Il racconto ha una componente fiabesca e si svolge al Cairo durante la II Guerra Mondiale. Hassan (Naguib al-Rihānī) è un uomo di mezz’età disoccupato. Un giorno aiuta un anziano semi-cieco che, per ringraziarlo, gli dà una moneta che risulterà essere falsa, ma gli porterà fortuna: trova subito lavoro come commesso nella ferramenta di Isaac (Sulaymān Naguib), nome tipicamente ebraico. Po Le’ba (Tahiyya Karioka) si presenta a casa sua, cercando un’armica che non abita più lì. La protagonista sta fuggendo dalla cerimonia prenuziale in cui dovrebbe stipulare un contratto matrimoniale con un uomo che non ama scelto dai suoi genitori (Mary Munib e Abdel Fatāḥ al-Kasī). Le’ba è una danzatrice del ventre che appartiene a una famiglia di intrattenitori che si guadagnano da vivere, animando matrimonii. Hassan aiuta e ospita la giovane affascinante; i due si innamorano subito e da lì a poco si sposano. Il loro matrimonio felice andrà in crisi, quando Le’ba diventa una star del cinema e va in Libano per girare un film. È accompagnata dai genitori che la spingeranno ad accettare la proposta di matrimonio di un libanese ricchissimo (a cui dicono che è solo fidanzata) e a chiedere il divorzio dal marito povero. Quando Hassan si rifiuta di divorziare, ovvero di ripudiare Le’ba, lei lo tratta con arroganza per indurlo ad assecolarla. Gli offrirà perfino una grossa somma di denaro in cambio della proposta di matrimonio; lui rifiuta i soldi, ma la ripudia; lei rimane mortificata e resta incapace di comportarsi nel modo che le aveva regalato. Da lì a poco Isaac decide di lasciare l’Egitto e di cedere la ferramenta a Hassan, dandogli la possibilità di comprarela a piccole rate mensili e di tenere per sé il resto dei profitti. Quando il ricco libanese scopre che Le’ba ora è divorziate e, quindi, era sposata e non fidanzata, come gli avevano detto, lui non la vuole più. Lei rimprovera ai suoi genitori per essere stati così avidi da spingerla a rovinare il suo matrimonio con un uomo che ama ancora. Le’ba sarà felice per Hassan, quando viene a sapere che è diventato un commerciante di successo. Per riconquistarlo, gli dichiara il suo amore e finge di avvelenarsi, per mostrargli che non può vivere senza di lui. La coppia si riunisce.

**Sequenze interessanti:**

00:00:36:00-00:03:15, Hassan entra in una sala dove un politico sta tenendo un discorso in arabo standard (lingua del potere, tema ripreso e ampliato da al-Rihānī in “Il flirtare delle ragazze”, del 1949): afferma che la felicità si trova nel sacrificio, nell’abnegazione, nella sincerità e nella lealtà; il protagonista interviene per screditare l’oratore e gli ascoltatori, tutti privilegiati, ipocriti e sazi, mentre lui, pur essendo leale, sincero e pronto a sacrificarsi, non ha nulla da mangiare.

00:06:00-00:10:00, nella ferramenta quasi 200 uomini si sono presentati al colloquio di lavoro muniti di una raccomandazione; Hassan è l’unico a non averne una. il personaggio di Isaac: afferma che ha chiesto ai genitori di tenere per sé il resto dei profitti. Hassan rifiuta la proposta per non interferire con l’impegno di tenere per sé il resto dei profitti. Quando il ricco libanese scopre che Le’ba ora è divorziate e, quindi, era sposata e non fidanzata, come gli avevano detto, lui non la vuole più. Lei rimprovera ai suoi genitori per essere stati così avidi da spingerla a rovinare il suo matrimonio con un uomo che ama ancora. Le’ba sarà felice per Hassan, quando viene a sapere che è diventato un commerciante di successo. Per riconquistarlo, gli dichiara il suo amore e finge di avvelenarsi, per mostrargli che non può vivere senza di lui. La coppia si riunisce.

00:00:35:00-00:45:00, Isaac chiede a Hassan di andare a prendergli “5 Lucky [Strike]”, ma quando Hassan ordina le sigarette al tabaccaio, un allibratore seduto lì davanti pensa che voglia smettere su un cavallo da corsa chiamato Lucky e gli indica i sportelli dell’ippodromo, vince una grande somma di denaro, la consegna a Isaac che rimane colpito dalla sua onestà e gli dice di tenersi l’intera vincita, grazie alla quale potrà sposare Le’ba.

00:50:00-00:54:00, suol Le’ba/Tahiyya Karioka balla musica araba tradizionale, mostrando lo stile moderno ed elegante che ha creato, introducendo nella danza del ventre elementi di danza classica occidentale e portando carpe con il tacco, invece di ballare scalza; 01:19:00-01:19:40, nel cabaret, mescola danza del ventre e carioca (da qui il nome d’arte dell’attrice, all’anagrafe Badawiyya Muhammad Karim al-Nidānī); ballo brasiliano divenuto famoso in tutto il mondo dopo essere stato eseguito da Fred Astaire e Ginger Rogers nel loro primo film, Flying Down to Rio, del 1933.

**Definizione del tempo:** 00:20:00-00:21:00, mentre la madre di Le’ba dice agli ospiti che sua figlia non può venire alla cerimonia prenuziale, perché sta male, scatta un allarme antiaereo e inizia un raid; 01:14:15-01:14:25, immagini di articoli del quotidiano al-Ahram sulle “manovre delle potenze dell’Asse in Libia”; 01:28:20-01:29:20, Isaac dice che deve lasciare l’Egitto, perché i tedeschi sono arrivati ad al-Alamein, poi sale in macchina con Hassan e gli fa firmare l’atto di compravendita formale della ferramenta che gli cede per ricambiare la sua lealtà.

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1 Il nome Le’ba, presente anche nel titolo, significa ‘gioco’ o ‘giocattolo’.
2 Nel diritto islamico esiste l’istituto del ripudio (jalah) che è una delle forme previste per il divorzio; solo il marito ha il diritto di ripudiare la moglie, semplicemente pronunciando la formula “sei ripudiata”.

**Film “Il gioco della donna” (Le’bat al-sitt, 1946)**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msgilVp60U
In questo film, Tahiyya Karioka fa la parodia sia dell’animatrici popolana sia della star altezzosa. L’opera condanna i matrimoni combinati e sostiene il diritto delle donne di avere una vita pubblica, esercitare la professione che vogliono, essere padrone di sé stesse, del proprio corpo e della propria femminilità. Le’ba difende puntualmente la propria dignità, appena ha l’impressione che un uomo voglia molestiarla.

