

1957-2017

60th anniversary of

**ILA AYN?
WHERE TO?
BY
GEORGES
NASSER**



**The first Lebanese auteur film and the
first Lebanese film presented at the
Cannes Film Festival**



RESTORATION PRESENTED BY

ABOUT PRODUCTIONS & FONDATION LIBAN CINEMA

WITH THE SUPPORT OF **BANKMED - LEBANON**

PRODUCED BY **MYRIAM SASSINE**

INITIATED BY **ANTOINE WAKED, BADIH MASSAAD & MYRIAM SASSINE**

IN COLLABORATION WITH **NADI LEKOL NAS & THE TALKIES**

WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF **FONDATION CEDRONA**

& TRIPOLI FILM FESTIVAL

WORKS CARRIED OUT BY **NEYRAC FILMS - FRANCE**

SOUND RESTORATION **DB STUDIOS - LEBANON**



CONTENTS

1. HISTORY OF LEBANESE CINEMA
2. ABOUT GEORGES NASSER
3. ABOUT THE PROJECT
4. ABOUT “ILA AYN?”
5. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROJECT
6. THE RESTORATION - BEFORE & AFTER
7. A CERTAIN NASSER - THE DOCUMENTARY
8. CREDITS

1. HISTORY OF LEBANESE CINEMA

At first sight, the history of Lebanese cinema reveals a few key names and dates, some individual, for the most part brief attempts.

The origins of Lebanese cinema date back to 1929, when the first feature film was shot: *The Adventures of Elias Mabrouk*, directed by Italian director Jordano Pidutti.

The independence of 1943 paved the way for the establishment of a film industry in Lebanon, based on the most prominent model in the region at the time, namely Egyptian cinema. Back then the dialogues of Lebanese films were spoken in literary Arabic... and the use of the Egyptian dialect guaranteed access to Arab markets. More than twenty films were shot every year during this period of prosperity, but the quest for popular success was pursued without real concern for quality, by Egyptian or amateur teams.

In the 1950s, the number of films increased. Most of the action took place in Lebanese villages. Georges Kahi and Michel Haroun moved from theater direction to filmmaking; this resulted in theatrical films that did not stand out either locally or internationally. At the beginning of the 1960s, Lebanese cinema became more original and distanced itself from the Egyptian model.

At first, it attempted to reconnect with neo-realistic forms. Georges Nasser had just completed his film studies in Hollywood and returned to Lebanon; he directed *Where to?* and *The Little Stranger*, which were shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1957 and 1962, respectively. These were resolutely modern works in the way they straddled the frontier between fiction and documentary, works whose influence can still be felt today. These films received critical praise, although they were not met with popular success.



The Adventures of Elias Mabrouk (1929)

Then arrived Mohammed Selman, who debuted in 1957 with *The First Melody* and succeeded in imposing himself in the 1960s, directing up to 4-5 films a year in the Egyptian dialect. His disciples were Samir Ghoussayni and Youssef Charafeddine, masters of commercial cinema in the 1970s and 1980s.

The nationalization of Egyptian cinema provided Lebanese cinema with a definite boost, at least with regard to the number of films being produced. Large numbers of producers and financial backers took refuge in Lebanon to produce their films. Local studios experienced a golden age, especially Studio Baalbeck.

But with the increase of quantity came a serious decline in quality.

A wave of films with no specific local color or sense of direction flooded the market. In the case of Mohammad Selman and others like him, the film was only a pretext: the plot centered on the main character, often a star of Arabic or Lebanese song, such as Sabah, Samira Toufic, etc. In those films, only the musical tableaux mattered.

Some films, however, did present some aesthetic and artistic value, including the Rahbani Brothers' three productions directed by famous Egyptian filmmakers: *The Ring Seller* (1965) by Youssef Chahine, *Safar Barlek* (1967) and *The Watchman's Daughter* (1968) by Henri Barakat, starring Lebanese diva Feyrouz, as well as a film



The Ring Seller (1965)

based on a true story: *Garó* (1965) by Gary Garabedian.

