a definite clue that we are embarking on a bizarre journey. *Hamlet*'s problem is all too clear; Chahine's is yet to be gleaned. On the sound stage Yahia is directing *Hamlet*, which is more Egyptianised than adapted.

Bahiyya in Chahine's films is a romanticised symbol of Egypt. Here he is combining two of his obsessions, *Hamlet* and Bahiyya – obsessions that are central to this film. Because Chahine is 'writing a film and not a script', *Alexandria Again and Forever* meanders in and out of subplots to the near confusion of the viewer. Its artistry is in the interweaving of incidents, cumulative effect of allusions, inner tempo of the telling and visual style. The basic story line depicts middle-aged Yahia, a prominent film artist. Though married, he has an attachment to his main actor, Amr, who suddenly decides to ditch both him and *Hamlet*. Yahia is confounded. Under pressure from his wife and his producer, he considers making a film about Alexander the Great instead. Some even suggest Cleopatra as a suitable subject. 'It's about time you had a woman play the lead in one of your films,' his wife chides him. To fill the void that Amr has created in his life, Yahia flirts with Nadia, a spirited young actress. But his attempt is not entirely successful, for she senses his cynicism about love. In the meantime, the actors' union is on a hunger strike because of oppressive intrusion by the government.

Some of the most delightful, yet baffling, moments in the film revolve around an operetta that Chahine stages in a film that is a hybrid of straight forward narrative, *cinéma vérité*, formalism, expressionism and some animation. He slides in and out of each style with relative ease, but not always to the viewer's satisfaction. The result is stimulating, its style fresh and original – amazingly it all works.

Urged to stop thinking about *Hamlet*, Yahia turns his attention to Alexander the Great, the founder of magnificent Alexandria from which he himself hails. We are treated to a fantasy that covers a space considerably larger than any sound stage on which Busby Berkeley, Vincente Minnelli or Gene Kelly ever worked. In lieu of a spacious sound stage, Chahine is using Alexandria's seashore and its environs. It is one of the largest musical scenes in cinema history, as though to confirm Shakespeare's notion that all the world is a stage.

Actually Yahia is not making a film about Alexandria, only contemplating the possibilities. Like Guido in Fellini's *8 1/2*, Yahia is searching for an idea that might tie up all the loose ends in his life. What we have here, then, is a germ of

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Alexandria Again and Forever

(*Iskindereya Kaman we Kaman*)

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

The Sixth Day (*Al Yom El Sades*)

Mon 24 Jul 18:00

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

The Land (*El Ard*)

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

Destiny (*Al Massir*)

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

Cairo Station (*Bab El Hadid*)

Sat 29 Jul 15:00

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

Sat 29 Jul 17:00

With thanks to



Misr International Films (Ahmed Sobky)

In cultural partnership with



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The festival programme includes further screenings related to this season: safarfilmfestival.co.uk

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

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a story. It is like watching a scene in an opera without knowing the plot. We can guess but we cannot be sure. We see a great number of extras dressed up like Greek soldiers and generals; we see a large number of actors dressed up in caps and gowns; we see the same people dressed up like batmen; we see Yahia wearing a mask and dangling his feet in the Mediterranean sea. And we are enchanted by lovely songs, yet we are not certain what it all means. We see the actor playing Alexander (with his plumes, shield and two horns) raised higher than the statue of Ramses. A debate ensues as to Alexander's nature. Was he a god, demi-god or just a conqueror? One character sings of his 'miracles' then quickly replaces it with 'achievements' to escape the abuse of those around him. A robust Egyptian *fellaha* sings a solo which includes the word 'mafia'. The diversity of opinions is perplexing. Does the presence of the academics in the film insinuate that the issue of Alexander's true nature is still unresolved? As viewers we only know that Alexander is partially responsible for Yahia's being what he is for he had built a magnificent city which became a cradle for many cultures which in turn had helped shape Yahia's character. 'If we were wrong about him,' Yahia sings, 'then we've been had.'

The narrative is also augmented by three elaborate dances. The first is a celebration of winning the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival a decade earlier. Those were the good days when Yahia and Amr were intimate. As they walk out of the theatre with their awards in hand, they break into a stylised dance, a homage to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. It is pure Hollywood, as they dance to *Walking My Baby Back Home*. Chahine has always fancied himself as a dancer and was enthralled by the MGM musical, – here he exhibits his considerable talent. The next dance is a solo by Amr, after having failed to win an award at another festival. By now his homo-erotic relationship with Yahia is at an end, and we find him alone twisting and turning on an outdoor floor, this time to the beat of a plaintive Egyptian song. The dance is erotic, for while he is writhing on his back a dozen fountains erupt in the background.

The third number takes place in the heart of Cairo. Yahia is now courting Nadia. They are in a crowded bazaar where a carnival is in progress. Reminding him of his dictum that an actor must be able to dance, shoot, sing and ride horses, she coaxes him to practice what he preaches. He tells her, 'I danced in *Cairo Station*' (yet another proof that this is Chahine's story), but she is not satisfied. She wants him to dance now. He complies. Before he leaves the dance floor he is challenged to a stick dance, which is comparable to but more strenuous than fencing. Yahia's skill and physical strength are tested against those of a young and virile-looking man. It is a draw. Yahia has acquitted himself in Nadia's eyes. The dance sequences serve Chahine well on three levels. One, they demonstrate his love for the art of dancing. Two, they acknowledge his indebtedness to the Hollywood musical. Three, they dovetail with a convention in the Egyptian cinema. Like songs, dance is an intrinsic part of the tradition in most of the Egyptian films. By adhering to local taste, Chahine demonstrates his idealism and a pragmatism at the same time.

The issue of inferiority in this autobiographical trilogy recalls many of Bergman's films and particularly Fellini's *8 1/2*. The intimation of mortality is the driving force behind Fosse's *All That Jazz*, John Boorman's *Hope and Glory* also comes to mind, for it is explicitly autobiographical, with the young Boorman experiencing World War II. Chahine's trilogy differs from all these confessional films in that it casts a wider net. Chahine and Egypt are centre stage. By baring his soul, Chahine is inviting Egyptians to come to terms with themselves. Without being didactic, he appeals to Egypt to recognise that pluralism, variety and nonconformity can be vibrant and positive. The mix produces healthy individuals, without whom a healthy nation cannot exist. For Egypt to restore her equilibrium – if not her glory – Egyptians should be diverse in personal pursuit but united in national spirit. The welfare of the nation and that of the individual are inseparable.

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