

## ***Gharam fi al-Karnak* (1965) [Love in Karnak]**

Egypt

Directed by Ali Rida.

Cinematography by Abdelhalim Nasr (*Ard al-, Zawja al-thaniya al-*).

*Gharan fi al-Karnak* is a wonderful blending of Egypt's past and 20th century cultural traditions. It tells a fictionalized account of the founding of Egypt's first national folkloric dance group, The Reda Troupe, a company that reworked indigenous song and dance into modern forms. The film features stunning ensemble dancing adapted from Egyptian folk traditions (in contrast to the solo cabaret routines performed in earlier Egyptian musicals).

Egypt has the oldest filmmaking tradition of any country in the Arab world, and the musical is one of Egypt's great film genres. When the Egyptian cinema was nationalized in the early '60s, the star fetishism, lack of social purpose, and Hollywood connotations of the standard musical fell into disfavor. Emerging from the new production system came Ali Rida's idealistic *Gharam fi al-Karnak*, a comedy about the efforts of The Reda Troupe to put on its very first show at the Temple of Karnak. Agreeably Soviet-style in its mix of ideology with an innocuous romantic plot, *Love in Karnak* recalls the musicals of Stanley Donen (*Singin' in the Rain*, *Funny Face*) in its pleasurable tension between the artificiality of the show-biz musical and the naturalism of its settings. Hard, bold colors evoke a world both real and magical; Luxor is overrun with Americans and Italians; through vast spaces lined with colonnades and sphinxes, dancers run geometrically amok, singing their sublimely inane refrain "Follow me, boys /Toot-toot/We're in the temple of Hatshepsut!" There's a dream sequence, in which lead dancer Mahmoud Reda fantasizes an encounter with the Pharaohs, that could be a candy-colored Technicolor outtake from *Kismet* – and a construction dance in which the glamorization of routine is no less exhilarating than Donen's factory scenes in *The Pajama Game*. The only dance sequence staged in the typical Reda folk style is the closing number, which represented the performance that the troupe spent the whole movie gearing up for.

Mahmoud Reda (who plays Salah) was a pioneer of dance theater in Egypt. Soloist, choreographer, and director of hundreds of productions, Reda toured in more than 60 countries, performing on the world's most prestigious stages such as Carnegie Hall, Royal Albert Hall, Congress Hall, and the United Nations. He was also principal actor, dancer and choreographer in many popular Egyptian films. Reda is universally acclaimed for his choreography that draws from techniques of jazz, ballet, Hindu dance, and Egyptian folk dance. Reda also represented Egypt in the 1952 Olympic Games. He was the first gymnast in Egypt to incorporate dance steps into his free exercise routine.

Farida Fahmy (who plays Amina) was the daughter of a British mother and Dr. Hassan Fahmy, a noted university professor of engineering. In 1959, when her brother-in-law Mahmoud Reda decided to create a dance company featuring folk dances of Egypt, she became the principal female dancer. Together, Reda, Fahmy, and the rest of the Reda Troupe created a new performing art - a theatrical presentation of traditional Egyptian folk culture. In 1965, King Hussein of Jordan awarded Fahmy the Star of Jordan. In 1967, Egypt's President Nasser awarded her the Order of Arts and Science.

*Gharam fi al-Karnak* provides a return to the golden age of both Egyptian and Hollywood musicals. 60% of Shira.net ("the world's most popular belly dancing website") users rated the film "absolutely fabulous" and 30% rated it "definitely recommended." The film runs 105 minutes.

## ***Ru Guo Ai* (2005) [Perhaps Love]**

China

Directed by Peter Chan.

Cinematography by Peter Pau (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) and Christopher Doyle (*In the Mood for Love*).

*Perhaps Love* may seem like a Chinese version of *Moulin Rouge!* for a number of reasons. It features a love triangle, a story within a story (here a film within a film), musical performances to express emotion and explain character, and blurs the line between the actors' lives and the lives of the characters they play. *Perhaps Love* may also seem like a Bollywood Musical because it juxtaposes romantic melodrama with singing and dancing. The *Hollywood Reporter* described *Perhaps Love* as "Bollywood meets Bob Fosse," a claim reinforced by the fact that the musical performances were staged by Farah Khan, a major Bollywood choreographer and director (*Main Hoon Na, Om Shanti Om, Monsoon Wedding*). But *Perhaps Love* is its own film, with its own story, and its own style. It offers a melancholy meditation on love and the myriad conflicting emotions and desires it evokes. It avoids clichés and demonstrates that there are no easy solutions to complex situations. It explores how the past always influences our actions in the present.