Il film mostra come le danzatrici del ventre moderne abbiano guadagnato rispettabilità grazie alla loro professionalità e al cinema che ha evidenziato il valore artistico di una forma di danza, tradizionalmente associata all’immoralità e addirittura alla prostituzione. Queste artiste contribuirono a una rivoluzione dei costumi destinata a propagarsi dopo l’indipendenza e soprattutto negli anni 1960.


The first and only time I saw her dance on the stage was in 1950 at Badia’s Casino, in Giza, just below where the Sheraton stands today. A few days later, I saw her at a vegetable stand in Zamalek, as provocative and beautiful as she had been a few nights before, except this time she was wearing a smart lavender suit and high heels. She looked me straight in the eye but my 14-year-old flustered stare wilted under what seemed to me her brazen scrutiny, and I turned away. I told my older cousin’s wife Aida with shamefaced disappointment about my lacklustre performance with the great woman. ‘You should have winked at her,’ Aida said dismissively, as if such a thing were even imaginable. Tahia Carioca was the most stunning and long-lived of the Arab world’s Eastern dancers (belly-dancers, as they are called today). Her career lasted sixty years, from her first days as a dancer at Badia’s Opera Square Casino in the early Thirties, through the rule of King Farouk, of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar al Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. Each of them, except, I think, Mubarak, imprisoned her at least once for various, mostly political offences. She also acted in hundreds of films and dozens of plays, took part in demonstrations, was a voluble, not to say aggressive member of the actors’ syndicate, and in her last years had become a pious (though outspoken) Muslim known to all her friends and admirers as ‘al-Hagga’. Aged 79, she died of a heart attack in a Cairo hospital on 20 September.

About ten years ago I made a special pilgrimage to Cairo to meet and interview her, having in the meantime seen dozens of her films and one of her plays, the appallingy bad Tohya (Wadj, written by her then husband and much younger co-star, Fayez Halawa. He was an opportunist, she later told me, who robbed her of all her money, pictures, films and memorabilia. Robed in the black gown and headscarf of a devout Muslim woman, she radiated die verve and wit that had informed all her performances as a dancer, actress, public personality. I wrote about her in the London Review of Books: her extraordinary dancing career, her power as a cultural symbol throughout the Arab world. Egypt was the capital of that world when it came to such matters as pleasure and the arts of desire and sociability, and Tahia was its representative.

Most Eastern Arabs would, I believe, concede that the dour Syrians and Jordanians, the quickwitted Lebanese, the rough-hewn Gulf Arabs and the ever-so-serious Iraqis have never stood a chance beside the I entertainers, clowns, singers and dancers that Egypt and its people have provided for the past several centuries. Palestinians or Iraqis may level damaging political accusations at Egypt’s governments, but they never fail to acknowledge the country’s charm and the pleasures of its clipped, lilting dialect. In all that Tahia stood quite alone, and not altogether despite her flaws and often puzzlingly wayward. A leftwing radical in some things, she was a time-server and opportunist in others; she made a late return to Islam but she also admitted to 14 husbands (there may have been a few more) and had a carefully cultivated reputation for debauchery.

The only other entertainer in the Arab world on her level was Um Kalthum, the great Koranic reciter and romantic singer, whose Thursday-evening broadcasts from a Cairo theatre were transmitted everywhere between Morocco and Oman. Having been led a diet of her music at far too young an age, I found her songs insufferable. But for those who like and believe in such cultural typing, her long, languorous, repetitive lines, slow tempi, strangely dragging rhythms, ponderous monophony and eerily lachrymose or devotional lyrics stood for something quintessentially Arab and Muslim which I never quite came to terms with.

Tahia, by comparison, is barely known – except among belly-dancers, all of whom today seem to be non-Arab, and who regard her as their major inspiration. Belly-dancing is in many ways the opposite of ballet, its Western equivalent. Ballet is all about elevation and lightness; Eastern dancing, as Tahia practised it, shows the dancer planting herself more and more solidly in the earth, digging into it almost, scarcely moving, certainly never expressing anything like the nimble semblance of weightlessness that a great ballet dancer conveys. Tahia’s dancing suggested (vertically) a sequence of horizontal pleasures, but also paradoxically communicated an elusiveness and a kind of grace that cannot be pinned down on a flat surface. She performed within an Arab and Islamic setting but was constantly in tension with it. Tahia was its representative.
scholars, intelligence agents – while we rely on personal and disorganised collective memory, gossip almost, and the embrace of a family or knowable community to carry us forward in time. The great thing about Tahia was that her sensuality, or rather the flicker of it that I recall, was so unneurotic, so attuned to an audience whose gaze in all its raw or, in the case of dance connoisseurs, refined lust, was as transient and unthreatening as she was. Enjoyment for now; then, nothing.


THE DEATH of Tahia Carioca, at the age of 80, on Monday afternoon, marks the end not only of an astonishingly multi-faceted contribution to Egyptian Arab and Turkish life, but also of an entire cultural era, and of a kind of female public figure unlikely to ever emerge again. Throughout the first half of the 20th century her belly-dancing performances, as much as her extraordinary beauty, charisma and striking -- sometimes shocking -- sincerity about her personal life (in the midst of forbiddingly chauvinistic conventions) captivated millions of admirers who not only cherished her image -- a bint ballad from the popular districts of Cairo who was also a forbidding femme fatale -- but deeply respected her. She was seldom the object of scandal because, instead of having love affairs, she promptly married all the men for whom she fell. Her 13 husbands included actor Rushdi Abaza and director Fatin Abdel-Wahab, as well as nearly every other male celebrity of distinction in the Egyptian entertainment industry.

Her acting career, which started in the 1940s, put her on a par with the greatest talents of her time. It also made her name synonymous with the persona of an irresistible me'allema -- the imposing woman of the world, the businesswoman and seductress of popular Cairo. Her bold, if sporadic involvements in politics testified to her capacity for taking matters into her own hands and, if necessary, risking financial and social security for the sake of higher values. From the 1960s on, having put on weight, she gave up dancing and resumed her acting career, opting for a conventionally respectable old age, eventually taking the veil and assuming the title of hagga -- a religious title referring to those who had gone on a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands and denoting a high degree of lower-middle-class respectability.

Born Badawiya Mohamed Karim Ali Sayed on 22 February 1919, in Manzala in the northern Delta, Carioca started dancing as a teenager in Ismailia, where she had moved with her family soon after she was born. Desperate with the suffering of an underprivileged upbringing and the overbearing authority which her brothers exercised over her, she ran away to Cairo and soon managed to work under Badi'a Masabni, the great belly-dancer, teacher and owner of a famous cabaret. It was in Badi'a's cabaret that Carioca gave her first solo performance, prompting Badi'a's choreographer to create a sequence especially for her, which was loosely based on the Latin American "karioka" (popularised in the 1933 American film, Flying down to Rio); hence the name that stayed with her throughout her life. In 1936 she danced in King Farouk's wedding procession, significantly to the accomplishment of dancing by Umm Kulthoum (Carioca is probably the only other female figure in Egyptian cultural life who achieved comparable status). Umm Kulthoum herself was a great admirer of Carioca's dancing. Asked which entertainment she would prefer on any one night, given the choice, she named Carioca -- an artist, she said, who could sing with her body.