The end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s finally saw Lebanese cinema wonder about its political identity and that of the nation. Civil war was about to break out, the Palestinian issue had become central. At the heart of Lebanese identity and of all conflicts, Beirut sheltered more than a third of the population and stood out as the place of convergence of all paths and interrogations.

Often part of the Lebanese Left, the prominent directors of the time included Maroun Baghdadi, Borhane Alaouié, Jocelyne Saab, Jean Chamoun, Randa Chahal...

Maroun Baghdadi was the pioneer of this new wave of filmmakers. In his film *Beirut ya Beirut* (1975), he succeeded in portraying the tension that led to the civil war.

Other films followed, with topics ranging from the lack of communication between Christians and Muslims, exile, the mechanisms of the Israeli occupation, the war in Southern Lebanon, the massacre of the Palestinians...

Jocelyne Saab gathered Beirut's cinematographic memory in *Once Upon A Time Beirut – Story of a Star* (1996).

Lebanese filmmakers exorcised the war in different manners: *West Beirut* (1998) by Ziad Doueiri became a cult film.

Recent years have seen Lebanese cinema turn to the present, nevertheless constantly traumatized by the past, by focusing on exclusively social themes such as the status of women, mixed marriage, drugs, poverty, sex... Memory plays a leading role in cinematographic creation, as exemplified by films that relentlessly question the “official version” and those gaping voids left by a conflict which is still very much alive. Audiences have however expressed certain weariness in recent years. Perhaps the Lebanese want to forget the past, or simply think about the future?

Pushed forward since the 1980s by a new and innovative force, Lebanese cinema falls, stumbles and rises every time. It struggles to assert itself and to exist.

Nadine Labaki, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Philippe Aractingi, Georges Hachem, Danielle Arbid, Ghassan Salhab, Vatche Boulghourjian as well as the young Ely Dagher, who received the Palme d’Or for Best Short Film at the Cannes Film Festival... Each tries to contribute his or her own language to form the uniqueness of this Lebanese cinema. Is it a passion for the image, a duty of memory?...

Lebanese cinema will be militant, it will be a cultural act, and it will possess social and political value.

Nowadays we can speak of the real emergence of Lebanese cinema, which is beginning to develop in Lebanon even if it hasn’t succeeded in establishing itself as a real industry yet.

In 2015, in spite of the lack of financing, 31 films were produced in Lebanon (compared to an average of 10 per year between 2006 and 2010), with a total of \$32.4 million invested. This represents a record figure in the history of post-war cinema in Lebanon; furthermore, more and more Lebanese films are finding success internationally. Lebanese cinema still needs support from the private sector, from international co-productions and NGOs. It is also necessary to revive the interest of public authorities and legislators about the need to equip Lebanese cinema with means worthy of its influence.



2. ABOUT GEORGES NASSER

Born in Tripoli in 1927, Georges Nasser studied cinema at UCLA in Hollywood and returned to his native country with the firm determination to make films in an environment where the industry was non-existent. In 1957 he directed *Ila Ayn? (Where to?)*, which became the first film to represent Lebanon in the official competition at the Cannes Film Festival. Nasser repeated the same remarkable feat with *The Little Stranger*, also selected at Cannes in 1962.

A period of relentlessness and disillusionment followed. In 1975, Nasser shot his third film *Al Matloub Rajol Wahed* (It only takes one man) in Syria. Although the film's future looked promising, the eruption of the Lebanese civil war put an end to its career. Unlike the new wave of young Lebanese filmmakers who filmed the war, such as Maroun Baghdadi, Borhane Alaouie, Jocelyne Saab, Randa Chahal and Jean Chamoun, Nasser did not follow suit. Nevertheless, at no point did he consider leaving the country. He worked as a production manager on a few foreign films, such as Volker Schlöndorff's *Circle of Deceit*, and continued to write and seek funding opportunities for his screenplays.

Unfortunately, time passed and money did not arrive. Nasser began to fight on another front: the creation of a Lebanese union of film technicians, another attempt that proved unsuccessful because of the incompetence of the state and the ministries concerned.

Nasser finally found a satisfactory vocation as a teacher at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA). He educates new generations in the art of making films.

