

Yousry Nasrallah Interview By Waleed Marzouk

**Cairo, Egypt
February 2007**

Yousry Nasrallah is an Egyptian film director. Born 1952 in Cairo, after studying economics and political science he went to live in Lebanon where he became a journalist. He began his career in film in 1980 as assistant to Volker Schlöndorff on *Die Fälschung* and to Youssef Chahine on *Al-Dhakira* and *Adieu Bonaparte*, which he also co-wrote. In 1987, he directed his first film *Sarikat Sayfiyah* (*Summer Thefts*), produced by Youssef Chahine and considered as one of the films that most contributed to the revival of Egyptian cinema. In 1994, he directed *Mercedes* and, in 1995, the documentary *Sobyan wi Banat* (*On Boys, Girls and the Veil*). In 1999, *El Medina* (*The City*) was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Locarno Film Festival. In 2004, his film *Bab El Shams* (*The Gate of Sun*), taken from Elias Khoury's novel, was presented in the Cannes Official Selection (out of competition). Nasrallah's works have dealt with themes of leftism, Islamic fundamentalism, and expatriation. He served as a jury member, in 2005, at the Cannes Film Festival for the short film competition, and is currently in preproduction on his sixth feature film, *Geneinat El Asmak* (*The Aquarium*).

At what stage in your film career did you start using European funding?

From the beginning. The first film I made was assisted with a grant from the Francophone institute. It was an Egyptian production. I had applied for the grant and won, and I made *Sariqat Sayfia* (*Summer Thefts*) with that money. Then my second film, *Mercedes*, was a co-production between Arte and the Cinema for the South Fund. And all my subsequent productions have also been co-productions that have always included Arte. In *Medina* (*The City*) the Cinema for the South Fund didn't give me any money because more than 25% of the film took place in France, and it's one of their rules that the film has to be in the native language, in this case Egyptian.

What is the Cinema for the South Fund?

It's a co-operative between the National Film Institute and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France and the Ministry of Interior here. One of the Fund's clauses was that its money had to be spent in France, be it in workshops or on French technicians. This was because they were granting the money to increase productivity in the French cinema industry. If the industry is

productive (they reasoned), and engaged in productions that are not French or American, it can generate the strength to protect itself from the 'dumping' of the American cinema industry. This was up until quite recently and Arte, other State channels, and Canal Plus, were receptive to non-French productions. In the past three to four years this trend has started to change.

In what way?

Canal Plus has started to specialize exclusively in American and French cinema. So if David Lynch or any of the American auteur filmmakers are making a film they'll show a great deal of enthusiasm, compared to Asian, Latin American, or Arab cinema. The second point is that since France has moved politically to the right, market forces have come to dictate the behavior of the TV channels. And the TV channels are starting to say we won't produce non-French speaking films for primetime because that's expensive. Or, as is the case with the film I'm making now, *Geneit Al Asmak (The Aquarium)*, they purchase the film in advance, and that reduces their contribution to 50%.

Does accepting foreign funding translate into constraints upon the production?

For me it's never happened. Nobody ever asked me to do something like that, or tried to put me in a situation where I had to.

So your films have always been based on personal conceptions that were never interfered with.

Yes, and I think that's clear from watching my films. I don't think anyone watching my films would suspect they were made to please somebody. Because you definitely find people who take the lead from the media in sniffing out the 'hot topics', e.g. women's stories, political Islam, etc. You find these trends emerging. There's a certain logic to it, even in response to local issues. Many here have been working on films about extremist groups for the past ten years. But I've never been a participant in the 'hot topic' construct, not locally or abroad.

Do you still seek new sources of funding for your films or do you rely on established resources?

There's a primary obstacle for any film. At least a year passes after the writing process and before the film goes into production, and if you're still enthusiastic that means the film has a certain vitality that you're attached to. The main point then becomes how do I make this without external pressure or constraints, like why don't you get this or that actor, why don't you change this topic, or why don't you stick in a song and dance number. This doesn't happen to me. My concern in that time period is finding the means to be independent while making my film.

