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Behind the production of Nabil Maleh's Al-Fahd

Born into a prominent upper middle-class Damascus family in 1936, Maleh began writing political columns for local papers when he was fourteen. At sixteen, he went to Czechoslovakia to study nuclear physics. Then one day he was asked to be an extra in a film, and he was hooked. "I realized it was the only thing I could be," he said to Alia Yunis interviewing him in 2013.^[1] He was accepted into the highly selective Prague Film School (FAMU), whose students then included Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová and Jiří Menzel.

While a student, his resonant voice and continuing political passions served him well: he was able to make a living working at the Arab Radio Transmission, an Arabic language Czech station aimed at the Middle East. But it was the cultural life of Prague, not politics that captivated him during his studies. The Syrian journalist Amre Sawah, former student and then collaborator and friend of Nabil Maleh during the last decade of his life described the film director as a poet and writer strengthened by his multicultural background: "He directed movies as he was painting canvas", putting special attention to details, music, and photography.

After graduating from FAMU in 1963 with his first student film *Pozor! Dítě?*^[2] Nabil Maleh worked in close collaboration with the National Film Organization (NFO), a Syrian film collective formed in the 1960s based on the model of the Soviet Mosfilm organization. The Syrian NFO aimed at developing Arab cinema in a way that would break away from the creative limitations of mainstream movies, then mostly produced in Egyptian studios. Nabil Maleh himself declared, "I have always avoided the false atmosphere of the studio", before explaining. "When I started filming in real places, that was a novelty for most Arab cinema. And that moved Syrian TV directors to do so also. We know that the actor is part of an environment, and he becomes more credible

within the story with genuine and real surroundings. This is why the Syrian drama conquered the Egyptian drama across the Middle East.”^[3]

Nonetheless, as the NFO was a state-run and state-funded organization, it was limited by officials’ approval of the scripts. The production of *Al-Fahd* (The Leopard, 1972) did not go very smoothly at first. Nabil Maleh finished the script in 1969, but a week before shooting was to begin, the government shut down production, saying the telling of the story of a rebellion made a hero of a thug. The next year, Hafez Assad came to power, and as is often the case in regime change, there was a reversal of decisions. Nabil Maleh took the opportunity to make the film and the script was agreed on. Moris Issa, a Czech director of Syrian origins, suggested that the film was approved by Assad’s new government because it pictured how the Sunni Syrians were oppressing the Shia Alawites in the country after the independence in 1946, the villagers in the film being from Alawites minority. Finally, *The Leopard* went into production in 1971 with a budget of \$25,000, and when it was released in 1972, it went on to play continuously in Syrian theaters for the next thirty years.

The Leopard is now considered an iconic film of Syrian cinematography, being the first film entirely produced by Syrians. Amre Sawah considers the film to have drawn the path of the style of Syrian cinema for the upcoming twenty years, though it was black and white, by the way, it was shot, its music, its depiction of nudity, and so on. Nabil Maleh’s viewpoint is well exemplified by the plot of this production, as he considered himself a natural-born dissident: “You have to fight for the better always”.^[4]

The Leopard tells the story of the rebellion of Al-Fahd, an ordinary peasant who refuses to pay the tax required by the Afghan occupants that would condemn his family to starve to death. Al-Fahd flees into the mountains and starts a lonely fight against the illegitimate authority. The film highlights the martyr figure rebelling for his self-determination „Each master is a tyrant. We are like sheep“ whose determination remains intact until the very end. Following the betrayal of the men of the village, the final scene depicts the execution of Al-Fahd hanging in the public square facing the sea, maybe to question the spectator about the reasons for his failure.

The Leopard won first prize at the Locarno Film Festival in 1972 and in 2005 it was described in 2005 by South Korea's Pusan International Film Festival as one of the "immortal masterpieces of Asian cinema". Known for a brilliant career consisting of 15 films, 30 documentaries, and 13 TV series, Nabil Maleh died in 2016. Today's Syrian directors who embrace his legacy the best are maybe directors in the diaspora, perpetuating the tradition of directing films aiming at inclusivity and justice for the future.

Sources:

Al-Fahd, Syrian National Film Organisation 1972.

Nabil Maleh, *Filmography*. <https://www.nabilmaleh.com/filmography> (accessed May 9 2023).

Leïla Prud'homme, Interview with Moris Issa, April 13, 2023.

Alia Yunis, "A Leopard in Winter: An Interview with Syrian Director Nabil Maleh". *Jadaliyya* – <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27926> (accessed May 9 2023).

This article has been written by Leïla Prud'homme under the supervision of Klára Trsková, teaching a course on cinema at the Charles University of Prague in collaboration with the National Film Archive in Prague. The productions Al-Fahd (1972) and Pozor! Dítě? (1963) by Nabil Maleh were screened from 35mm film prints at cinema Ponrepo on April 24, 2023. The guest speakers Amre Sawah and Moris Issa took part in this unprecedented screening organized by Národní filmový archiv, Prague.

Notes:

[1] Alia Yunis, "A Leopard in Winter: An Interview with Syrian Director Nabil Maleh". *Jadaliyya* – <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27926> (accessed May 9 2023).

[2] A question might arise about the length and year of production of the student film of Nabil Maleh as the filmography at official webpage nabilmaleh.com states as Nabil Maleh's first film work called *Family Problem* (1964, 35 min.) but the student film in

the collection of Národní filmový archiv is *Pozor! Dítě?* (1963, 14 min.)

[3] Alia Yunis, “A Leopard in Winter: An Interview with Syrian Director Nabil Maleh”.
Jadaliyya – <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27926> (accessed May 9 2023).

[4] Ibid.