

Director Lyès Salem inspired by U.S. comedies

Jonathan Curiel, Special to The Chronicle

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A dusty village in southeast Algeria is the setting for the comic film "Masquerades," which centers on the relationships between a man named Mounir, his narcoleptic sister and the sister's secret love - who happens to be Mounir's best friend. The movie, which opens the Arab Film Festival on Thursday at the Castro Theatre, was Algeria's submission for a 2009 best foreign film Oscar.

Lyès Salem, 37, who plays Mounir, also directed "Masquerades" and co-wrote the script. Born and raised in Algeria, Salem moved as a teenager to France, where he attended the prestigious French National Academy of Dramatic Arts in Paris. Salem's 2005 short film, "Cousines," won a French César Award. Among his many acting roles: a guard in Steven Spielberg's 2005 movie "Munich." "Masquerades" is Salem's first full-length feature as director.

Q: In the film, Mounir is his sister's guardian and tries to arrange her marriage - by claiming she has a rich and successful suitor. Her secret love, Khliffa, is poor but creative. The sister, Rym, is constantly falling asleep, but she and her sister-in-law often have the upper hand with the film's men. You've said the characters represent the friction between Algeria's past traditions and more modern values.

A: Mounir thinks he has to guarantee the past. It's an obligation for him, not something he chooses. The sister's love (Khliffa) represents the future. He's the only one who builds something in the film. He is the only character we see cry. For me, Rym's handicap was poetic. It's about the notion of dreams. She represents our country: Beautiful, smart when she's awake, but she can't capitalize because she's always falling down asleep and has to start everything again.

Q: Audiences have reacted well to the humor, but some Arab film festivals have been unreceptive to "Masquerades." Why?

A: In some festivals we sent the film to, there was distrust because "Masquerades" is a comedy. It's like (Arab filmmakers) have an obligation to stick to certain subjects (like politics). We can't make scary movies or comedies. It's like we can't make films like everyone else, like we can't take some distance

from reality and laugh about it. ... For me, it was important for Algerian audiences to laugh about themselves. When we laugh about ourselves, we can think, too.

Q: Why did you want to be an actor?

A: When I was 7, I saw a French movie about the life of Molière. For me, it was a revelation, this guy who passed his life writing stories and performing in front of an audience, and spending all this time on the road, meeting people. So when I was 7, I began to say, "I want to be an actor."

Q: You've acted in English-language, French-language and Arabic-language films, and have eclectic tastes in cinema. What Hollywood films do you like?

A: "The Party," which stars Peter Sellers and was directed by Blake Edwards. "O Brother, Where Are Thou?" by the Coen brothers. And "Some Like It Hot," with Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe. I like all of Billy Wilder's films.

Masquerades: 7:30 p.m. Thurs. Castro Theatre. 14th Arab Film Festival runs through Oct. 24. (415) 564-1100. www.arabfilmfestival.org.

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