At the age of 89, he still has not retired, and his eyes shine when he talks about his great love of cinema.



3. ABOUT THE PROJECT

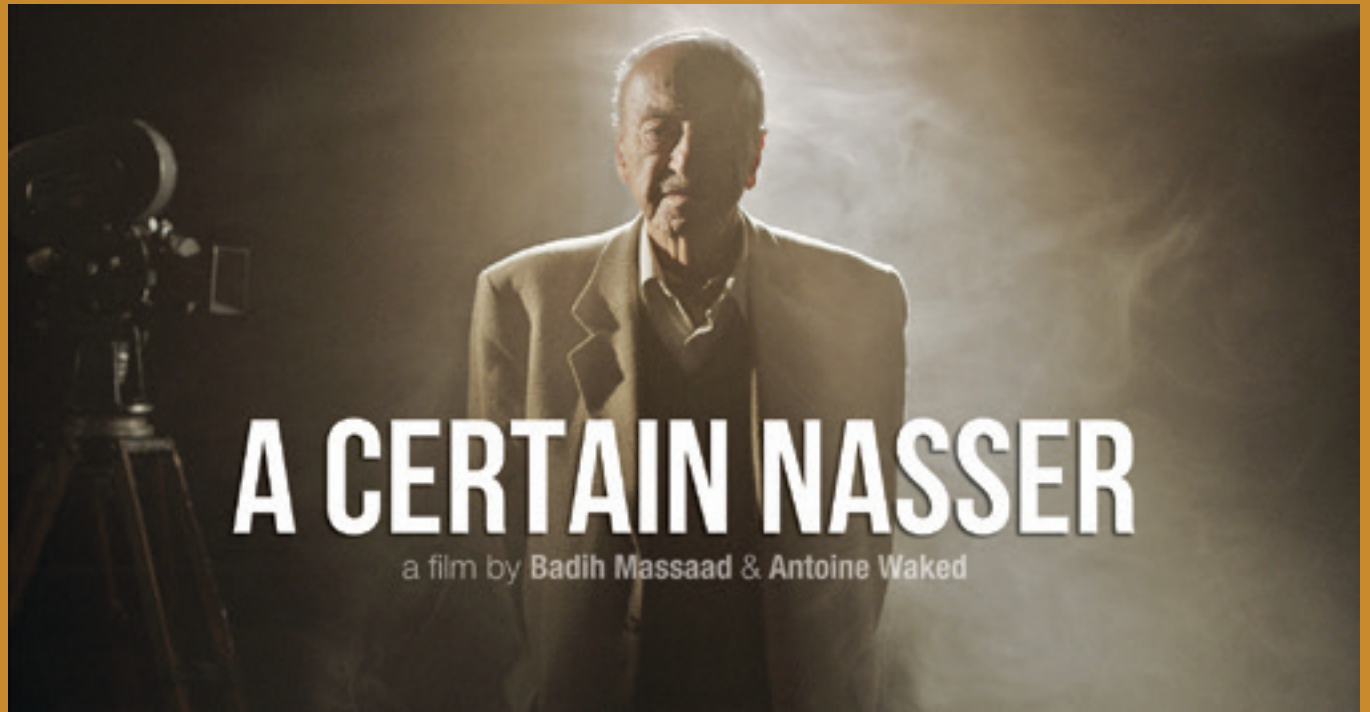
For *Ila Ayn? (Where to?)* 60th anniversary directed by Lebanese Cinema pioneer in 1957, Georges Nasser, a double bill is proposed.

The original 35mm Fine Grain Master Positive was scanned, retouched and color-corrected in a resolution of 4k.

The restoration was initiated by Abbout Productions and Fondation Liban Cinema, with the support of BankMed-Lebanon, with the participation of Nadi Lekol El Nas, an NGO that aims to preserve the Lebanese heritage and with the collaboration of the production house The Talkies.

The restoration works have been carried out by Neyrac Films – France. Sound restoration was carried out by db studios - Lebanon.

The restoration of *Ila Ayn?* will be accompanied by a 60-minute documentary entitled *Un Certain Nasser (A Certain Nasser)*, directed by Badih Massaad and Antoine Waked. In this film Nasser tells his own story, a story that also reflects the history of a country and its national cinema.



