

Arab Cinema: Another Window into Life in the Arab world

by John Andrews

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No doubt, you enjoy a good film from time to time. Have you seen any good Arab films lately? I've recently discovered some entertaining and thought provoking films on YouTube, films that take on some of the social challenges that the Middle East is facing and the harsh realities of life there. Thanks to YouTube (and subtitles!), Arab cinema is much more accessible to people like me. Here are a few Egyptian and Palestinian films that I would recommend.

1. Cairo exit (2010)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SF0UI6_kFaU

On one level it's a love story between a Copt girl and her Muslim boyfriend and the taboo subject of love across different religions in modern day Egypt. On another we see the harsh socio-economic factors that make such love near impossible to survive. Set in a low-income neighbourhood of the chaos that is Cairo, Amal, the Christian girl, is torn between staying in Egypt to care for her mother or leave with her boyfriend, Tarek, to Europe in a smuggling boat....

2. Cairo 678 (2010)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEkdGHLvEPw>

(Note - click on the captions button to get English subtitles)

Feyza is a working-class mother struggling to pay her children's school fees. It soon becomes apparent that her tardiness to work is simply a result of her desperate attempts to avoid the over-crowded bus 678 where she is routinely harassed and bothered by over-eager male passengers. She soon befriends Seba, a wealthy self-defence teacher whom we learn was raped a year earlier, as well as a middle class student (Nelly) whose life-threatening assault results in a historic first legal case for sexual harassment in Egypt. What binds these women together is a frustration at the unashamed impunity to these men's actions and society's pretend ignorance about their daily struggle to walk down Cairo's streets without harassment.

3. Hassan w Marcus (2008)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_grulLPatHs

This is largely a comedy in which two men, a Coptic Christian in hiding and pretending to be a Muslim, and a Muslim in hiding pretending to be a Coptic Christian, become close friends, neither knowing of the other's deception. This provides some humorous situations. Be aware that these two deceivers are presented as being in equivalent situations, which aids in presenting a tidy can't-we-all-be-friends message. However, this is far from the reality, as the Copts are at the mercy of the majority Muslim population and are often persecuted by them. The movie can be enjoyed if you ignore this reality.

4. Asmaa (2011)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4XoK6ZZjsc>

A lower class woman who suffers from AIDS decides not to surrender to the fatal disease. She focuses on helping those who suffer the same disease by giving them glimmers of hope. A sensitive look at Egyptian society and an uplifting look at this 'shameful' disease.

Here are a few other films that look at Palestinian issues. Each one is very well done.

5. The Syrian Bride (2004)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67s54XH44nl>

A young Druze woman living in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights agrees to an arranged marriage with a Syrian TV star. Since neither country recognizes the other diplomatically, once the bride crosses the border to Syria, she will never be allowed to return to Israel and her wedding day, usually a day of great joy, may be one of her saddest. While the film tells us much about the harsh realities of the political fragmentation in the Middle East, it is also a story with social and cultural ramifications.

6. Lemon Tree (2008)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55HFJczgv0s>

Salma, a Palestinian widow, lives simply from her grove of lemon trees in the West Bank. Her quiet life is disrupted when the Israeli defence minister and his wife move next door and the Secret Service orders the trees removed for security. The stoic Salma seeks assistance from the Palestinian Authority, Israeli army, and a young attorney who takes the case. While the courts deliberate, the Israelis fence her trees and prohibit her from entering the grove. As the trees

with her, the defence minister's wife and, separately, an Israeli journalist, look on Salma with sympathy...

7. Amreeka (2009)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyVVaXwUxgU>

This is the tale of Muna, a single Palestinian mother, and her teenage son who, tired of the hassles in Palestine (road blocks, constant checks), seize an opportunity to move in with her sister and her husband in the small town Illinois. Their experience gives a genuine portrayal of the humorous and challenging adjustments for those who choose to emigrate.