FESTIVAL 2010: CRITICAL OVERVIEW of Masquerades (Mascarades, 2008)
As Michael Hawley synopsized in his lineup preview of the 14th edition of the Arab Film Festival (AFF): "This year's opening night AFF film is Lyès Salem's Mascarades, a comedy that was Algeria's submission for last year's Best Foreign Language Film Oscar®. A box office success at home and in France, the film stars director Salem as a ridiculed villager who invents a drunken story about his narcoleptic sister's engagement to a wealthy European.

The impending faux-marriage gains him the respect of the village, but the enmity of his sister who's secretly in love with his best friend. Director/star Lyès Salem is scheduled to attend the screening, which will be preceded by the presentation of AFF's annual Noor Awards for Outstanding Feature, Short and Documentary. In last Friday's San Francisco Chronicle, there was an interesting interview with Lyès conducted by writer Jonathan Curiel."

I first caught Mascarades at a private screening when the Global Film Initiative (GFI) announced their Global Lens 2010 lineup. As they synopsized at the time, Mounir, a "horticultural engineer" (i.e., part-time gardener) for a wealthy estate owner, dreams of improving his small family's lot and gaining a measure of respect in his dusty Algerian village. He's determined to marry off his narcoleptic sister, Rym, to a "real gentleman," but Rym dreams of marrying Khliffa, his best friend. When Mounir counters village gossip with a fib that he's promised Rym to a wealthy outsider, she embraces the rumor to press Khliffa into action. The town rallies around the fictional nuptials, propelling Mounir to big-shot status by association, and swelling his impressionable ego beyond recognition. This charming romantic comedy suggests that when dreams turn into reality, it's time to wake up.

A narcoleptic sister as a character, writes Film-Forward "would usually be grist for farce. Instead, the gossip, misunderstandings, mistaken identities, and Pyramus-and-Thisbe-like romance her condition sets off are handled with charming humor and affection for village life." At Variety, Ronnie Scheib concurs: "It may not be P.C. to make fun of narcolepsy, but when servicing the slapstick requirements of thoughtful--even socially conscious--comedy, the joke has much less to do with real illness than with classically executed farce." Scheib's rave review adds that as "an accomplished comedy of manners" Mascarades "deftly tosses matrimony, celebrity and narcolepsy into a potent brew with international appeal. A likable cast, a witty star turn by Salem, faultless staging and a neatly inflected pace contribute to a modest but sparkling romp that has racked up several fest prizes."
At Screen, Fionnuala Halligan writes: "Genuinely amusing, if not downright funny at times, Lyès Salem's biggest asset in *Masquerades* is himself, playing the pop-eyed, misguided, at times quite delusional Mounir.... The score is whimsical, but not obtrusive; *Masquerades* script is surprisingly tight, and technically the venture is assured. Undoubtedly, *Masquerades* marks Salem out as a talent we'll certainly be seeing more of; and if his next work is as genial as this, the pleasure will be all ours."

At The Arts Desk, Sheila Johnston writes that *Masquerades* is a "battle of the sexes, a comedy of errors and a cutting satire" that succeeds as "a broad, madcap farce." Johnston adds: "Salem, 36, ...paints an unvarnished portrait of his mother country as hobbled by poverty, unemployment, corruption and antiquated patriarchal prejudice, but also as a place of spectacular wild beauty and one where sheer humanity compensates for a multitude of sins." Though she qualifies that the French critics who "have invoked the spirits of Moliere, Almodovar, Kusterica" are "over-excited", she concludes that *Masquerades* "is conceived on an altogether more modest scale and has a much more sentimental streak than those masters; but that should not deter from its unassuming, captivating achievement."

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