4. ABOUT “ILA AYN?”

A family lives poorly in a village in the Lebanese mountain. One day the father abandons his family and leaves for Brazil, considered an Eldorado by a great number of his compatriots. Twenty years pass. The mother raised her children with great difficulty: the elder has a family and the younger one is getting ready to immigrate to Brazil. One day a ragged old man arrives to the village. No one recognizes him, not even his son to whom he gives blood in order to save him.

Nasser's films were remarkably modern and innovative for their time. They reveal a true vision and a perfect mastery of the 7th art. *Ila Ayn?* (*Where to?*) was a pioneering experience. Before the realization of this film, Lebanese cinema's sporadic attempts had not succeeded, and for good reason: the lack of cinematographic infrastructure. There was no technical equipment, no technicians nor even movie actors.

Following his return from the United States, Nasser embarked on the adventure of his first long feature. He convinced a producer to go along with him and began filming *Ila Ayn?*. Riddled with trials and mishaps, the shoot lasted 11 months. Throughout this experience, Nasser's Hollywood experience helped him overcome the difficulties of an

infernally shoot and manage on his own the entire crew of the film, consisting of amateur yet passionate individuals.

It is therefore with *Ila Ayn?* that technicians and actors were trained to work in Lebanese cinema. The crew went as far as crafting its own filming equipment, such as a camera dolly, and Nasser was not afraid to risk his own life to create his shots. He even climbed on top of a tree to film a specific sequence.

In spite of these pitfalls, the efforts deployed eventually paid fruit. Much to the filmmaker's surprise, the film was officially selected at the Cannes Film Festival alongside Ingmar Bergman, William Wyler, Jules Dassin, Stanley Donen, Andrzej Wajda, Federico Fellini and Robert Bresson, among others.

Following a Cannes screening where *Ila Ayn?* was acclaimed by George Stevens, Marcel Pagnol and Georges Sadoul, Nasser returned to Lebanon to show his film to the local public.

Nasser did not know how to distribute his film, considered as an alien object at a time dominated by Egyptian cinema. With its actors speaking in the Lebanese dialect, *Ila Ayn?* did not benefit from good screening conditions in Lebanon. Egyptian



film distributors also fought it. Western and Egyptian films monopolized cinemas during this period. Egyptian film distributors did not want to encourage the production of Lebanese films, which they considered as a danger to their industry, especially after the film's selection at Cannes. In a bid to protect their livelihood, they threatened Lebanese cinemas of not procuring them with Egyptian movies, should they ever project the film.

This was one of the many reasons that prevented Lebanese cinema - still in the process of seeking its identity - from developing. Only Lebanese musicals and B-series, often spoken in the Egyptian dialect, found popular success with the public.

Georges Nasser was not interested in making such films. His desire was to be an author, to tell stories inspired by society and its concerns.



5. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROJECT

The themes addressed in Nasser's work revolve around subjects which are particularly relevant and still current today, showing Lebanon's lack of real progress over half a century.

Ila Ayn? (Where to?) addresses the issue of migration and exile; the agony of residing in a country without a future and, at the same time, the cruelty of an exile that does not keep its promises of a better future. This neo-realistic chronicle portrays a family where the father decides to immigrate to Brazil, leaving his wife and two boys behind. His family is torn apart, but he is convinced that this is the only way to ensure a better life. Shortly after his departure his family stops receiving any news. Years later, as the younger son is getting ready to follow in his father's footsteps, he returns home defeated and anxious to confront his family with his failures. This is a pertinent and contemporary subject, Brazil having nowadays been replaced by the Gulf countries.

In addition to the harsh social situations addressed in his filmography, Nasser's films revolve around idealistic characters that refuse to compromise and end up being

defeated by their hostile environment. His film can be viewed autobiographically, in light of the life he's had.

Nasser's films tell the stories of people whose potential does not flourish; dreamers unable to realize their dreams, forced to resign themselves to an ordinary destiny and bend under society's weight. Nasser could have easily predicted the fate of a visionary such as himself, in a country like Lebanon where it is tough to assert oneself.