After a series of brief appearances in the cinema as a dancer, Carioca was approached by the great comedian Naguib El-Rihani about acting in one of his widely acclaimed motion pictures. Her role opposite El-Rihani in Li'bet Al-Set (Woman's Play, 1946), now a classic of the Egyptian screen, initially revealed her gift for acting, though she will probably be better remembered as Me'allema Shafa'at, the beautiful older woman who seduces and ruins the life of her boarder, a guileless university student from the countryside, played by Shukri Sarhan, in Salah Abou-Seif's classic, Shabab Imra'a (A Woman's Youth), which participated in the Cannes Film Festival in 1956. More recently, she participated in Youssef Chahine's Alexandrie encore et toujours. Her films, in which she collaborated with the most successful actors, singers and directors of her day, number nearly 200, and her careers in theatre (for a long time she had her own successful troupe) and in radio and television drama were equally auspicious. She received many awards.

As an activist, she played an inspiring role when she went on strike following a change in the laws concerning workers' unions in 1987 perceived as unfavourable to actors. This typified her strikingly independent approach to politics. Unlike most of the belles of her time, she was not a mere conformist, and did not always use her influential contacts to promote her career. Expressing her disagreement with the monopoly, she nonetheless retained nostalgic memories of the old regime after the 1952 Revolution, and was imprisoned for three months in 1953 when she expressed her support for a post-revolution return to constitutional democracy. In prison she went on hunger strike to protest against the possibility of physical abuse. Yet she actively encouraged the revolution. A famous anecdote relates how Sadat hid in her sister's house following his involvement in a political assassination in 1946.

In a fascinating article drawing on his own experience of 1930s Cairo, Edward Said paid intellectual tribute to Carioca, praising her freedom of spirit and her very particular brand of triumph -- the way she managed to be incredibly seductive without recourse to excessive physical effort and without sinking into vulgarity, the way she subdue authority without losing out on respectability, the way she spoke openly and inspiring about her (failed) experiences with men. She was, Said wrote, her own personal and private history, the larger part of which


A comedy icon of her time, Mary Mounib died on 21 January in 1969 after a career in film and theatre spanning over 50 years.

Egyptian cinema lost Mary Mounib on 21 January 1969. Mounib wasn't an ordinary comedienne. She was the first woman to break men's monopoly on stardom in the comedy field.

Definitely before her there were actresses who had the capability to play comedy roles. But none of them achieved the success Mary Mounib attained. Plays were written for her and she was cast as the leading lady the same as male comedians.

She was born Mary Selim Habib Nasr on 11 February 1905 in Al-Ghouta, near the Syrian capital Damascus, to a Lebanese family from Fum Al-Shubbak area. She came to Egypt as a child with her mother and elder sister, following her father who came to speculate in the Egyptian Cotton Exchange.

As if it were a cinematic coincidence, just as the family arrived to Cairo, the father returned to the Levant. Her mother was preparing to go back as well when she learned that he had died. They then remained in Cairo to face an uncertain future.

For some time, Mary was enrolled in the Deliverande School in Al-Faggala neighbourhood, where many foreigners and minorities resided. She stopped attending school when she was still under 12 years old.

With her elder sister, Alice, she started working as an extra for the Ali Al-Kassar Theatrical Company around 1917. Then they joined the Amin Attallah Company.

 Afterwards she formed with Fawzi Mounib, her husband at the time, a theatrical company bearing his name and through which she got to know a number of brilliant stage luminaries, on the top of which came director and actor Bishara Wakim.
In 1934, Mary Mounib went through the most important leap in her artistic career, joining the prominent Naguib Al-Rihani Company, named after Egypt's top comedian. She remained with it until her death. In this company, her artistic character began to be shaped at the hands of the company's founder, and his partner, playwright Badie Khairy.

She was known for playing the low class sharp-tongued woman, or the mother-in-law who liked to upset the happy lives of husbands and wives. Both characters were the base upon which Mary Mounib achieved her broad popularity. But when precisely did Mary Mounib begin her cinematic career? And who was behind this step? In 1934, she was cast in a small role in Son of the People (Eli Apticman) through her old friend Bishara Wakim who co-produced the film. Then she played other minor roles in Al-Ghandoura (1935) with the songstress Mounirah El-Mahdiya, His Highness Wants to Marry (1936, Alexander Varkasz) with Naguib Al-Rihani and The Chant of Hope (1937, Ahmed Baderkhani) with Umm Kulthum.

Despite achieving but moderate success Mounib in her early cinematic period, in contrast with her stage beginnings in Naguib Al-Rihani Company, this success was enough to push her into leading lady roles. The first such role was under cinematographer and director Tulio Cabarini who chose her to star in My Wife No 2 (1937).

However, her breakthrough role was in Determination (1939, Kamal Selim) where she played the mother who wants her daughter (Fatma Roushdy) to marry one of the alley’s rich men against the daughter’s will. In that film, Mary Mounib didn’t only move to playing the role of an adult woman's mother — although she was only 34 at the time — but also moved to playing a sinister character whose only care is hoarding money, even at the expense of destroying her daughter’s marriage.

She didn’t play such a provocative mother-in-law again except in Foreman Hassan (1952, Salah Abu-Seif). It is true that in that role she wasn’t as sinister as in Determination, whose sharp-tongue and tone of rebuke was too high at the expense of comedy. Her interventions were rather borne of keenness to secure the well-being of her son or daughter. Thus, irksome situations ensue and usually generate comedy. In her role in The Lady's Game (1946, Wali Eldin Sameh), which she reprised in The Honorable Family (1964, Fateen Abdel-Wahab), she sought that her daughter get divorced in order to marry a richer man.

Hers wasn’t the character of a deviant so much as a supporting mother nonetheless taking her care for her daughter to extremes. Of course, Mary Mounib’s refined comedic performance alleviated the distaste some viewers would have felt towards such a character. This is an important difference between “Sanyya Gunnah,” Naguib Al-Rihani’s mother-in-law in The Lady’s Game, and “Umm Fatma,” Hussein Sedki’s mother-in-law in Determination.

Mary Mounib played variations of the mother-in-law role, the most prominent were My Mother-in-Law is an Atomic Bomb (1951, Helmy Rafia) and A Marriage Tale (1964, Hassan El-Seifi). The majority of her roles were that of a traditional mother-in-law, who doesn’t aim at separating the married couple but seeks to have a presence and a role in the life of her son or daughter even if her intervention — without willing or wanting to — means driving the marital couple to the edge of distraction.