Japanese heartthrob Takeshi Kaneshiro plays Lin Jian Dong, a struggling film student who met his true love, Sun Na, in Beijing. When *Perhaps Love* begins, he's an accomplished actor, starring opposite Sun Na (now also a famous actor) in his latest film. He's not the least surprised at being given the cold shoulder by Sun Na, and goes all out to try and win her back. But exactly what his motivations are - love, revenge, closure – remain to be seen.

Contrasting Kaneshiro's character is Jacky Cheung's Nie Wen, the Shanghai director with mood swings. His current lover and muse is Sun Na. As the filmmaking progresses, he learns of Jian Dong and Sun Na's earlier love affair in Beijing. He feels cheated upon and hurt, and consequently channels his raw emotions into the film.

Chinese actress Zhou Xun plays Sun Na, the woman caught between the two men. One is her lover in a past she wants to forget, while the other is her lover who brought her stardom in the present. We learn that Sun Na will sacrifice love to pursue her dreams of fame and fortune. She walked out of Jian Dong's life at least twice, once to be with an American director, and later to be with Jian Dong's assistant director friend, before we currently see her with Nie Wen. Will Jian Dong's romantic persistence make her re-evaluate her life or will she remain emotionally callous?

South Korean TV stars Jin Ji-hee plays Montage, a reporter who bookends the film, interacts with all characters, and weaves in and out of the plot. His role is the most abstract. He functions as a kind of ringmaster or "chorus" who suggests that there's a higher power involved. As he explains at the start of the film,

*"Life is like a film for everyone. Everyone is the leading actor in his own film. Sometimes, he may think he is also the leading actor in another's film. But actually he may only play a minor role. He might appear only in one scene. I stored up clips of films that have been edited. I collect them because sometimes people make mistakes when cutting them out. When they need them again, I return their clips to them."*

*Perhaps Love* is a beautiful film, with a powerful pan-Asian cast and crew, and provides a deep emotional response. It is a rare example of a Chinese musical that adopts a more global perspective. The film runs 110 minutes.

***Vastutuulesaal* (2007) [Headwind Hall]**

Estonia

Directed by Priit Valkna.

Cinematography by Rein Kotov (*Somnambuul*), Margus Malm, and Tauno Sirel.

Producer and co-writer of *Headwind Hall*, Artur Talvik, offers a light-hearted summary of the film.

“*Headwind Hall* is a documentary film about the conductor Tõnu Kaljuste and his crazy idea of building an opera house on the estate of the past inventor Schmidt in Naissaar; an island which even today has no regular ferry line, no electricity and only one permanent resident. In order to carry his idea through, Kaljuste must face situations bordering on the absurd, involving potential investors, snobby bureaucrats, construction workers, and the general public. He transports construction materials and other necessities to the island with his own small boat. The press and the representatives of different institutions cannot refrain from gloating – what is he trying to prove? The idea is almost as crazy as inventor Schmidt's erstwhile headwind ship that used the energy of headwind in order to move ahead with double power. However, in the summer of 2006, the Nargen Opera is completed and the first performances are carried through. This amusing and dynamic film follows the activities of Tõnu Kaljuste during a period of five years.”

The building of an opera house may not strike most people as a subject for a very dramatic film, notwithstanding, sometimes the most extreme circumstances can be the setting for the most compelling stories. The charismatic conductor Tõnu Kaljuste resigned his position as music director and chief conductor of the world renowned Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir in late 1999 and set out on a quixotic quest to build an opera/concert hall on the island of Naissaar, located about 12 miles north of Tallinn (the Estonian capital).

Naissaar, also known as the Island of Nargen, was once the family home of world renowned telescope and optical lens inventor Bernhard Schmidt (1879-1935) among whose other theoretical inventions was a wind-powered sail/propeller boat which used the force of the wind to sail directly into the wind itself. The idea of this "against the headwind ship" becomes the metaphor for Kaljuste's dream to realize the construction of his opera/concert hall despite all the forces of bureaucracy, financing, and common sense working against him. Naissaar Island had no electrical supply, a barely functioning harbor, and only one or two permanent residents at the time this story begins. How Kaljuste overcame nearly endless adversity and ultimately achieved his goal is shown in this exhilarating film. *Headwind Hall* ends with the pop hit *Minu inimesed* [My People] by the Estonian rap/dance-club performer Chalice (the stage name of singer Jarek Kasar) and provides a musical benediction to Kaljuste's efforts. At the same time, composer Arvo Pärt declares on-screen that "the Estonian people can't begin to appreciate the trouble that Tõnu has gone through". Thanks to director Priit Valkna's triumphant film, audiences get the chance to see it and appreciate it for themselves. *Headwind Hall* was given standing ovations at the 2007 Nordic Film Days in Lübeck. The film runs 60 minutes.