



DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

Destiny (Al Massir)

Destiny (Al Massir)

Director: Youssef Chahine

Production Companies: Ognon Pictures, France 2 Cinéma, Misr International Film

Producers: Humbert Balsan, Gabriel Khoury

Production Manager: Hisham Soliman

Assistant Director: Khaled Youssef

Screenplay: Youssef Chahine, Khaled Youssef

Director of Photography: Mohsen Nasr

Editor: Rashida Abdel Salam

Art Director: Hamed Hemdane

Costumes: Nahed Nasrallah

Assistant Costume Designers: Monia Fath Elhab, Dina Saad

Music: Kamal el-Tawil, Yohia el-Mougry

Choreography: Walid Aouni

Sound: Annette Dutertre, Gasser Khorched

Cast:

Nour el-Cherif (*Averroes*)

Laila Elouie (*Gypsy*)

Mahmoud Hamideh (*Caliph*)

Safia el-Emary (*Zeinab*)

Khaled el-Nabaoui (*Nasser*)

Hani Salama (*Abdallah*)

Muhammad Munir (*Marwan*)

Magdi Idris (*Sect Leader*)

Faris Rahoma (*Youssef*)

Ahmed Fouad Selim (*Riad*)

Ingi Abaza (*Sarah*)

France/Egypt 1997

136 mins

Restored by Cinémathèque française, Orange Studio and Misr International Films, with the support of CNC, and Association Youssef Chahine

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk



BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Often a Chahine film evolves out of its immediate predecessor, or from the need to crystallise Egypt's psychological reality at that particular period. In *Destiny* he succeeds in warning that Egypt is veering in the wrong direction. Stabbing a writer or suing a film-maker in a court of law simply because they hold views that are contrary to someone else's is not the way for a free society to behave. Intolerance is unacceptable and is bound to lead to repression. The role of the artist is not to satisfy popular taste, but to shake lethargy and dispel foginess; not to conform to the mould, but to shatter it.

While reminiscing about his first experience at an international film festival, Chahine talked about the day he had shown his film *Nile Boy* at Venice in 1952, and how he and a group of Egyptians ended up at a café where one of the Egyptian singers in the crowd was persuaded to play the *oud*. He was joined by the café musicians and soon a memorable night of music and singing began to unfold. The discussion soon centred on how in Andalusia, Arabic music, Spanish dancing and Jewish chanting blended together to create a wonderful musical heritage. There was a time when the Arabs lived harmoniously with other ethnic groups. Chahine was immediately taken with the idea of making a film about Arab Spain. Researching the possibilities, he and his collaborator came upon the character of the twelfth century Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroës) who was at once a renowned physician, Grand Judge and a philosopher whose brilliant commentary on Aristotle had an influence on the Renaissance. But his claim that there was no conflict between faith and reason made him a heretic in the eyes of the Islamists. Ultimately he was banished by his friend and supporter, the caliph, and his books were burned in the public square. The parallel between the distant past and the immediate present was eerie. Were elements of this not reminiscent of what happened to Naguib Mahfouz, and to Youssef Chahine himself?

The prologue, which occurs during the Inquisition, is a chilling parallel to what could happen in modern Egypt. A man is burned to death because the Catholic Church was opposed to Ibn Rushd's 'radical' ideas. Providing a sharp contrast to this episode, the rest of the film shows the Arabs at the zenith of their civilisation, living in luxury and in harmony with all their neighbours. Their scientists, poets, musicians and architects were at the height of their creativity. Yet in the midst of that society there were ominous symptoms of a disease that threatened to destroy it. The deadly disease took the form of an attack on the brilliant Ibn Rushd who had translated Aristotle, written excellent commentaries on his works, and has been acknowledged as a contributor to the birth of the Renaissance. The West learned from Ibn Rushd, but his own people exiled him and burned his books, which were his and the Arabs' pride. Chahine's warning is forceful unless today's Egyptians allow free exchange of ideas and respect their artists and thinkers – and unless they reconcile reason and revelation – one day they might find themselves engulfed in their own Dark Ages.