This was demonstrated in The Charming Mothers-in-Law (1953, Helmy Rafia), Ismail Yassin’s Ghost (1954, Hassan El-Seifi), This is the Love (1958, Salah Abu-Seif) and A Husband’s Confessions (1964, Fateen Abdel-Wahab).

It is noteworthy that Mary Mounib in her films was capable of transforming small parts into major ones that paralleled that of leading roles to the extent that the viewer may not remember anyone except her. Perhaps her most prominent role in this context was her final role in Thieves but Funny (1969, Ibrahim Lotfi).

Mary Mounib, known as the sharp-tongued low class woman or the hot-tempered mother-in-law role, was transformed into an extremely meek and good-natured woman, perhaps with a bit of naivety and helplessness, when she played the role of the mother in Papa Amin (1950, Youssef Chahine) and in A Letter from an Unknown Lady (1962, Salah Abu-Seif).

Rebelling against mother-in-law roles, we can see her acting the spinster in Omar Bey (1941, Niazi Mostafa) and in Abu-Halmous (1947, Ibrahim Helmy) with Naguib Al-Rihani or when she played a Turkish lady in Martyrs of Love (1944, Kamal Selim) and April’s Fool Day (1954, Mohammed Abdel-Gawad). All these were variations on the character she played in her best remembered play, To Five, produced by Naguib Al-Rihani Company.

Whatever role she played, Mounib had full control over her attributes as an actress, whether her outward appearance, movements, or her superb capacity to change the tonality of her voice.

It is worth mentioning that starring roles were offered to Mary Mounib in nine films, which is considered a large number for a comedienne. These included My Mother-in-law is an Angel (1959), A Bitter Honeymoon (1960, both by Essa Karama) and People Downstairs (1960, Kamel Al-Telmesani). In her final years, many roles were written especially for her. Such was her renown, and the respect she commanded.
Film “Lotta nella valle” (Ṣirāʿ fī ‘l-wādī, 1954)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1JHTvvGCgY


In an Egyptian valley, two different factions compete in sugar cane production. One is run by the wealthy and powerful Pasha (Zaki Rostom) and his thuggish nephew Riad Bey (Farid Shawqi). The other is run by the peasants. For years, the Pasha’s crop has been of superior quality and fetched higher prices. But the young upstart Ahmed (Omar Sharif) is a bright agricultural engineer whose talents have improved the peasants’ sugar to the number one position… despite the fact that Ahmed’s father, Sàber Efendi (Abdel Waress Assar), happens to work for the Pasha. The Pasha and Riad secretly destroy their crops, but the plan escalates to the point where it involves murder and the framing of Ahmed’s father for the crime. Now Ahmed struggles to prove his father’s innocence, and the Pasha’s daughter Amal (Faten Hamama) stands by him in her love for him, unaware of her own father’s involvement. […] It seems a bit routine at first, but really ramps up as it goes on. The last 40 minutes are pretty intense, a whirlwind of activity involving revenge and twists and high melodrama, culminating in a deadly standoff among majestic ruins and tombs. The characters may be thinly sketched, but the performances are strong enough to make them quite watchable. […] there is some excellent cinematography, especially as it approaches the climax. While not especially sophisticated thematically, there’s a noir-esque tone to the film that complements the drama well. Rating: Very Good (82)


The opening, with dramatic compositions and emotive music by longtime Chahine collaborator Fouad al-Marsa, sets the stage. Amany Ali Shawky, writing for Mada Masr, considers the film a “value proposition” for lovers of Egyptian cinema. And it’s likely to deliver exactly that. The first 20 minutes consist of a prologue: Ahmed (Omar Sharif) tells his story. The opening shot is a flashback to Ahmed’s childhood. He is back home after finishing his bachelor’s degree in agriculture. The opening, with dramatic compositions and emotive music by longtime Chahine collaborator Fouad al-Marsa, sets the stage. But t...
Dopo l’allagamento dei campi dei contadini (00:29:00-00:31:00), lo sheikh accusa Sàber Efendi - padre di Ahmed - di essere complice del Pascià, poi chiede al Pascià di pagare ai contadini i soldi che avrebbero ricevuto dallo zuccheroferro per il loro raccolto; Sàber Efendi rivela il suo divenire con lo sheikh al Pascià e a Riàd, il quale ucciderà lo sheikh per fare ricadere la colpa di tutto su Sàber Efendi che sarà arrestato; per aiutare Ahmed, Amàl porterà al processo Hassàn – guardiano del Pascià – convinta che scagionerà Sàber, ma, evidentemente prezzolato dal Pascià, lo stesso Hassàn testimonia contro l’imputato. Riàd porterà Hassàn a nascondersi in una tomba faraonica, perché Ahmed non lo trovi e lo costringa a dire la verità; vuole a tutti costi salvarlo il padre, scoprendo che è il vero assassino. Il Pascià cercherà inutilmente di convincere il giovane di lasciare il villaggio, per non subire la vendetta del figlio dello sheikh. Ahmed troverà Hassàn che gli dirà che l’assassinio è Riàd e poi cerca di fuggirlo da lui, ma durante la fuga sarà investito da un treno. Definizione del tempo: prima di fare eseguire la condanna a morte di Sàber per impiccagione, un ufficiale legge la sentenza in cui si afferma che l’omicidio dello sheikh era avvenuto il 23 settembre 1951: il film mostra le ingiustizie del periodo monarchico (la prima riforma sociale adottata dal governo militare dopo la Rivoluzione del 1952 è la riforma agricola predisposta da Nasser, allora primo ministro, per migliorare le condizioni di vita dei contadini; i braccianti nullatenenti riceveranno piccoli appezzamenti terrieri, presi dalle parti di terreni espropriati ai latifondisti a tale scopo). Per vendicare la morte del padre, il figlio dello sheikh sparerà contro Ahmed ferendolo. **Sequenza 01:25:00-01:49:00**: Riàd chiederà la mano di Amal al Pascià che dovrà assecondarlo, visto che è il suo complice, ma la ragazza fugge; va da Ahmed che le dirà che l’assassinio è Riàd; sì quest’ultimo sia il figlio dello sheikh cercano di uccidere Ahmed; Amal lo raggiunge in un tempio – complesso templare di Karnak sulla sponda est -, dove Riàd le spara, ferendola a una gamba; alla fine emerge tutta la verità; Amal scopre i crimini del padre che morirà per salvarla; Ahmed e il figlio dello sheikh consegnano Riàd alla polizia, invece di ucciderlo per vendicarsi ed essere poi giustiziati per l’omicidio. Ormai, Ahmed e Amal sono socialmente sullo stesso piano.

