



european cultural foundation



Hala Galal, Director

Hala Galal has directed several documentary films which have marked the Egyptian audiovisual landscape, amongst which "Chouk" (Thorns) and "Dardasha Nissaiya" (Between Women). In 2002, she managed to create, with a group of professionals, an Egyptian film production company, SEMAT, whose objectives are to produce independent films, train young people to the cinema business and develop a new parallel current to dominating mainstream Egyptian cinema.

How did creating SEMAT become a necessity for you?

When I finished my degree in journalism and I started working at a young age in public television, I soon realised that I had to learn about film-making to be able to do the documentaries I dreamed of, and I really didn't want them looking like anything being aired on Egyptian television. I left television for the Cinema Institute in Cairo and, once my diploma in hand, I received grants to go abroad, in Europe mainly, and started filming and directing my first documentaries. At that time, we were actually a group of friends and film professionals working together because we had not managed to establish normal relations with people working in the commercial film business in Egypt. As a director, you had to accept that everything be imposed on you from the outside, you did not choose the scenario or the actors, you did not make decisions, you were, in a sense, a woodworker making a custom-built table but in the end your role was limited to that of a technical advisor.

The idea behind SEMAT wasn't just a way to get into the Egyptian film market, but to create the conditions for the appearance of a different cinema?

Yes, we wanted to have total freedom of expression in our film-making, whether they were documentaries or fiction, and for that, we soon understood that we needed our own production company, our own camera, our own editing machine. At first, we supported ourselves financially but then we received a grant from a Swedish NGO which was crucial because it was destined for an administrative project, rather than an artistic one. It allowed us to rent a locale, buy an editing machine, cameras, and there we were, finally operational! We started producing like crazy, we produced ten films in less than a year – this was October 2001 and the launch of SEMAT. We were six founders, we are now 15, directors, editors, scriptwriters, etc.

What role have you personally played in the creation and launching of SEMAT ?

I was artistic producer, with two other colleagues and we had decided to start by producing for others and not for the works of SEMAT members. For three years, that's what we did. Changing the way film production was done in Egypt became our obsession and we chose to focus on young directors, to create a movement, to get a network of people who had the

same interests to do away with loneliness. We also decided not to order films, even if we liked the scenarios. If a film director did not come to us and proposed his own project, we would not produce it. It was our way to break the machine a little, which wants that the person with the money – producer, distributor – decides what is filmed. Out of the ten first films produced by *SEMAT*, five went to European festivals and won prize for fiction and documentary.

Before working in partnership with the European Union, we worked a lot with the Lebanese, and the Jordanians. It was important for us to open the windows because even though Egypt is big, it is also blind to anything that is not made here. We don't look at what is being made in Tunisia, in Jordan or in Syria. The self-centeredness of the mentality "Oum eddounnia" (*"Mother of the World"*, a saying used by Egyptians to characterise Egypt, Editor's note) prevents from opening up to new ideas, we only reproduce what has already been done.

What kind of project *SEMAT* is implementing with the European Union today?

It's called the Caravane of Euro-Arab cinema and the idea is to organise, with five European and Arab partners, several cinematic events a year, like for instance the Biennale of the IMA (*Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, Editor's note*), the Rotterdam Festival, summer outdoors cinemas in Alexandria, Beirut, Marseilles, and a documentary and short film festival. The project also offers training possibilities.

What advantage did the EU funding give you?

Until now we had done a lot of things – training, production, we put films on DVDs, distributed them, particularly to Egyptian television, we have a publication, *Nazra*, for Egyptian filmmakers, we have a place for screenings. What we didn't have was the opportunity to create events. For example, we dreamed of doing an independent or alternative film festival and this EU project gave us that possibility. It was good for us to bring European films here and to send our films in Europe, to new screens and audiences. This project was a dream come true! We could satisfy all our fantasies. It's a three-year project. Our partners and us finance 28 percent and the EU covers the remaining 72 percent. It gave us a lot of freedom. They consider us as experts, since we were already working in the field. If we had had money from the Egyptian government for example, the decision-making process would still belong to them. The same applies to funding which comes from commercial film dealers. They don't support art and culture, they only want people who execute their wishes.

With the EU, was there ever any interference with the choices you make?

No, never. The only rules that apply concern administrative and financial matters, not about programming, content, or other...

