

Robert Avila  October 14, 2010

Masquerades could easily be the work of a much older filmmaker, one returning to form after a long career, with blithe but clear-eyed sentiment and sly self-referential salutes to cinema. It’s a smart, expertly made crowd-pleaser, set in an out of the way village amid the gorgeous, sun-baked and sparsely populated expanse of eastern Algeria. An adroit satire of prestige-worship and gender politics that turns on mistaken identities and meanings, Masquerades—which opens the 14th annual Arab Film Festival this Thursday night at the Castro Theater—stands squarely on a classic foundation that includes Chaplin and French vaudeville. Its gently involving storyline, meanwhile, adds just enough in way of romance, dramatic tension, winsome characterization and political subtext to bear both close attention and serious reflection.

When one considers that the widely praised and award-winning Masquerades is Algerian filmmaker Lyès Salem’s first feature, it becomes all the more exceptional: charged with youthful vitality yet never callow, it’s masterfully sure of what it sets out to accomplish—and wise enough never to take itself too seriously.

That stands in contradistinction to its main character, Mounir Mekbel (played superbly by director/co-writer Salem, a highly trained comic actor to boot). Mounir takes himself very seriously. The proud young head of his modest household, Mounir—perennially sporting wife-beater T, tracksuit and louche, Borat-like moustache—is forever trying to increase his family’s circumstances and gain the respect of his fellow villagers. A quarrelsome bunch, his neighbors seem content rather to ignore, chide or belittle him at every turn.

This is admittedly easy and tempting to do, as well intentioned and ultimately kind-hearted as Mounir clearly is. (In an early scene we watch him gently reprimand his young son for tormenting a beetle with his friends. “How would you like that?” he asks. “That beetle has a mother too.”) Hanging around the street with his peers, he boasts of his new job as an estate gardener for the Colonel (the town’s rich man and an entirely off-screen presence), describing his position as “horticultural engineer.” When they finally translate this a few days later, Mounir comes in for a well-deserved ribbing.

Less legitimately, his fellows tease him about his sister, Rym (the vibrant Sarah Reguieg), a beautiful but narcoleptic young woman whom Mounir is determined to see married well. Rym, however, is in love with her long-standing secret suitor—and Mounir’s best friend—Khlifa (a handsomely scruffy Mohamed Bouchaïb). Unfortunately, Khlifa, who works ambitiously on opening the village’s first video rental store, continually begs off approaching the prickly Mounir on the subject.

The plot, which moves forward on the disconnect between appearance and reality, gets going in earnest after a gossip-stung Mounir drunkenly announces to the village’s sleeping inhabitants that he has promised Rym to a wealthy and civilized gentleman from beyond their dusty backwater. The news enrages his normally tolerant and loving wife (Rym Takoucht) as well as Rym, until they discover there’s no truth behind it. But the subterfuge hatched to deal with Mounir’s drunken claim leads to an even greater lie, as Rym, disgusted with sweetheart Khlifa’s hesitancy, spontaneously affirms the arranged match, boasting to her curious neighbors of her new mega-rich blond-haired and
blue-eyed fiancé, William Vancooten. The ruse forces Khlifa to act, and he immediately begins a fight for Rym’s hand that severs his connection with an outraged Mounir.

The other and unintended consequence of phantom-fiancé Vancooten is Mounir’s sudden popularity as a very well connected man about town. The lie inspires others to boast of their firsthand knowledge of the whole Vancooten affair, encouraging local big shot Redouane Lamouchi (Mourad Khen) to include Mounir in his schemes and scams in hopes of ensuring a connection with the seemingly all-powerful Vancooten.

The situation is, of course, Mounir’s dream come true. But based on a lie, it also becomes a nerve-racking dilemma, as Mounir finds himself deeply torn over the necessity of ending the charade. Meanwhile, to his wife’s amazed disgust, he has been transformed into a community leader of both comical proportions and uncharacteristically brutal behavior (registered neatly in another reprimand leveled at his young son, this time for defending a frog whom the other children had forced to smoke. “It’s just a toad, what do you care?” he chides him, adding that “democracy” and survival mean rallying around the strongest).

At the heart of this comic send-up of small-town bigotry are very real issues having to do with social power and oppression as well as the inculcated prejudices that allow them to flourish. In this context, religion occupies neutral or ambiguous territory. When Rym and Khlifa finally decide to run away, for instance, it is a kind and wise Mufti whom they turn to for help. At the same time, Masquerades suggests Algeria lies at a crossroads between cosmopolitan values and authoritarian intolerance—especially on the subject of women’s rights. (Indeed, Salem, who is expected to be on hand for AFF’s opening night screening, has told a French interviewer that the film shoot itself took place amid a series of terrorist attacks by rightwing fundamentalists vying for control of Algeria’s political landscape.)

If politics is ever present here, the film never loses sight of its humbler purposes. These might be summed up by the pre-title sequence, which in essence sets up the movie in miniature: A long tracking shot takes in the frantic activity among an irritable group of villagers preparing for the arrival of a wedding cortege. The camera at last lands on three contrastingly stationary, mute figures: a trio of old men seated ringside, at the center of town, who raise handkerchiefs to their mouths in practiced unison as the speeding automobiles approach the town center, their tires kicking up a whirlwind of desert dirt. As the cars race off again, the men appear caked in thick yellow dust. Everything in this isolated desert town settles down again, the same but different. The men never crack a smile; they’ve seen it many times before. Nevertheless, they’re there again each time. No doubt the repetition as well as the little differences make it all worth it. Another satisfying show.