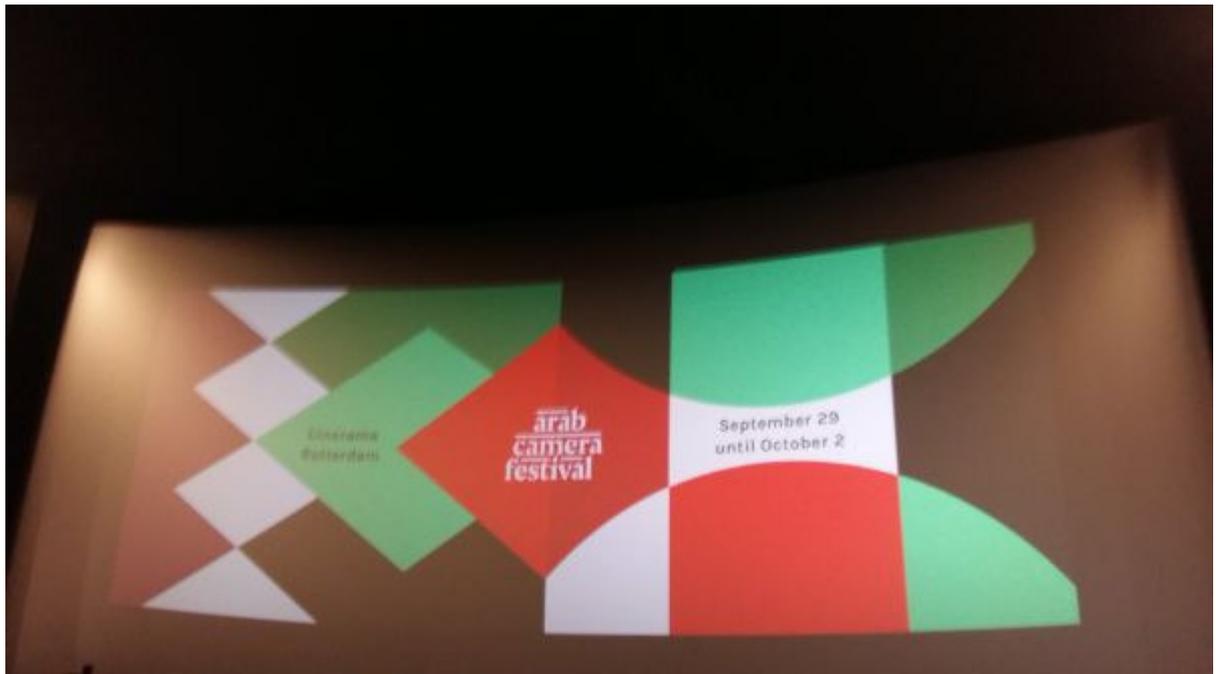


06-10-2016

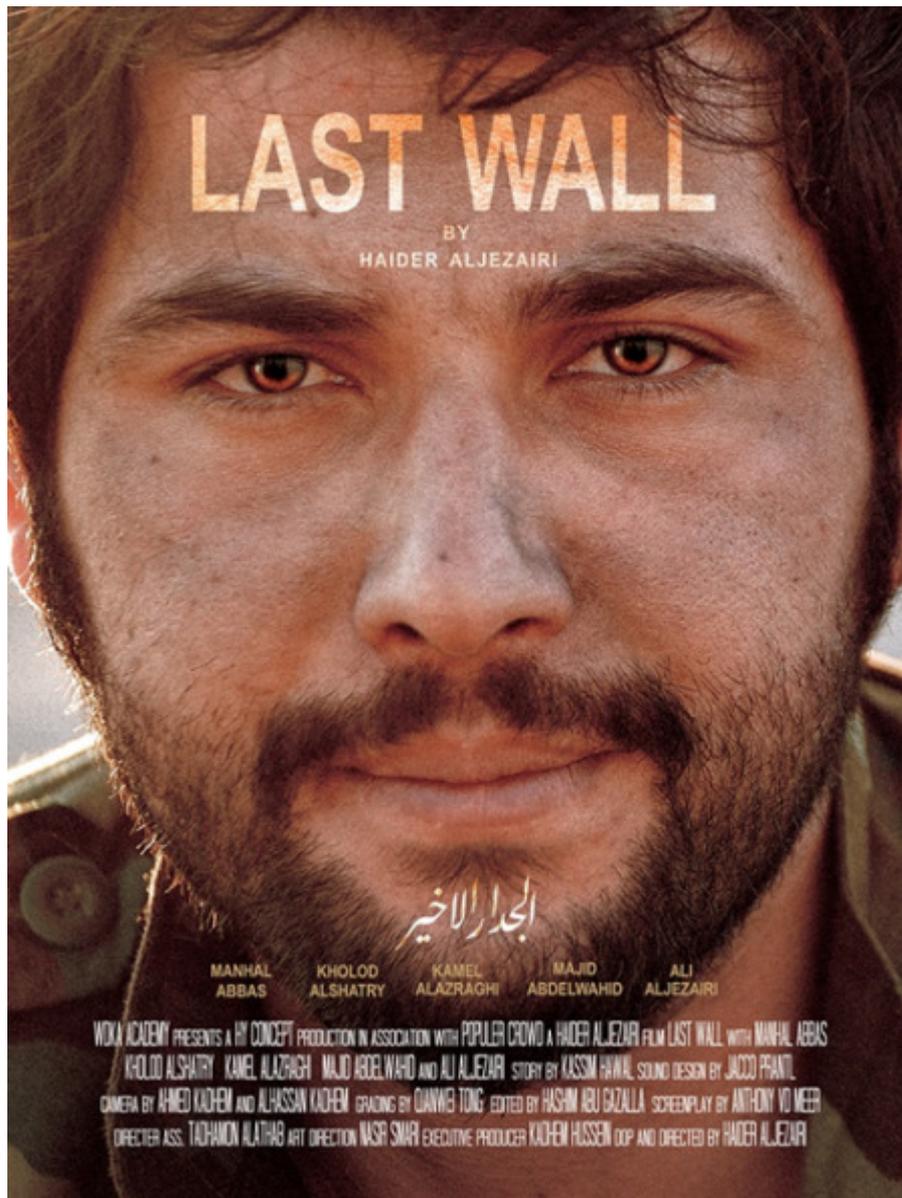
**Review: Rotterdam's Arab Camera Festival September 29 – October 2**



The four-day *Arab Camera festival* kicked off in Rotterdam's Cinerama on September 29 with the premier of the Saudi Arabian movie "**Barakah meets Barakah**". This was the Arab Camera Festival 15<sup>th</sup> installment and this year's theme was freedom and the public space. The films came from across the Middle East and as organiser Rosh Abdelfatah notes: "We wanted to give a wide window into the Arab world. The films are experimental and innovative". Over the course of the festival at least thirty films were screened which gave movie-goers plenty of choice. To add to the experience, DJs from North Africa and Israel were invited, as well as attendees also had the chance to participate in a discussion with a select group of academics to examine the question of freedom and the public space. Overall the festival succeeded to show just the breadth of talent that exists across the Middle East and why it is so important for Europeans to reach out to support this artistic field.