Arab viewers left the cinemas feeling exhilarated as well as unsettled. The beautifully mounted *Destiny* evoked for them one of the finest chapters in their history. Cordoba shone because of its natural beauty and architectural splendour, and because of Ibn Rushd, the symbol of enlightenment. Here, and for the first time, Egyptian film-goers came in 'contact' with the historical figure, and they were delighted. Ibn Rushd is presented as a warm, decent, fair human being, not a stuffy thinker immersed in his books at the expense of

DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

Destiny (Al Massir)

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

Alexandria Again and Forever

(Iskindereya Kaman we Kaman)

Fri 28 Jul 18:15

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

The Emigrant (Al Mohager)

Sun 30 Jul 18:10

The Other (Al Akhar)

Mon 31 Jul 20:30

With thanks to



Misr International Films (Ahmed Sobky)

In cultural partnership with



SAFAR Film Festival is the UK's largest festival of Arab cinema 29 June – 9 July.

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

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

living. He is brilliant, yet normal. He has a sense of humour and enjoys watching people sing and dance. He enjoys humming a pretty tune, is courteous with family and friends, and lets his daughter poke fun at him. As the caliph's counsellor, he advises vigilance against the flatterers who, in the name of religion, are scheming to usurp his power. As the Grand Judge, he pronounces a mild sentence against a boy the criminals used as a pawn.

Arab viewers were even more unsettled when they became conscious that things had not changed. Extremists were still recruiting innocent youth and brainwashing them to do their evil work. As the film unfolds, the viewers' attention is focused on four parties to the conflict: the caliph, who is beginning to grow arrogant and insensitive; the clerics, who are more political than religious; the youth, who are too naïve to know right from wrong; and the poet, who brings joy to his listeners and is felled with a butcher's knife. The voice of reason is Ibn Rushd who sees that those obsessed with the assumption of *sulta* (authority) will, in the name of righteousness, ally themselves with the enemies of their own people just to gain control. The game is power – not religion. The stabbing of the poet reminds them of the stabbing of Naguib Mahfouz. The burning of Ibn Rushd's books paralleled the banning of Chahine's films. The sporadic violence in Cairo cannot be but at the urging of some ambitious and wily men such as Shaykh Riyad, the chief conspirator against the caliph.

All artistic works are intended to stimulate thought, but *Destiny* strikes a raw nerve. Instead of posing a rhetorical question, it raises ideas with disturbing implications. Though the viewer enjoys the film's artistry, he or she leaves the cinema feeling challenged and with a desire to read Ibn Rushd as a reminder of the history of al-Andalus, to see how internal conflicts eroded that golden age. This is precisely what Chahine must have hoped his audiences would do: stop being complacent and start thinking.

No sooner had the film been released than Egypt was plunged once again into a new controversy. Chahine's admirers hailed him for his brilliance, and used superlatives that, according to an unimpressed economist-cum-film critic, transformed him into a 'mythical and sacred character'. But Chahine's enemies were on the attack with almost the same refrain. The economist accuses the film of offering the viewer an unworthy choice 'to be a terrorist or to dance with Laila Elouie,' referring to the gypsy café owner portrayed by the movie star. In another foray he accuses Chahine of spending an inordinate time showing or talking about sex. Then he asks, 'Who ever told Chahine that God is love? This is a notion that is alien to Islam and must be rejected.' Others complained about the film's 'undignified' representation of the venerable Ibn Rushd. How absurd, Law Professor Hassan Shafii thought, that the great philosopher who had taken only two days off from his studies, the day his father died and the day he got married, would sit around humming a tune. They also objected to the use of colloquial Egyptian rather than classical Arabic which, surely, the eminent scholar must have spoken. How shameful it is to show that on the day of his banishment his wife would only remember the bench on which they consummated their marriage. One critic who castigated Chahine's earlier films for having been highbrow and enigmatic, now makes a u-turn and denounces Chahine's plainness and accessibility when Chahine deliberately simplified his message in order to reach the youth who are being preyed upon by the extremists.

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

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged | Browse online at theb.fi/programme-notes

Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk