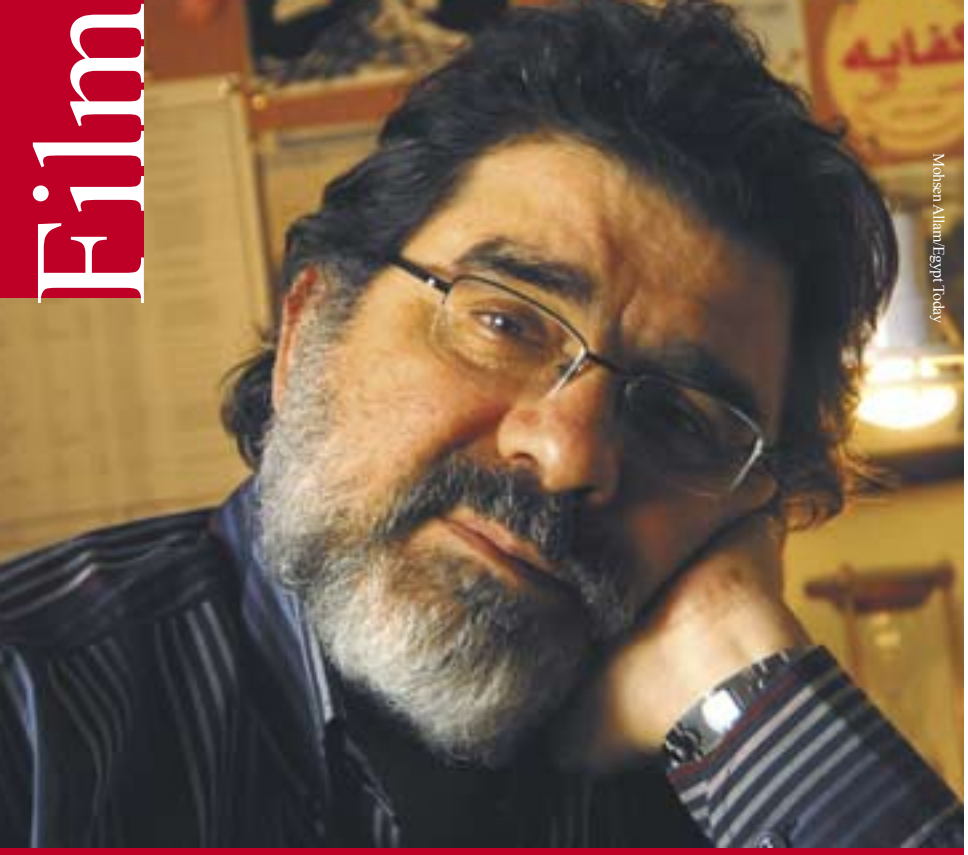

Mohsen Allam/Egypt Today

Fightin' Words

AUC professor, playwright and director Mahmoud El-Lozy talks of his latest acting role in a film that takes a critical look at the US involvement in Iraq

By Marwa Helal

A terrorist, a baddie, an oil-rich sultan or a dark and handsome womanizing prince — when it comes to the international film arena, chances are any Egyptian or Arab actor looking for a break will at some point in his or her career succumb to playing one of these flat and much-maligned stock characters.

Not so for Mahmoud El-Lozy, who has just wrapped up shooting The Situation in Morocco. Documenting the American occupation of Iraq, the film is directed by Philip Haas and is a far cry from what El-Lozy dubs a "formula" or star-studded film.

"It's a modest film, with a budget of less than $2 million and a one-month shoot," says the popular associate professor of drama at the American University in Cairo. He adds that the film's offbeat plot line doesn't promote a certain way of life and doesn't include big action or visual expenses.

"It stands out as the only film where all the voices you hear are voices you wouldn't hear in other films," says El-Lozy, who has made appearances in Mohamed Khan's Fares Al-Madina (Knight of the City, 1992), Jonathan Winfrey's Legend of the Lost Tomb (1997), Youssef Shahine's Alexandria… New York (2004) and Karin Westerlund's God, Smell, and Her.