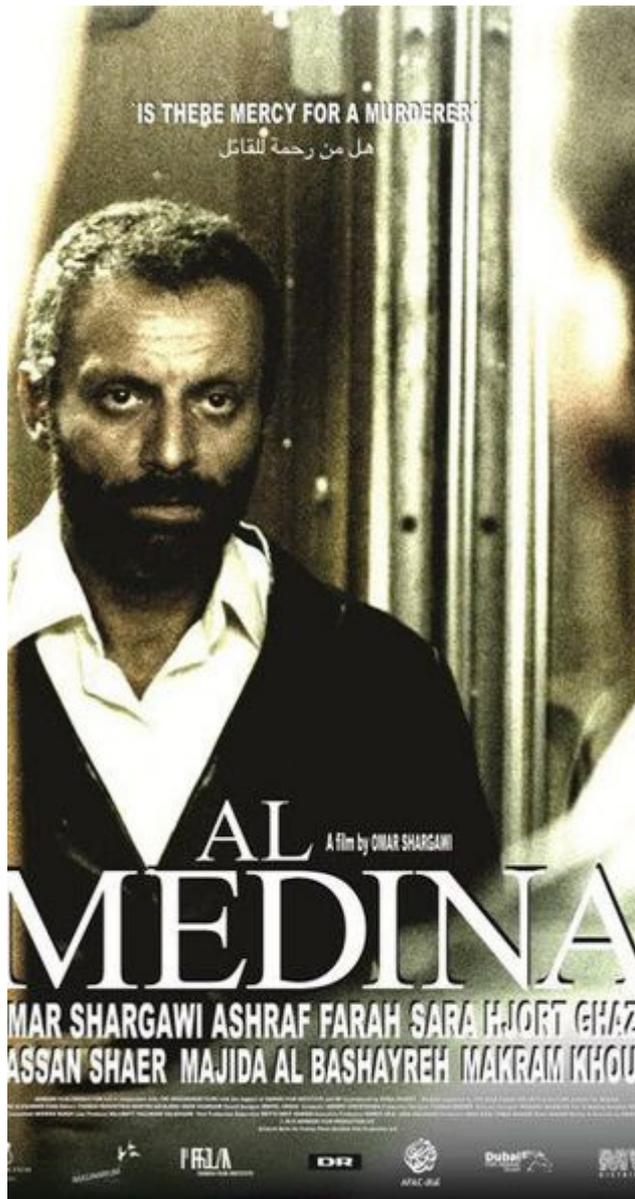
The opening movie **Barakah meets Barakah** directed by Mahmoud Sabbagh, which first screened at Berlin's International Film Festival in February, tells the tale of a single and lowly government official, Baraka Urabi (Hisham Fageeh), who is in the midst of rehearsing for the role of Ophelia in Hamlet. One day he encounters the beautiful and audacious Bibi Harith (Fatima Al Banawi), who happens to be an Instagram sensation. Little by little, their relationship grows, but at every turn they are reminded of the fact that they live in one of the region's most conservative countries. Filming took place in the city of Jeddah and the film naturally generated publicity given it skirted with topics that are considered taboo.



On day two of the festival there was a short film programme. Noteworthy mentions include **Last Wall** directed by Haider Aljezairi. It focuses on the close relationship between a mother and son who live in an Iraqi village that lies in the path of Islamic state terrorists. The son decides to join local resistance fighters, while his mother attempts to convince him to stay in order to complete construction of his marital home. While only 22 minutes in length, the film is especially harrowing since the story was based on an actual mother and son's experience and features footage shot by local fighters. What makes it more extraordinary was that Aljezairi is still a novice film maker who chose to travel to Iraq specifically to shoot the movie as part of his graduate thesis at the Willem de Kooning Academy.



Film makers Hamid Saïdji and Jonathan Mason entry **L'échappée** follows an Algerian Italophile who has a passion for photography, but to make ends meet earns a living as a taxi driver in the Algerian capital. He clings to the hope of escaping the country to enjoy a more carefree life.



Danish-Palestinian director Omar Shargawi's **Al Medina** is a disturbing tale about a man who is imprisoned shortly after arriving in his father's homeland. He succeeds in escaping only to face new challenges which serves to test his morality. More importantly, it is never made clear in which country or rather city he is living. This added a layer of surrealism, which this reviewer did not find helpful in supporting the story. Also the narrow camera angles serve to induce a feeling of claustrophobia.



Other notable festival entries included the Algerian-French production **Road to Istanbul**, which follows an anguished mother’s search for her Belgian daughter who has converted to Islam and decides to travel to Syria with her boyfriend. Without aid from the authorities, her mother played sumptuously by Astrid Whettname, heads to Turkey in order to trace her daughter’s steps. The film’s director Rachid Bouchareb purposely chose to examine this issue from the perspective of a non-Muslim. In regards to the subject of indoctrination and radicalisation, Road to Istanbul is by far one of the most compelling films to emerge in recent years.

