

Egyptian Films at the Festival de Cannes

From the first season of the Festival in 1946 until 2004, 22 Egyptian feature films have been screened. Only one feature film was screened out of competition during the 2006 season ("These Girls" by Tahani Rached).

Among these 22 films, 14 took part in competitions from 1946 to 1997, three were presented in the selection *Un Certain Regard* from 1987 to 2004, and five in the Directors' Fortnight from 1973 to 1990.

The 14 feature films that were screened are a good illustration of the Egyptian school of cinematography (1933-1963) in its illustrious beginnings after the Second World War, and then in its heyday in the 1950s with the screening of two films at the Festival seasons of 1946, 1952 and 1954. However, the break in relations between Egypt and France after the Suez crisis resulted in the absence of Egyptian films in Festival screenings between 1957 and 1963.

In 1946, the Festival screened "Donya" by the pioneer Mohammed Karim (1896-1972). Another Egyptian director, Youssef Wahbi (1898-1982), was appointed a member of the jury. In 1949, "Al bayt al kabir" by Ahmed Kamel Morsi (1909-1987) represented the generation of pioneers, whereas "The Adventures of Antar and Abla" by Salah Abu Seif (1915-1996) represented the second generation. In 1952, the Festival screened "A Night of Love", directed by Ahmed Badrakhan (1909-1969), from the generation of pioneers and "Son of the Nile" by Youssef Chahine (1926-2008), from the third generation.

Egyptian cinema reached its heyday during the 1950s, in particular in the years 1954, 1955 and 1956, when the four masterpieces of this school were screened: "The Monster" by Salah Abu Seif, "Struggle in the Valley", directed by Youssef Chahine in 1954, "Life or Death" by Kamal Sheikh (1918-2004) in 1955, and "The Leech" by Abu Seif in 1956.

These films represent a new trend in the Egyptian school of cinema, comparable to that of neorealism in Italy. In "The Monster", Abu Seif based his film on the true story of the emergence and arrest of a gang of criminals in Upper Egypt and in "Struggle in the Valley", the first innocent character in Egyptian film is executed. "Life or Death" is the first film shot in the streets of Cairo, whereas "The Leech" reveals some unspoken taboos regarding sexual relations, although the film ends on a conservative note.

When Egyptian films once again took part in the Festival in 1964, the Egyptian school had already come to an end, and a new page had been turned with the screening of a masterpiece: "Last Night" by Kamal El Sheikh produced in 1964, a classic work par excellence, and a sign that neorealism had attained its high point in Egyptian cinema.

Once again, from 1971 to 1984, Egyptian films experienced a rupture with the Festival de Cannes, with the exception of "The Sparrow" by Youssef Chahine, presented in the Directors' Fortnight in 1973, at the time when it was banned in Egypt (where it was screened finally in 1975). This time the rupture was not the result of broken diplomatic ties between Egypt and France, but because Egyptian cinema was no longer following the enormous progress that this art form was then undergoing all over the world. Its backwardness was due to nationalisation and the disappearance of this brilliant school in 1963. Although the 1970s saw significant attempts to return to the freedom that characterised the old school and to catch up on the progress made in the film industry, the return to the Festival did not take place until 1985 with "Adieu Bonaparte", directed by Youssef Chahine.

The two decades between 1985 and 2004 are considered Youssef Chahine's finest period, crowned by the Commemorative Golden Jubilee of the Festival in 1997. During this period, among the 22 films presented at the Festival de Cannes, 10 Egyptian films were screened. Seven of them were directed by Youssef Chahine, including "Adieu Bonaparte", "Destiny" in 1997, and two films in Un Certain Regard: "The Other" in 1999 and "Alexandria...New York" in 2004. Two other films were presented in the Directors' Fortnight: "The Sixth Day" in 1987 and "Alexandria, Again and Forever" in 1990. All these films were coproduced by Egypt and France, with the exception of "The Sparrow", coproduced by Algeria. Through these films, Youssef Chahine won his freedom via coproduction. He developed his own artistic universe and addressed the great issues of his era, be it in Egypt or in the world at large. He became the greatest symbol of Egyptian cinema and one of the greatest filmmakers worldwide.

The three other films presented during these two decades were "The Return of a Citizen" by Mohammed Khan in Un Certain Regard in 1987, "Love on the Pyramids Plateau" by Atef El-Tayeb (1947-1995) in 1985, and "Summer Flights" by Yousry Nasrallah in 1988, at the Directors' Fortnight. These three films are the masterworks of neorealism in Egyptian cinema of the 1980s, which resisted the extremist Islamic current that has in the past attempted to "veil" Egyptian cinema and continues to do so to this day.