"The film is based on a situation where it looks as if the Americans are the victims, the hostages — and then it turns out to be something completely different," he explains. "The Americans come in to save the supposed hostage, but they end up burning the whole place and killing people, including a child, in the name of this thing called 'democracy' that they keep on trying to spread, like cream cheese or something."

The beauty of The Situation is that it breaks ground when it comes to stereotyping. "The clichés of Americans as victims or knowing better, or Americans as saviors — none of that is there," El-Lozy emphasizes. "Basically, this film leaves you with a picture of the chaos the Americans have created. They have destroyed one of the most ancient nations and civilizations in the world. They have violated it and raped it. After you've seen it the only thing you can say is that the Americans should get the hell out and also pay reparations to the Iraqis for the rest of their lives."

El-Lozy plays Duraid, an Iraqi diplomat. "There's a tragic dimension to him because he's in a position where he has to betray his countrymen in order to get — he wants to get his family out, but he doesn't want to be in exile, so he wants to make a deal, selling information to this CIA man who thinks he can 'win hearts and minds and build a new Iraq.'"

Rolling his eyes at the clichés, El-Lozy continues: "He wants to go to Australia, which I thought was hilarious, because he knows what's happening in his country and wants to go to Australia of all places," El-Lozy says with a laugh. "How far away from Iraq can you go?"

Unlike El-Lozy's character, the screenwriter Wendell Steavenson plays a reporter who choses not to leave Iraq when the aggression began five years ago. "She is independent, not embedded. She is not there seeing it through the eyes of the military or the American propaganda machine. She has had encounters that have allowed her to see the reality of people in war, not the rubbish that you see on CNN and FOX," says El-Lozy.

While he sees the value in the writer's point of view, he feels that this strength also happens to be the film's weakness. "This is why the movie is going to fail, that's why it has a limited release," El-Lozy says.

So far the reaction to the film has been mixed. "A lot of people feel it's an important film, an important document, because unlike any movies made about Vietnam from the American perspective — the Iraqis are there, you never saw Vietnamese people in films about Vietnam," he says.

"It's true [the Iraqi characters are] played by Egyptian actors, Moroccans, etc," concedes El-Lozy, but he feels there is a lesson to be learned from the casting of this film.

"They are Arab-speaking actors […] Phillip [Haas] was very particular about that — no Americans pretending to be Arabs."

As such, the multicultural group of performers presented the challenge of finding a common language for all of them to work in. "The language we are speaking in the movie is kind of a journalistic-classical Arabic, because the problem is if they used Iraqi Arabic there would be problems with dialect and no one would be able to understand them."

"My character doesn't speak in broken English — he speaks in perfect English," El-Lozy says. "[Haas] didn't ask anyone to make an effort to speak in broken English, with the exception of the main character Zaid," (played by Mido Hamada), who is supposed to have lived in Iraq his entire life.

A translator of major Egyptian playwrights such as Tawfiq Al-Hakim and Numan Ashur, El-Lozy holds a Ph.D. in dramatic art from the University of California, Santa Barbara and has written on contemporary Egyptian theater and playwrights, with a special focus on the issue of censorship. Despite being censored himself here (the censor didn't approve production of his first full-length play Bay the Moon), El-Lozy has never thought once about leaving Egypt for good.

"I wanted my eldest daughter to be born in Egypt and this way I can bitch about Egypt all I want, because it's mine," he says. He sums up his reason for being here in a few words: "this is where my battles are."

Pointing to his 2002 production of And Then Went Down To The Ship at the Directors' Lab of the Lincoln Center in New York City, El-Lozy explains, "At the Lincoln Center, I could talk to them about American foreign policy and they could not say a thing because I am Egyptian," he says.

"If I had an American passport they would ask, 'Well, why do you have an American passport? Why are you complaining about this?'"

He pauses for a hearty laugh as he considers their dilemma. "The other thing is, I can go over there and tell them what I think of them, and they will not get too upset because they know I'm going to leave," he says. "It gives me the right to give the Americans hell." et