A fresh, raw face for the leading man is a tradition Chahine followed religiously throughout his 50 years filmmaking. In Omar Sharif or Michel Demitri Shalhoub (Sharif’s birth name), he saw something that was missing from most heartthrobs of the era and gave him his first ever cinematic role. Aside from his strange accent and impaired articulation, Sharif looks great and manages to portray anguish, despair and wrath with his gaze and loud silences. Casting Hamama as a teenage high-school graduate is also strange: she doesn’t look like one as she was 23 at the time. But she knows how to act like one. Amal is loud, squeaky, naïve and impulsive, someone you might get annoyed with pretty fast, but at the same time extremely watchable. (In real life, the two got married a couple of years later, and both worked for Chahine again in 1956 to make romantic drama *Siraa fil Mina* (*Struggle on the Pier*).)

As for Shawky, throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, he cleverly and smoothly alternated between villains and underdogs, preventing himself from being typecast. (He pops up again in Chahine’s early masterpiece *Cairo Station* in 1958, with quite a different character.) Rostom, however, deservedly wins the title “villain of all villains.”

Cinematographer Ahmed Khorshid’s frames are clear and faultless. Some bear remarkable similarities to the black-and-white stills of photographer Van Leo, especially the shots of Sharif. Mostly lit from below, Khorshid’s angles accentuate his beauty, piercing eyes and protruding cheekbones. Chahine’s glorification of men’s beauty and love is there, though much more subtle than his later work in *Eskenderia Leih* (Alexandria… Why, 1979), and *Haddouta Masreya* (An Egyptian Story, 1982). Chahine loved his leading men. He unearthed raw talent and polished it to stardom.

Zahir’s score, though great, confirms the film’s slightly orientalist approach: the flute, drum, oud and daunting screeches of sopranos merge to form a gamut of Upper Egyptian sounds in symphonic form. Things get pretty intense and more complicated toward the end of the film, with flooding, a race against time, multiple plot twists, a memorable kiss between Hamama and Sharif, and a tense stand-off among ruins in the desert. It might have an unpromisingly classic set-up, quite a bit of melodrama, and some unconvincing aspects, but it’s definitely worth a watch.

[https://www.britannica.com/biography/Omar-Sharif#ref1113472](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Omar-Sharif#ref1113472)

**Omar Sharif**, original name Michael Demitri Shalhoub, Michael also spelled Michel, Shalhoub also spelled Chalhoub, (born April 10, 1932, Alexandria, Egypt—died July 10, 2015, Cairo), Egyptian actor of international acclaim, known for his dashing good looks and for iconic roles in such films as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965).

Shalhoub was born in Alexandria, the only son of a prosperous lumber merchant. When he was four years old, he moved with his family to Cairo, where he attended English schools. With early aspirations of being an actor, Shalhoub participated in theatre productions in secondary school. At the urging of his father, he worked for the family’s lumber business after graduating. In 1953 his acting dreams were realized when he was cast opposite Egyptian star Faten Hamama in *Siraa fil-wadi* (1954; “Struggle in the Valley”). He began his acting career using a pseudonym, which went through several variations and eventually was rendered consistently in English as Omar Sharif. Sharif went on to star in several more films with Hamama, whom he married in 1955 (the couple divorced in 1974).

Sharif quickly rose to stardom in his native Egypt, appearing in more than 20 films before garnering international acclaim as Sharif Ali in David Lean’s epic *Lawrence of Arabia*. His portrayal of the loyal Arab chief earned him an Academy Award nomination for best supporting actor. Following this breakthrough role, Sharif was much in demand to play a variety of characters, including a Spanish priest in *Behold a Pale Horse* (1964) and the Mongolian conqueror in *Genghis Khan* (1965). Among Sharif’s most famous roles is the title character in *Doctor Zhivago*, Lean’s adaptation of Boris Pasternak’s novel of the same name. Starring opposite Julie Christie, Sharif portrayed a poet-doctor in the middle of a love triangle. He later was cast as a German military man in *The Night of the Generals* (1967), Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria in * Mayerling* (1968), and revolutionary Che Guevara in *Che!* (1969). Sharif was also well known for his portrayal of Nick Arnstein, husband to Barbra Streisand’s Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* (1968); he reprised the role of Arnstein in the film’s sequel, *Funny Lady* (1975).

Sharif continued to appear both on-screen and on television into the 21st century, though he appeared in few notable roles after the mid-1970s. Instead, he devoted much of his time to the card game bridge, releasing books, videos, and video games on the subject. Beginning in the 1970s, Sharif published a syndicated column about bridge. He also wrote an autobiography, *L’Éternel Masculin* (1976; *The Eternal Male*), with Marie-Thérèse Guinchard.
In 1963, Faten Hamama made her one and only Hollywood film. Entitled Cairo, the movie was a remake of The Asphalt Jungle, but refashioned in an Egyptian setting. In retrospect, there is little remarkable about the film but for Hamama’s appearance alongside stars such as George Sanders and Richard Johnson. Indeed, copies are extremely difficult to track down: Among the only ways to watch the movie is to catch one of the rare screenings scheduled by cable and satellite network Turner Classic Movies. However, Hamama’s foray into Hollywood is interesting by comparison with the films she was making in “the Hollywood on the Nile” at the time. The next year, one of the great classics of Hamama’s career, Al-Bab al-Mafluh (The Open Door). Henri Barakat’s adaptation of Latifa al-Zayyat’s novel, hit Egyptian screens. In stark contrast to Cairo, in which she played a relatively minor role, Hamama occupied the top of the bill for The Open Door, as was the case with practically all the films she was making by that time.

One could hardly expect an Egyptian actress of the 1960s to catapult to Hollywood stardom in her first appearance before an English-speaking audience, although her husband Omar Sharif’s example no doubt weighed upon her. Rather, what I find interesting in setting 1963’s Cairo alongside 1964’s The Open Door is the way in which the Hollywood film marginalizes the principal woman among the film’s characters, while the Egyptian film sets that character well above all male counterparts. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that while parts for women in Hollywood were almost invariably of secondary or tertiary importance in the 1950s and 1960s, women in the Hollywood on the Nile were at least as likely as men to occupy the headline roles in films.

No doubt critics might suggest that The Open Door is exceptional as the adaptation of a novel written by a woman and focused on a woman’s experience, though the fact this particular novel was seen fit for adaptation is likewise significant. But comparing the milestones of Hamama’s career with those of her colleagues in Hollywood at the time is instructive. Among such colleagues, there are three whose careers are both roughly comparable in terms of stardom and contemporaneity with Hamama’s — Grace Kelly, Natalie Wood and Elizabeth Taylor. Kelly is perhaps best known for her collaborations with Alfred Hitchcock — like Dial M for Murder (1954), Rear Window (1954) and To Catch a Thief (1955) — but in each of these films she shares the screen with a dominant male character. She won an Oscar for Best Actress for The Country Girl (1954), and this is arguably the one role of her career in which she clearly supersedes her co-stars — Bing Crosby and William Holden — in importance.