What about your current film, how were you able to finance it?

The participants are ART (Arab Radio & Television), and their investment is a first for me, and Arte, who brought the rights in advance. And there's a competition that I applied to in Berlin called the World Cinema Fund. They don't give much but it helps, and it comes with no constraints attached at all. Maybe I'm repellant to someone approaching me in such a manner but no-one has ever dared tell me why don't you cast that actor, or why don't you do that. It's never happened, ever.

Do you ever feel inclined to demand more subsidies from the Ministry of Culture here?

There's apparently 20 million Egyptian pounds available. I've applied for certain grants but I doubt I'll get them. But I'm skeptical about this business in general. I mean, right now, even without asking the State for money we (as filmmakers) are met with a persistent backlash from members of parliament. Invariably someone opinionated will say this film offends Islam, or sullies our moral code. Or they'll sit around self-righteously debating whether the beard we saw in *El Rahina (The Hostage)* was a Muslim beard or a Jewish one. What business is it of theirs? And this is without us receiving any assistance from them. In fact, we pay them taxes. That's our only relationship with the State, and with the citizenry in fact. So if this is how they're behaving now who knows how abusive they'll be if they give us grants. So, to be honest, I'm not sure I'm comfortable with the idea.

In your experience, has working with European funding increased mutual understanding between Arabs and the West?

Yes, I think so. But mutual understanding and such concepts are, in my opinion, usually a big fantasy. Mutual understanding is predicated on the desire to understand. I can spend two days showing you or watching films about how kind and generous Americans are, and I can have a lot of American friends that are dear to me, but that won't blind me to the fact that when this American administration invades Iraq they're not there to pat them on the back but to screw them over. I have many Jewish friends, and many Israeli friends too, but that won't blind me, in any shape or form, to the fact that Israel is an occupier of Arab land. So if what is intended by mutual understanding is in fact mutual blindness, I hope cinema doesn't contribute to that at all.

Mutual understanding begins with understanding one's own issues, at the very least. My main concern is not mutual understanding but insight. We have an amazing capacity to blind ourselves to our problems, instead of confronting ourselves. That's why I make movies, not so that the Europeans will understand me, but so that I can understand myself better.

Have you had experiences where this mutual desire for understanding was present?

There was one film, *Sobyen wi Banat (Boys & Girls)*, that I made at a time when there was a lot of talk about the *hijab* (veil) being a symbol of extremism both locally and in Europe. It was the mid-nineties and girls were being

expelled from schools for wearing it. So here at least was a film that challenged that thinking; because the idea that a girl wearing a veil is more likely to support extremism is simply false.

Would your career have been altered in any significant way had you received no European assistance over the years?

It's hard to conceive of another trajectory. I'm sure I would have taken the same direction one way or another. What you refer to as European assistance I simply call opening up a new market, aside from the local one. So you can maneuver around the demands of the local market.

Traditionally, the local market was the video market in Saudi Arabia before there were satellite stations, and it's the satellite stations today. None of my movies have been censored in Egypt, not a single frame. When my first film, *Sarikat Saifia*, was sold to Saudi Arabia the Nasser speech was dubbed with music because at the time Nasser's voice was banned there. Forty minutes were also chopped from *Mercedes* when it was sold to Saudi Arabia because it portrayed churches, kissing, and alcohol consumption. There's no escaping the demands of the Egyptian market because in the end you're shooting in Egypt and answerable to its censorship board. But the idea is to free oneself of markets that are more restrictive and less liberal than the Egyptian one. So you're not forced to be dependent on funding from Saudi Arabia or the traditional Arab market.

I think any director with a serious desire to make independent productions will seek new markets out and find them. And it always comes with a price. The price for me was agreeing to make my films inexpensively, and accepting a sub-standard salary for that market. I constantly try to strike the right balance to ensure my independence.