Georges Nasser single-handedly placed Lebanese cinema on a pedestal and thanks to him, our national film industry found international recognition. His film *Ila Ayn? (Where to?)* represented Lebanon at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1957, followed by *The Small Stranger* in 1962. This double selection constitutes one of the greatest distinctions to be bestowed on an independent film, even today.

In spite of this, his work has fallen into oblivion; it is not recognized by the state, the public, not even by professionals of Lebanese cinema, unfortunately.

The founding father of Lebanese cinema



is widely regarded now as an outdated director and a teacher of the old school. Apart from a few projections in Beirut, his films are largely unseen since they were not screened in Lebanon at the time of their distribution, thus remaining unknown to the general public in the Middle East. In addition to this, copies of these films are rare, almost impossible to find.

Il la Ayn? is the only one of Nasser's films of which a 35mm copy still exists at the CNC, in addition to a copy owned by the director. The film is not available to the larger public and has been screened very rarely. The project of digitization, accompanied by a documentary about the director, will allow Lebanese and international viewers to rediscover the work of a filmmaker who single-handedly triggered the creation of an independent Lebanese cinema, different from the Egyptian model of the time. While the conditions that hampered Nasser's work remain virtually unchanged today, Lebanese cinema has recently witnessed a boom thanks to the emergence

of a new generation of independent writers, producers and individual initiatives that strive for the existence of a national cinema, independent of the state.

With about thirty films produced yearly since 2015, Lebanese cinema has never fared better, and on this occasion the world should rediscover Georges Nasser's films.



6. THE RESTORATION - BEFORE & AFTER



Until today, the only screening copy available was one DVD copy of the film of very poor quality.

The 35mm copies in existence today are not easily accessible.

Our goal is to offer a restored digital version of the film that will be easily accessible and allow everyone to discover a national treasure of world cinema.

Technical Director
Jean-Baptiste Neyrac

Grading **Rémi Berge**

Restorers
Elise Bigot
Fred Chabbal
Marc Giacobbi
Marc Molto
Valentin Neyrac
Joffray Procureur
Matthieu Terrien
Julien Champenois
Paul Rembert
Béatrice Neyrac de Miguel
Christophe Lussignol

Post-production Manager DCP
Erick Gatellier Guilloux

Sound Restoration
db Studios - Lebanon Rana Eid

Sound Mastering 5.1
Christian Fontaine

Subtitles
Cineli Digital Frédéric Busnel-Joncour

Existing copy



Restored copy



Existing copy



Restored copy



Existing copy



Restored copy



Existing copy



Restored copy



Existing copy



Restored copy



Existing copy



Restored copy



Existing copy



Restored copy



Existing copy



Restored copy



7. A CERTAIN NASSER - THE DOCUMENTARY

Lebanon - Color/Black and White - 60 minutes - Arabic - STE/STF

With candor, humor and grace, iconic Lebanese filmmaker Georges Nasser tells his own story; a fascinating tale of unprecedented success, struggles and disappointments.

A Certain Nasser is the compelling journey of a man, a nation and an art-form; a portrait of a man whose eyes still light up at ninety years of age at the mention of his greatest love, cinema.

This documentary will be screened at a later stage during the celebrations of *Ila Ayn?* 60th anniversary.



With the support of Fonds Francophone de Production Audiovisuelle du Sud & the Lebanese Ministry of Culture, in association with L'Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts - Université de Balamand & Nadi Lekol El Nas in partnership with Télé Liban, db Studios-Lebanon, Lucid, The Council.



Directed by
Badih Massaad & Antoine Waked

Produced by
Myriam Sassine & Georges Schoucair

Editing
Halim Sabbagh

Cinematographer
Nadim Saoma

Music Composer
Charbel Haber

Sound Restoration
Rana Eid

Grading
Belal Hibri

Presented by



with the support of



in collaboration with



Renno Building, 1st Floor,
Gemmayze, Beirut, Lebanon
Tel/Fax: +961 1 58 78 24
Email: contact@abboutproductions.com
Website: www.abboutproductions.com