Wood began her career much like Hamama, as a child star in films like Miracle on 34th Street (1947). After prominent parts in The Searchers (1956) and Rebel Without a Cause (1955), she went on to her signal roles in Splendor in the Grass and West Side Story (both 1961). In both of these she dominates the screen, while in subsequent parts — notably Inside Daisy Clover (1965) and This Property Is Condemned (1966) — she shares the screen with dominant male characters.

Finally, Taylor likewise lit up the screen as a child star in National Velvet, before coming into her own with roles in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1958), Suddenly, Last Summer (1959), Butterfield 8 (1960), Cleopatra (1963), and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1966). It would be hard to suggest that Taylor was at all outshined in these roles by male co-stars, and that is what made her unquestionably the leading Hollywood actress of her generation.

What sets Hamama apart from these Hollywood luminaries is the sheer volume of roles in which she dominated the screen. From 1958 onward, there is scarcely a film in her expansive filmography in which she was forced to share the top of a bill. There are the obvious examples, like Sayyidat al-Qasr (Lady of the Palace, 1958), Duaa al-Karawan (The Nightingale’s Prayer, 1959), Nahr al-Hubb (River of Love, 1960), The Open Door, and Al-Haram (The Sin, 1965). But one might equally cite films like Ard al-Salam (Land of Peace, 1957) and La Anam (Sleepless, 1957), in which she shared the screen with large ensemble casts, yet still seemed to remain the central player. Or one might turn to earlier films, like Aisha (1953) or Al-Yatimatayn (The Two Orphans, 1948), in which she had scarcely left adolescence and yet was nonetheless carrying the action forward. And in later films, like Imbaturiyat Mim (Empire of M, 1972), Oreed Hallan (I Need A Solution, 1974) and Afwah wa Aranib (Mouths and Rabbits, 1977), despite the manifestly changing times, she remained the central point of reference on screen. Arguably every film cited here was a vehicle first and foremost for the career of Faten Hamama, and in this, she far exceeds Elizabeth Taylor, her nearest Hollywood peer.

Further, most of the leading men of the Egyptian screen could only have dreamt of the stardom Hamama possessed. Emaid Hamdy, Farid Shawy, Ahmad Mazhar, Rushdy Abaza and Omar Sharif all had remarkable careers, but nowhere near the success Hamama enjoyed in “the Hollywood on the Nile.” Among leading men, perhaps only Ismail Yassin and Abdel Halim Hafez could carry a film in the way that Faten Hamama could. But of course their stardom had roots in the adjoining arts of comedy and music, quite apart from the strength of their onscreen presence.

What I find so remarkable and compelling about all this is that Faten Hamama was scarcely alone among Egypt’s actresses in holding such sway in the star system. Indeed, as well as Hamama, stars such as Shadia, Magda, Naima Akif and Souad Hosni were entirely capable of carrying the success of a film on their shoulders without the assistance of a leading man. The “Egyptian difference” that I cited in the title — the difference between Hollywood and the Hollywood on the Nile — is the dominant role of women in 1950s and 1960s Egyptian cinema.

How is one to explain this remarkable phenomenon? There are scholars who would suggest that this Egyptian difference is rooted in the revolutionary politics of those two decades. A prominent role for women in film permitted Egyptian artists to explore revolutionary social change on screen in a way that Hollywood artists would not or could not.

Whatever the explanation, this Egyptian difference yielded a cinema in the 1950s and 1960s that was more daring, more complex, and more progressive than most Hollywood cinema of the time. Accordingly, the passing of Faten Hamama, arguably the principal symbol of this Egyptian difference in cinema, is one that I mourn bitterly. With each passing day, I feel Egyptians distancing themselves from this enormously rich heritage. This is not, of course, to say that Egyptians should dwell in the past, merely to suggest that there is much we have forgotten about that past, and much we can still learn from it.
Film “La porta di ferro” (Bāb al-ḥādīd, 1958)

*Cairo Station* sottotitolato in inglese: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYAG_Gi2iDA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYAG_Gi2iDA)

Regia: Youssef Chahine. The film was entered into the 8th Berlin International Film Festival; and was selected as the Egyptian entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 31st Academy Awards, but was not accepted as a nominee. Cast: Farid Shawqi (1920-1998) as Abu Siri; Hind Rostom (1931-2011) as Hannuma; Youssef Chahine as Qinawi

A newsstand owner called Madbuli takes pity on Qinawi, a lame young man, and gives him a job selling newspapers in the Cairo train station. The women there all shun him because of his mild handicap, though he has little trouble walking. Qinawi becomes obsessed with Hannuma, a beautiful cold drink vendor. But she is engaged to Abu Siri, a husky luggage porter who is trying to organize his co-workers into a union to better their lot. Nonetheless, Qinawi proposes to her. When she rejects his fantasy of a home and children in his village, Qinawi's obsession turns to madness. Inspired by an unsolved murder in the news, he buys a knife and plots to kill Hannuma. When the local policemen try to catch Hannuma and the other women illegally selling drinks, she asks Qinawi to take her incriminating drink bucket and hide it. He seeks to lure her to a warehouse to pick it up, but she asks a friend to get it instead.

In the darkness, Qinawi does not notice the substitution; he stabs the other woman repeatedly, then hides the body in a wooden crate supposedly holding Hannuma's trousseau (clothes and linen, etc., that a bride collects for her wedding and married life). Then he gets Abu Siri to put it aboard a train for Hannuma's impending wedding. The woman is not dead, however. She is found, and the station is alerted. The men who stand to lose by Abu Siri's unionization at first try to pin the attempted murder on him, but the would-be victim identifies her real assailant. Meanwhile, unaware of her near escape from death, Hannuma goes to get her bucket. Qinawi chases her through the rail yard and catches her, holding a knife to her head to keep the crowd at bay. The newsstand owner tells Qinawi that he will be allowed to marry Hannuma and coaxes him into putting on his wedding garment. Qinawi complies, then realizes he has donned a straitjacket. He struggles, but is taken away.

