

the EGYPTIAN RESOLUTION

Reclaiming Perspectives in Arab Culture

words and interviews by CHRISTIANA BOULES

When an out-of-towner steps into a Cairo taxi, they might notice the drivers become amateur tour guides. “*That’s Ramses Station — ‘Bab El Hadid,’ like the film.*” My driver that morning was referring to the 1958 Youssef Chahine film, whose name, *Bab El Hadid*, translates to *The Iron Gate* (more commonly known as *Cairo Station* in English). A blend of film noir and neorealism, it uses the workers of a train station as a microcosm of social injustice. Not initially well received by domestic audiences, international acclaim found its way home, and the film was appreciated within its post-revolution context.

On the surface, cinema in Egypt has undergone dramatic changes over the decades, buffeted by social, political, and economic vicissitudes. However, cinema has always endured as an added dimension to Egyptian culture. A child of the diaspora will notice the different impact stories have on screen there. In predominantly Muslim countries that observe Ramadan, television is a medium that holds significant influence. A unique synchronisation of audiences’ attention occurs; conserving their energy at home, they watch shows as they air. There are few other unifying moments able to rival on-demand consumers’ fragmented attention.

Such a relationship to audiences is common within the Arabic-speaking world, but Egypt’s position as industry forerunner is what makes it exceptional. Soon after the advent of the *cinématographe* in Europe, the Lumière brothers brought their invention to Egypt at the end of the 19th century. In a place so familiar with foreign influence, Egyptians developed their own film industry, utilising it as a means of safeguarding their national identity. *The Mother of the World*, as Egypt is affectionately known, has become a focal point of culture and talent for the region, and continues to produce the majority of Arabic films to this day. Such is the influence of its cinema that the country’s dialect is uniquely understood by most Arabic speakers.

The appellation ‘The Hollywood of the East’ demonstrates Egyptian cinema’s relevance beyond its borders. In recent years, global audiences have become more vocal in challenging the hegemony of English-language culture, including the stories they consume through screens. Diversified portfolios on streaming platforms cater to a hunger for alternative narratives, and what viewers often find is a rebuttal to Western cinema. Where Hollywood’s one-dimensional portrayal of ‘The Arab world’ conflates cultures, religions and ethnicities, local lenses provide a higher resolution.

The Egyptian contingent of actors and filmmakers straddling the language divide is another type of response. First and second-generation Egyptians include Rami Malek, Ramy Youssef, Mina Massoud, Amir El-Masry, and the directors Sam Esmail and Mohammed Diab; all are waving the flag in Hollywood with the same vigour that made Omar Sharif a household name. Dominated by men, the fashion industry supports international visibility for women. Huda El Mufti, Salma Abu Deif, and Tara Emad represent luxury brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Cartier, Chanel, and Valentino. All are a reminder of what Egypt once contributed to the borderless world of cinema, and a mark of what’s to come.

On the international festival circuit, Egyptian offerings have generated critical favour. *Happy Birthday* (2025, dir. Sarah Goher), *Seeking Haven for Mr. Rambo* (2012, dir. Khaled Mansour), *East of Noon* (2024, dir. Hala Elkoussy), *My Father’s Scent* (dir. Mohamed Siam), and *Life After Siham* (2025, dir. Namir Abdel Messeeh) have all been released within the last two years. Internally, film festivals attract and amplify homegrown talent. In its eighth year, the El Gouna Film Festival has already proven valuable for Egyptian filmmakers, while becoming an important fixture on the international calendar. The glitzy festival’s democratic side invests in aspiring creators and launches careers – such as Ali El Araby’s Best Arab Documentary win for his debut *Captains of Zaatari*. With producer-director Marianne Khoury, the niece of Youssef Chahine, at its helm, no less can be expected.

Elsewhere, the Cairo International Film Festival and Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Film Festival prove that SWANA stories don't need to chase external approval. The temptation to produce affectatious 'festival porn' becomes a point of conversation with our feature stars. Arab culture should not always have to indulge the trauma fantasies of Western viewers in order to stimulate attention. The rise of the film festival in this region, therefore, provides a necessary added avenue. But in the face of global aloofness, cinema's role in activism can never be minimised – it has become one of the few remaining ways to get human hearts beating.

Whether the aim is global or not, not everything can be exported wholesale. Amongst their Arab cousins, Egyptians are known for their sense of humour. But comedy has its own meta qualities and struggles in translation – it reminds us that stories don't have to be universally understood to be valued. Arguably, Egyptian cinema's most treasured trait is the intimacy it shares with the native viewer. A mediator between the spectator and their own reality, film allows them to witness aspects of society that might be otherwise ignored or hardly discussed. Asser Yasin and Dalia Shawky shared how they learnt about 'their Egypt' through cinema, especially eras where films prioritised emotional resonance over 'spoon-fed' teachings.

We get our own education from talking to the stars of our feature. Each is asked the same question: "*If an international viewer had to learn about the Egyptian people through film, which film would you recommend?*" Most were mid-to-late 20th-century titles, but recent projects illustrate the latest evolution in Egyptian film.

Known for his feature adaptation of the legendary book *The Yacoubian Building* in 2006, Marwan Hamed's latest works herald a new era of big-money productions: the 2022 box office hit *Kira & El Gin*, and the upcoming release of the Umm Kulthum biopic, *El Set* (The Lady). Women continue to make up the minority of filmmakers. Still, pioneers like Mariam Naoum, Sandra Nashaat, and Hala Khalil have made way for the tender stories of Sarah Goher (director of *Happy Birthday*, 2025) and Jaylan Auf (director of *The White Dress*, 2024).

Undeniably, Youssef Chahine is named time and again as the godfather. In his shadow, there is nostalgia and hope: that cinema will once more become dauntless – without erring on the seditious. Creators live in an era of greater investment, nurturing better talent and encouraging bolder choices. Women in film are taking up more space, and films for women are becoming more viable. The palimpsest of Egyptian filmography reveals a deep pride amongst its artists that has endured throughout the years. For those bored with regular Hollywood, consider instead *The Hollywood of the East*.

and the NILE'S CINEMA STARS

with Asser Yassin, Amina Khalil, Asmaa Galal
Dalia Shawky and Ali El Araby

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