One of the few non-Arab entries in the festival was the Iranian film **Hair**, written and directed by Mahmoud Ghaffari. Three female karate champions with impaired hearing are determined to compete in an international competition in Germany. However their chances to take part are in peril over the obligation to conceal their hair and necks. The film deals effectively with a problem that many Iranian female athletes face when it comes to competing abroad. The acting is both raw and visceral. More importantly, the film truly highlights the limits of freedom within the public space.



One of the festival's feature films that dealt extensively on the aftermath of the uprising in Egypt in 2011 was Hala Khalil's **Nawara**. An honest and sincere woman, Nawara lives in a run-down district of Cairo, but who makes a living as a house keeper in one of the capital's wealthy gated communities. While the Arab Spring fills her with optimism and hope for a better life, her fiancé and her well-to-do employers are more circumspect. The film perfectly illustrates the sharp contrast between those living in the backstreets of Cairo, who contend with crippling inequalities and the country's elite, who enjoy a standard of living unimaginable to the vast majority of Egyptians.



Although many of the films at the festival were political in nature, a number of mainstream or feel-good movies were also shown. **Halal Love** a German-Lebanese production, directed by Assad Fouladkar is a humorous and insightful look into the intimate lives of three sets of characters who each have issues of the heart: A hardworking housewife and mother must cope with her husband's insatiable desires, while another couple finds it almost impossible to avoid arguing over jealous encounters and one newly-divorced woman is forced to decide between her heart and her head. The actors, in particular the beautiful Loubna played by Darine Hamze, does an excellent job of portraying a modern and liberated woman who is unafraid to challenge social conventions. Halal Love is a warm and charming film that has proven very popular with audiences.



The last full-length film to be screened was the Egyptian film **Before the Summer Crowds** directed by the late Mohamed Khan. A young divorced woman Hala (Hana Sheha) decides to head to a secluded north coast resort to enjoy the peace and quiet before the summer beach goers arrive. She is the only guest, except for a middle-aged couple, played by Maged el Kedwany and Lana Mushtaq and an inquisitive gardener and caretaker. Without no one else around, the residents enjoy the tranquility while battling personal problems. Hala is dealing with an unreliable and insecure boyfriend and her neighbours face professional scandals. However the beauty of the sandy beach and blue sea helps to dilute these concerns. A beautiful movie!

Other films screened at this year's festival include the following:

*The Idol* (Palestine) Director Hany Abu-Assad

*A Sadness by any Other Name* (UAE) Director(s) Reem al-Shihahi, Deema al Therman, Layal Mooti.

*I am Vertical* (UAE) Director Hamda al Qassimi

*Wale Ndetro* (UAE) Director Malak Elghuel

*Coma* (Syria-Egypt) Director Amro Ali

*Just Another Day in Egypt* (Switzerland – Egypt) Director(s) Nikola Ilić - Corina Schwingruber Ilic.

*My Father's Garden* (Iraq) Director Shwan Attoof

*One Minute* (Jordan- Belgium) Director Dina Naser

*3000 Nights* (Jordan) Director Mai Masri  
*House Without a Roof* (Germany – Iraq) Director Soleen Yusef  
*Hedi* (Tunisia) Director Mohamed Ben Attia  
*The Past will Return* (Egypt) Director Dina Hamza  
*Going to Heaven 6+* (UAE) Director Saeed Salmeen  
*Skin* (Lebanon, Syria, Turkey) Director Afraa Batous  
*Deema* (Lebanon – Canada) Director Raghed Charabaty  
*The Curve* (Jordan) Rifqi Assaf  
*Starve Your Dog* (Morocco) Director Hicham Lasri  
*Hepta* (Egypt) Director Hadi El Bagoury  
*Zinzana* (UAE-Jordan) Director Majid Al Ansari  
*In the Last Days of the City* (Egypt, UK, Germany and UAE) Director Tamer El Said  
*Abdullah* (UAE) Director Humaid Al-Suwaidi  
*Winter* (Syria - US) Director Firas Aladai  
*Congratulations* (Lebanon) Director Cynthia Sawma

More information about the festival can be found here: <https://arabfilmfestival.nl/>