Sequenza 00:00:00-00:00:02:00, prologo in cui il giornaliero Madbuli descrive la vita nella Stazione Centrale del Cairo e presenta Qinawi (Youssef Chahine), il protagonista storpio, immigrato dal Sud, a cui offre un lavoro come venditore di giornali e poi scopre che è ossequiato dal sesso; poi ci sono i titoli del film dopo i quali il racconto riprende (00:04-00:00:08:00) con una scena nella biglietteria dove la venditrice di bibite, Hannuma (Hind Rostom), sta scappando dalla polizia e chiede a Qinawi (che non si vede) di nascondere il secchio con le bibite che vende illegalmente e va dalle altre venditrici; dal dialogo emerge che Qinawi vuole sposare Hannùma che è fidanzata con Abu Siri (quindi, c’è un ellissi tra il prologo e questa scena del film: non vengono presentati gli antefatti); poi tutte scappano; appare Abu Siri che cerca di allontanare dal binario un altro facchino perché non è il suo turno di lavorare lì, e l’altro gli risponde che non ha soldi per pagare una tangente al caposquadra Abu Gabel che, solo in tal caso, assegna ai facchini i biglietti; una femminista fa un comizio o; i membri ansiosi di una famiglia contadina si muovono in mezzo alla folla; due giovani innamorati cercano di incontrarsi in segreto; una femminista fa un comizio. Le scene di ognuno di questi racconti paralleli frammentano la struttura narrativa che segue le convenzioni del poliziesco, con l’introduzione di un conflitto, un climax e una risoluzione.


In my mind Youssef Chahine’s movies are about sweaty careworn heavy-smoking intellectuals in 1970s colors talking very passionately about things I don’t totally understand or relate to in scenes that end abruptly with someone jumping. Chahine made many movies and a lot of them were about himself, in a way that made it impossible to see any of them outside of his ongoing provocative conversation with his audience. But I used to really enjoy the movies he made that were not about him or about careworn heavy-smoking intellectuals (though maybe they were the same thing). Mainly because I really liked the way he made things look and feel. It was amazing to see a black-and-white movie by Chahine for the first time: Egyptian black-and-white movies we were allowed to see on TV mostly looked the same and had the same stories, locations and character types.

Chahine’s romantic musical *Inta Habeey* (You Are My Love, 1957), for example, despite being similar to mainstream movies of that time in terms of plot or purpose, looked and felt very different. In a TV interview, Chahine once said that its star, Farid al-Atrash, insisted that his face be lit in a specific way that made it look more square, but that he refused and shot the movie his way. The film came out nice and entertaining, and Farid — the squardest singer and actor in the history of Arab cinema — came out funny and charming for the first and possibly last time.
In 1958, one year later, Chahine made **Bab al-Hadid** (Cairo Station), a huge surprise to almost everybody. His previous movies were very box-office friendly, movies about people fighting in the docks, the valley or the desert, movies that disturbed nobody and didn’t cause any trouble. Maybe he alone knew during the shooting of **Cairo Station** that his career was about to undergo a massive transformation.

It’s quite a safe movie. It made it onto Egyptian national TV as an entertaining noir psycho-thriller. The final scene is carved into the memories of millions as a classic cinema moment. Yet throughout the film’s multi-layered body you feel a suppressed steaming power boiling inside, looking for a crack to explode out of. Just like Qinawy — the immigrant from the south who lives the predatory chaotic jungle of **Cairo Station**.

No wonder Chahine himself wanted to play that role: a limping wreck of a newspaper seller described by his only sympathizer as “a person made ill by deprivation,” a creep the world pities and despises, a pair of staring eyes full of desire and magical dreams, and a stuttering mouth incapable of normal boring conversation.

Chahine, unlike many stars at the time, wasn’t worried about playing such a role (created by scriptwriters Abdel Hay Adib and Mohamed Abu Youssef, but probably developed by himself). A lot of actors wouldn’t want roles that present them as repulsive — playing a villain is fine because people respect fear, but nobody wants an audience to remember them as “ill from deprivation” or offensive. Chahine didn’t mind being the guy who only desires Hanouma (Hend Rostom), rather than the guy who kisses her.

When you watch Chahine’s 1970s movies about careworn heavy smokers in which people suddenly jump, you have to admire how he was able to make movies about whatever he wanted, the way he wanted. It’s quite amazing that in a country where the industry is troubled and the political and social situation is rather tight, Chahine earned that much freedom. Movies like **Cairo Station** show that it took him a while to earn it. I don’t want to believe in the idea that more limitations bring more creativity, but I do tend to like his movies that were made (I believe) under more pressure.

**Cairo Station** is shot entirely in the station, in 1958. If you know Cairo’s present-day train station, you can imagine what it was like back then — exactly the same. The movie’s events all happen in one day. A large flock of actors and actresses float around the place in cleverly choreographed routes (Chahine’s love of dancing, which later emerged more strongly, appears shyly here).

Alvise Orfanelli, the Italian-Alexandrian filmmaker who introduced Chahine to the cinema scene, is the director of photography. Orfanelli literally established the aesthetics of early Egyptian cinema through his work as director and/or cinematographer on lots of movies made in the early 1930s. In **Cairo Station**, he seemed to have fallen in love with the darkness of the gigantic metal beasts that scream off and squeak past people, blowing them around, abstract triangular shapes of smoke and mist hanging behind the characters and creating a constant spooky, epic atmosphere. Combined with Fouad al-Zahir’s biblical-sounding music, this gives the station the feel of a mythical shrine where pilgrimage-like visits occur repeatedly before magnificent acts of bloody sacrifice and sinful confession.

The movie deliberately drifts off its rails and slows down near the areas where Chahine loves to hang out. A group of speechless young adults in a train carriage play merry western rock n roll on guitars and accordions, and Hanouma joins them with a slowly progressing dance as she tries to sell them Pepsi. This moment of joy and beauty, which of course later turns into an important beat of the plot, is a seed for what later becomes a sort of Chahine signature.

**Cairo Station** also introduces his political agenda in a slightly louder voice than previous works. Abu Sery, the station’s alpha male who makes a living from carrying baggage, is trying to convince the other carriers to unite under a union to protect their interests. A few years after the 1952 revolution, amid raise-your-head-brother discourse, Chahine cared about making a movie that would remind people that there was still injustice and work to do about it.

Abu Sery is also loved by the sexiest woman on earth and he is very large. When they have angry make up sex after a fight, spied on by Qinawy, we see a shot of metal railway bars repeatedly sinking into the ground under the heavy weight of a train. This scene helped slowly pave the way for a conversation exploring gender issues in Egyptian society in Chahine’s later works.

**Cairo Station**, the eleventh of his 43 movies, was nominated to represent Egypt in Berlin Film Festival and the Academy Awards. He made it when he was 32 and the same year he made **Gamila al-Gazairiya** (Gamila the Algerian), another important movie about the famous freedom fighter Gamila Bohraid, who had a crucial role in Algeria’s struggle against French colonization. **Gamila** also had a remarkable international reception, as relived in Chahine’s **Hadouta Masriya** (An Egyptian Tale, 1982).