What do you think were the positive consequences of such a project on your European partners?

I can't really answer in their place. What I know, for example, is that when European experts come to see what we do here, they sometimes ask me: "why do you do this and not that, why don't you rather do it this way?" and often, when they come back several months later they say: "you were right, it doesn't work this way at home". I think, but it is not my place to say, that they learn more about us with these types of experiences and projects. In any case, this type of project is based on exchange.

On a professional but also personal level, what have you gained from this experience?

I have received a lot. I think that each time you work or establish relationships with people from another culture, you understand many things better, the dark places in your mind brighten.

Were there any mishaps, things that went wrong?

It was the first time we were doing something like this, so we had a few administrative problems, we rushed into the launching of the first event because we had very little time to prepare it, etc. But for the second year, our rhythm was more disciplined, more organised, we knew where we were going.

On the other hand, the problem we have each time we get funding from the EU, the Swedish or the French, is that we are accused of not being honest with the money. Every time I'm interviewed by a journalist, he doesn't ask me about the content of the programming, he asks me how much money I received and what I did with it!

Are those the questions of Egyptian journalists or of European experts as well?

No, European experts come for audits, and that's normal. I'm talking about Egyptian journalists, who are very fond of conspiracy theories and think that everybody wants to steal money. They always ask: "Why did they give you this money? Why do they care about Egyptian cinema? What are their true ambitions?" Those people, if we'd listen to them, we wouldn't get anything done...

And you personally, do you think the EU gives this money without having a political agenda, even implicitly?

I'm not interested in that, because I do what I want. I don't waste my time analysing this or that agenda, as long as my choices aren't imposed on me... It is precisely people in Egyptian cinema who spend their time saying: "I want this and I don't want this."

What was the biggest challenge for you?

The organisation and coordination between the five partners. We come from different places and I am the head of project even though *SEMAT* is not of the oldest, most-established and most recognised labels on the European market, so this is difficult. Since I started working in this business, I know this kind of problems, I'm used to them. I don't lose my head and start screaming to people's faces. I'm familiar with all this, but it's still difficult.

What kind of impact this cooperation had on your work environment?

The young people who work with us at *SEMAT* work a lot faster now (laughs) and they joke about it. You know it, Egyptian rhythm has nothing to do with European rhythm, so according to European standards, we can say that their work is more efficient and done more rapidly. But most of all, it is interesting to see how their work have been influenced by films from other Arab countries - films which they had never heard of before. Another significant aspect are the professional networking meetings. For example, a young Egyptian director sold his film in England after meeting an English distributor recently in Alexandria, who was thrilled about the film. Or during a workshop in Ismailiya, two of the produced films are now sought-after in the United States, and one of them was made in just one week! For us, this is very important. It allows our authors, not only to learn the business itself, but also to communicate with a world that was until now closed to them – How to make contact with this world, how to speak to this world, because there is a code that people don't necessarily know.

Do you think that this experience had a sustainable structural effect on their work as artists and on yours?

Yes of course, I've tested it myself with my first film that I did in Switzerland. Being confronted to a different world totally changes your mentality, it changes your outlook on cinema, but it doesn't change who you are, your culture, your education, your character. What changes is the way you see things and possibilities. There are no more sealed black rooms in which you can't get in...

So how does one avoid the trap of sterile imitation? EU-financed films often fuel the clichés held by Europeans themselves...

If a European producer ever asks me to change something in my film because it does not correspond to my culture and I accept this, it would lead to the same conclusions that made me leave the world of commercial cinema in Egypt. Why would I then go through the trouble of finding foreign partners? Why did I refuse to work with the Egyptian producer who wanted to force strange things into my film because he wanted to distribute it in the Gulf? What you are talking about are films made with a tourist viewpoint. But I don't think that this is due to European funding. These artists could be doing the same films with Malaysian or Djiboutian funding. They're not filming, they're clowning, I'd say. They don't want to tell their stories to the world. Money isn't the problem, money comes from everywhere, there's money in the Gulf, there's money in the Egyptian commercial network, etc.

If there were things to improve in this kind of partnership, what would they be?

I think we should be more attentive to both sides and know each other better. There are good intentions but still a lot of unawareness of the other.

Interview by Daikha Dridi
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