



#### The Silences of the Palace Samt El Koussour

Director: Moufida Tlatli

Production Companies: Cinétéléfilms, Magfilm, Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, Mat Films, Le Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Ministère Français de la Culture, Channel Four, Canal+ Horizons, Hubert Bals Fund, Agence de

Coopération Culturelle et Technique

Producers: Ahmed Attia, Richard Magnien

Production Manager: Tarak Harbi

Written by: Moufida Tlatli

Adaptation and dialogue: Nouri Bouzid

Director of Photography: Youssef Ben Youssef

Editor: Moufida Tlatli

Set Designer: Claude Bennys

Music: Anouar Brahem

Sound: Faouzi Thabet

Cast:

Amel Hedhili (*Khedija*)

Hend Sabri (young Alia)

Najia Ouerghi (*Khalti Hadda*)

Ghalia Lacroix (adult Alia)

Sami Bouajila (*Lofti*)

Kamel Fazaa (*Sidi Ali*)

Hichem Rostom (*Si Béchir*)

Hélène Catzaras (*Fella*)

Sonia Meddeb (*Jneina*)

Mechket Krifa (*Memia*)

Kamel Touati (*Houssine*)

Fatima Ben Saïdane (*Mrouibia*)

Zahira Ben Ammar (*Hadiba*)

Sabah Bouzouita (*Schéma*)

Tunisia-France 1994

130 mins

Digital

The screening on Thu 18 Dec will be introduced by Ifriqiya Cinema

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#### Too Much: Melodrama on Film

# The Silences of the Palace

In its new year issue *Time* magazine listed the ten best movies of 1994.

Predictably, *Pulp Fiction* was at number one. Less predictably, eight of the other nine were made outside the United States, though inevitably these nine included such well-known directors of art films as André Téchiné and Krzysztof Kieslowski.

However, the real surprise was there at the bottom of the list: a first film by a woman director from Tunisia, a Third World country struggling even to establish a film industry. This is Moufida Tlatli's *The Silences of the Palace*. *Time* called it 'a *Stella Dallas* story', and quite rightly placed it in the melodrama tradition. However, since the Egyptian film industry has dominated the Middle East and the Arab-speaking world since the 20s, the tradition of melodrama at issue derives from Cairo, not Hollywood.

Opening in the mid-60s, the story is told through the flashback memories of a young woman, Alia, a professional singer who returns after an absence of ten years to the palace of the Bey, where she had spent the first 16 years of her life (the beys being the royal rulers – under the French – of Tunisia). These memories include her early music-making, her observation of palace life and her gradual discovery of her own sexuality, but they revolve particularly around her mother, who worked all her life as a servant at the palace – and around her father.

The first silence surrounds his identity (the beys demanded sexual services from chosen women working in their kitchen). As a child, Alia's curiosity about her father had focused on the bey Sidi Ali, and she had spied on his relationship with her mother. As she re-explores the decaying palace, her memories rise up like ghosts, and she lives again the enigmas of her past, that were only ever acknowledged in silence between the women in the kitchen.

Her flashbacks are taking her back to 1956, when Tunisia won independence from the French. As the film unfolds, the silence that has surrounded the politics of colonialism and rising nationalism achieves a certain articulation, which even begins to penetrate those rooms in the palace where the women live, in almost complete isolation from the outside world. But the silences that surround their sexual exploitation by the beys never find a voice. Prior to this, Alia had been too young, but now she is beginning to mature, and to attract the attention of the younger beys, the princes.

In the final flashback, an adolescent Alia, now Sidi Ali's favourite singer, had interrupted her performance at a royal engagement party with the forbidden nationalist anthem. With this act, both musical and revolutionary, she seemed to have broken out of her mother's menial and exploited world – but her mother meanwhile lies dying, in another part of the palace, of a self-performed abortion.

However the message of the film's present – the mid-60s – is that for any woman, even in this post-revolutionary world, sexuality and the body are inescapable, and difficult. Alia faces a present-day crisis also: she is pregnant and her companion, the young revolutionary who once rescued her from the palace, has persuaded her to have an abortion, also. It is only through her memory, or rather through the process of deciphering her memories, that she and the film can bring to this crisis a new understanding: that independence and liberation are not solely matters of the public sphere and political struggle. The polarisations of gender, which had formerly co-existed with a world divided by class, have once more risen to the surface.

Alia's processes of decipherment are shared by the audience. In keeping with the aesthetics of the melodramatic genre, those things which cannot be said, the unspeakable, find expression through the *mise-en-scène*, the framing and the camera movements, while these same beautifully choreographed movements allow the viewer the time and space to read the images framed on the screen.