In one of his biographical movies, **Iskandriya Kaman w Kaman** (Alexandria, Again and Forever, 1989) there is a scene where he — as himself — is talking to an older lady. She somehow embodies the poor simple people of Egypt (a character who regularly appears in Chahine’s movies in different shapes and figures). As she offers him a cup of tea, she says, “**The Land** is your best movie.” Chahine stares at her with his famous, inexplicable, not always necessary naughty look, and asks: “How about **Cairo Station**?” She walks away and mumbles something about it being good but not as good as **Al-Ard** (The Land, 1969).

I see this scene as a stage for an important discussion about Chahine’s work and how I feel about it: The conversation about those two particular movies, which both reached out to ordinary viewers and created a very special channel between them and Chahine, shows a very sharp recognition of that channel; yet this conversation is in a movie he
Youssef Chahine earned the title "the pioneer of social realism" in Egyptian cinema. His country once had the fourth largest film industry in the world; and it has been an important tool in securing Egypt's cultural dominancy in the Arabic-speaking world since the 1920s.

When I was a pupil at Victoria College in Alexandria (sometimes known as the "Eton of the Mediterranean") in the years after the Second World War, we were reminded by the British staff there that we were expected to succeed. Before our eyes they dangled portraits of those who had preceded us – King Hussein of Jordan, or the actor Omar Sharif, who had just become a star after being discovered by Chahine, another Victoria College old boy.

He had featured Sharif in his 1954 film Siraa Fil-Wadi (The Blazing Sun). This was Chahine's sixth film – and the first Egyptian one to be shot in the Valley of the Kings. It explored a theme much loved by Chahine, that of social injustice and the individual's struggle against oppression, whether from landowners, governments or backward social traditions. He was to revisit these themes on an epic scale in El Ard (The Land, 1969).

Chahine's 1957 Bab el Hadid (Cairo Station, 1957) starred the director himself as a crippled newspaper seller at Cairo's main railway station. The film, which was banned in Egypt for 12 years, was written by Abdel Hay Adid, and was the first in Egyptian cinema to create original characters; previously, films had borrowed from novels by authors such as Naguib Mahfouz, or from Shakespeare, Dickens and Zola, or from Hollywood.

Although social realism was his trademark during a 55-year career, Chahine went through different phases, using a range of styles and genres, while maintaining his distinctive cinematic language throughout. The first phase was his social realism and included Baba Amin (Father Amine, 1950), Ibn el Nil (Son of the Nile, 1951), The Blazing Sun (also known as Struggle in the Valley), and two further films starring Omar Sharif as well as Cairo Station.

The second phase witnessed a love-hate relationship with the revolutionary regime of Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. Chahine used historic events to try to shed light on what was happening in the present, while keeping an eye on the censor's reaction. Djamila (Jamila, The Algerian, 1958), for instance, was an exaggerated account of the activities of the Algerian revolutionary Djamila Bouhired, in which the heroine is tortured by the French.

Fed up with the bureaucrats of the state-owned film board in Egypt, Chahine moved to Beirut in the 1960s and made several films including the musical Biya el-Khvatim (The Ring Seller, 1964). But on hearing that Nasser was asking why this "mad artist" was not working in Egypt, he returned home.

He then produced several films that mixed the dreams of the individual with bigger historic events, including Al-Nass wal Nil (Those People of the Nile, 1968), The Land and Al Asfour (The Sparrow, 1973) about the Nasser regime's defeat in the Six Day War in 1967.

Nasser's control of the film-making industry was a mixed blessing; lavish subsidies came at the price of heavy censorship and artistic interference so that directors and script-writers were made to conform to revolutionary themes that pushed Nasser's socialist and anti-western agenda.

Chahine's epic El-Nasser Salah el Dine (Saladin, 1963) was a reflection of this. A loose adaptation of one of the battles of the Islamic hero Saladin, it was made in CinemaScope with two battalions and 120 cavalrymen of Nasser's army put at Chahine's disposal. The director later said he was forced by those in control of the budget to add Nasser's name to the title. Nevertheless, he managed to inject some of his favourite subplots, including a love story between a Muslim and Christian and a Christian Arab fighting under Saladin's colours against the invaders. He used a similar theme in Wadan Bonaparte (Adieu, Bonaparte, 1985). Set in the period of the Napoleonic expedition into Egypt, the film explores the complex relationships between East and West when a homosexual French general falls in love with a local Egyptian.

Chahine was the son of a middle-class father of a Lebanese descent and a Greek mother. He was born in 1926 in Alexandria, where mixed marriages were then the norm. Middle-class families put great emphasis on education and art, and Chahine's struggling civil servant father took on extra work to send his son to Victoria College, and later to study acting at the Pasadena Playhouse in California between 1946 and 1948.

The key to understanding Chahine's complex character lies in his three autobiographical films: Iskendria. . . Leh? (Alexandria. . . Why?, 1978) about the city during the Second World War when a patriotic Egyptian homosexual kidnap a British soldier but falls in love with him; Hadota Misreya (An Egyptian Story, 1982) about a film-maker struggling with career compromises; and Iskendria Kaman Wakaman (Alexandria Again and Forever, 1990). His exploration of the rich cultural mix of Alexandria, reflecting the historic fact of Jewish contribution to all walks of Egyptian life, made him a target for the anger of Nassarites, and anti-peace leftists accused him of backing President Anwar Sadat's peace with Israel, which coincided with the making of the first part of the Alexandria trilogy.

As two Alexandrians, Chahine and I enjoyed talking about days gone by whenever we met over the years. He always reminded me that his "well of cultural strength" was his childhood in Alexandria, a city that always resisted the Arabisation, and later the Islamisation, of Egypt.

In 1994, a fundamentalist lawyer succeeded in getting a court to ban Chahine's film Al-Muhager (The Emigrant) because its plot was based on the story of Joseph in Egypt, found in the Bible and the Koran; most interpretations of Islam ban the depiction of prophets. Fundamentalists were angry particularly because his characters spoke colloquial modern Egyptian rather than the classical Arabic language, reviving a (long-suppressed) belief in Egypt that Jews were ethnically Egyptian.
Chahine responded in 1997 with the historical film Al-Massir (Destiny), about the 12th-century Andalusian Muslim philosopher Averroes, whose books were banned by extremists in the Islamic kingdom of Andalusia. Again, all his characters spoke modern Egyptian, and the film created scenes reflecting modern events, like the attempted assassination of the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz by an Islamist.

In 1997 Chahine received a special award from the Cannes film festival. In his later years he became more outspoken in criticising oppression in the Arab world as well as America's foreign policy which he believed contradicted her contribution to the world. He had been much influenced by Hollywood as a young film-maker. "All we see is Spider-Men and musclemen," he said in 2005. "America has become violent like the new movies."

Chahine's last film, Chaos, was finished by his disciple Khaled Youssef because of Chahine's ill-health. It was screened in London in March.