Laura Mulvey, *Sight and Sound*, March 1995

## Too Much: Melodrama on Film

### Imitation of Life

Tue 2 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Ellen E Jones, film & TV journalist and author); Sat 20 Dec 15:10

### Beyond Camp: The Queer Life and Afterlife of the Hollywood Melodrama

Wed 3 Dec 18:15

### Tea and Sympathy

Wed 3 Dec 20:25; Sun 7 Dec 18:15

### Lola Montés

Sat 6 Dec 14:30; Wed 17 Dec 20:40

### Way Down East

Sun 7 Dec 12:15; Tue 16 Dec 17:50 (+ intro by Pamela Hutchinson, film critic and historian)

### New Women Xin nuxing

Tue 9 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by Cynthia Gu, Milk Tea Films); Sat 20 Dec 20:45

### The Heiress

Wed 10 Dec 20:35; Sat 27 Dec 15:00

### La otra The Other One

Fri 12 Dec 18:15 (+ intro by Camilla Baier, co-founder and curator of Invisible Women);

Thu 18 Dec 20:40

### The Silences of the Palace Samt El Koussour

Sat 13 Dec 20:30; Thu 18 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Ifriqiya Cinema)

### The Cloud-Capped Star Meghe Dhaka Tara

Sun 14 Dec 18:15; Sun 28 Dec 11:50

### UK Premiere of Restoration: Beyond Oblivion

Más Allá Del Olvido

Fri 19 Dec 18:15; Mon 29 Dec 20:50

### The Seventh Veil

Fri 19 Dec 20:35; Sun 28 Dec 15:00

### Floating Clouds Ukigumo

Sun 21 Dec 18:15; Tue 30 Dec 20:30

### Portrait of Jennie

Mon 22 Dec 18:20; Sat 27 Dec 18:15

### Pandora and the Flying Dutchman

Mon 22 Dec 20:30; Mon 29 Dec 18:10

### Rouge Yin Ji Kwan

Sat 27 Dec 20:50; Tue 30 Dec 18:10

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## Moufida Tlatli in conversation with Laura Mulvey

When the Arab countries won their independence, their first instinct was to build a cinema that would be the exact opposite of the existing Egyptian industry, which they saw as escapist and stultifying. So the initial intention was to build a *cinéma d'auteurs* that would be intellectual and would deal with important themes, such as the condition of women. But the people were bored by these movies, because they were used to Hollywood, or to Indian or Egyptian melodramas.

Today we have a better balance. I think our cinema went through a period of self-criticism, as a result of which something positive emerged. We are coming back to the melodrama, but in a much more nuanced manner. Nowadays our cinema is trying to reach a popular audience, and is branching out into love stories and comedies. The Arab cinema-going public loves to laugh. And to cry. Of course, this new wave of popular film owes a lot to the Egyptian cinema of the 50s, which was a cinema of excess: of both excessive melodramas and excessive comedies.

*What part does the theme of women and their liberation play in this cinema?*

Through my work as an editor, I have close contact with the contemporary preoccupations of Arabic cinema. I've worked with several male and two female directors and I've noticed that they share a common interest in the condition of Arabic women. I often wondered why it was that male directors should be so preoccupied with the question of women, until I realised that, for them, woman was the symbol of freedom of expression, and of all kinds of liberation. It was like a litmus test for Arab society: if one could discuss the liberation of women then one could discuss other freedoms. Most likely there would not that much freedom of expression, and most likely they could not speak freely about political problems, but the question of women could still be discussed. I think that each country in the Mahgreb [i.e. North Africa] tends to take up particular themes and the theme of women's liberation is the one that has been special to Tunisia.

*How important is the relationship between Arab cinema and wider aspects of Arabic culture?*

I think that poetry and an oral tradition are particularly significant for Arabic culture. Poetry was something that existed in the spoken word. At the same time it was subject to censorship, so poets frequently had to make use of symbols and metaphors to express something that could not otherwise have been spoken. Poetry allows this: it gives a fantastic freedom. You only have to have a small amount of imagination to extract another reading from the words. Perhaps the cinema is the same. It too has to make use of metaphors and symbols, in keeping with this lack of directness that so characterises Islamic society.

At the same time, Arabic culture has not been a culture of the image. We have preferred to express ourselves through words, through poetry. One could almost say that there was a sort of blockage in relation to image, which was something we had to learn, something we had to adapt little by little to our own culture. But the effort of mastering something new also leads to something good: a new mode of expression, but one that is right for and specific to this culture.

*But though Arabic culture may not be a culture of the image, poetry makes use of images through its metaphors and symbols, as you implied. One finds images inside poetic language.*

That's right. Poetry is made up of a superimposition of images on words. Perhaps this culture of the indirect has advantages over a culture valuing simple and direct expression. Here everything is a little bit devious, a bit unformulated – the unsaid, and so on. This is why the camera is so amazing. It's in complete harmony with this rather repressed language. A camera is somewhat sly and hidden. It's there and it can capture small details about something one is trying to say, so in a sense it can be an instrument for poetry.

*Sight and Sound, March 1995*