

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF *THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT* AND *BOY FROM HEAVEN*



Fares FARES

EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC

Lyna KHOUDRI Zineb TRIKI Amr WAKED Cherien DABIS

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EAGLES **OF THE** **REPUBLIC**

A FILM BY TARIK SALEH

Lyna KHOUDRI Zineb TRIKI Amr WAKED Cherien DABIS

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synopsis

Egypt's most adored actor George Fahmy is pressured to star in a film commissioned by the highest authorities. He reluctantly accepts the role and finds himself thrown into the inner circle of power. Like a moth drawn to the flame he begins an affair with the mysterious wife of the general overseeing the film.

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Interview with **TARIK SALEH**

**EAGLES
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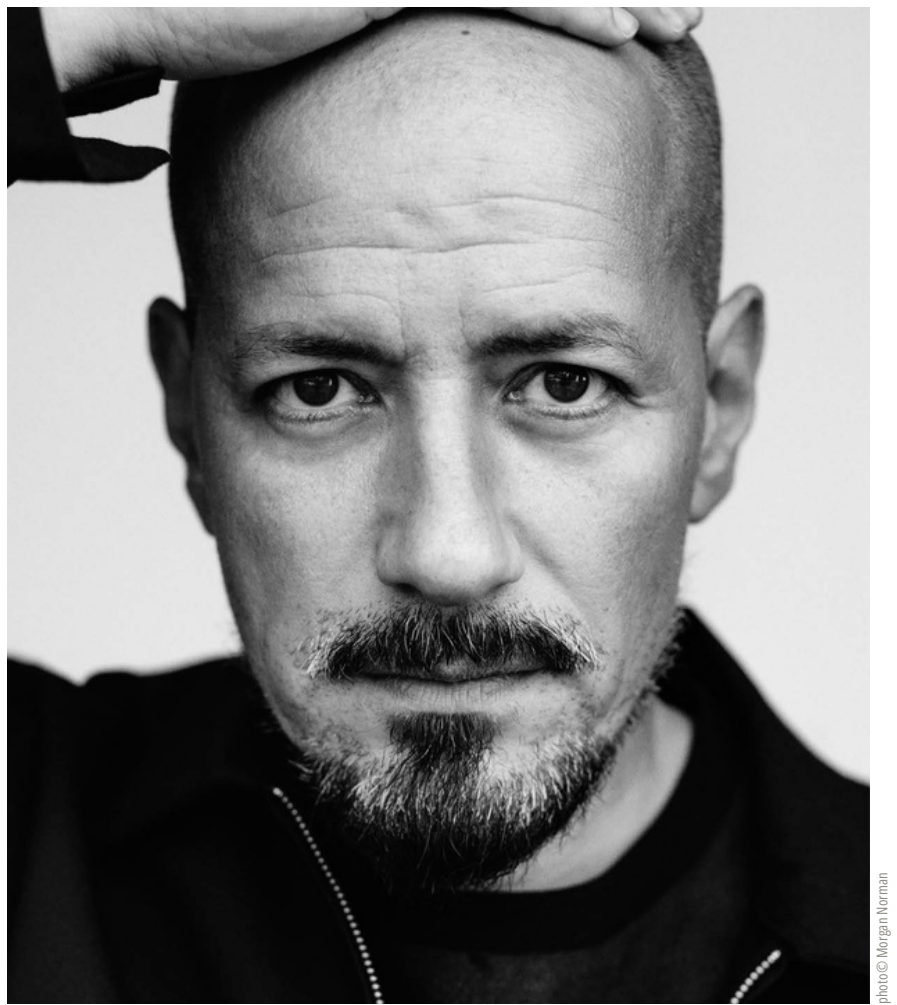


photo © Morgan Norman

Can EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC be seen as a love letter to Egyptian cinema, and more specifically to its golden age, from the 1950s to the 1970s, when the country was the world's third-largest film producer?

Absolutely. When I was younger, I used to think that Egypt was all about the pyramids and other relics of Pharaonic times. As I grew up, I realized that cinema also played an important role, and that the country had even been the hub of filmmaking in Africa and the Middle East. The Egyptian film industry – inspired by Hollywood, with its studios and star system – is comparable in size and influence only to that of India, France or the United States. Its rise in the 1950s and 1960s can be explained by the illiteracy of most of the population, who turned to movie theaters for entertainment. Cinema then became a means of cultural expression that allowed people to dream of other possibilities. Even if it's only suggested, actors are allowed on screen to drink alcohol or have extramarital affairs, things that are impossible to do in larger Egyptian society.

My father is a filmmaker, so I can say that films are literally part of my DNA. But I didn't understand how important cinema was to Egyptians until I started studying at the Alexandria University of Fine Arts. Every screening I attended was quite an experience: spectators shouted and reacted physically to what was happening on screen.

How would you describe the relationship between the Egyptian film industry and the government embodied by former general al-Sisi, who became president after a military coup?

I consider that the Egyptian film industry and the Army have a “peaceful” relationship. There’s a certain freedom of movement granted, but it obviously stops where the prerogatives of the censorship office begin – a bit like the Hays Code in Hollywood’s day. When al-Sisi came to power, the Army weighed in at 30% of Egypt’s GDP, owning under the aegis of the National Service Products Organization [a government agency controlled by the Ministry of Defense] several dozen companies in fields as varied as agribusiness, automobiles and shoe manufacturing. This stranglehold on the local economy was criticized by the IMF and the World Bank, who insisted that the Army divest some of its activities. Of course, the Army did the exact opposite, and has since built up a solid and well-established media empire, with television channels and production companies.

A series recounting al-Sisi’s rise to power [Al-Ikhtiyar or The Choice] was actually financed by one of these companies and, since I was curious as to how the 2013 coup [led by the Egyptian armed forces against Mohamed Morsi until his removal] would be portrayed, I watched it with a certain fascination. Of course, this propagandistic narrative has a relationship with the truth that I would describe as « distant ». After watching it, however, I asked myself a number of questions: if I lived in Egypt today and were offered to direct a fiction film of this kind, how would I react? Would I decline? Would I be able to do it? It’s this Cornelian choice that forms the basis of the screenplay for EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC. At first, I couldn’t wrap my head around the idea – the situation is so far-fetched that it begs for comedy. But I ended up identifying with the character.

In what way?

While I was writing the screenplay for EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC, I was approached by two countries with recognized international clout, to direct blockbusters with unlimited resources. Both countries asked for exactly the same thing, promising me total artistic freedom and unprecedented access to privileged information. One was a democracy, the other an authoritarian regime.

This vertigo prompted me to question the artist’s complex relationship with power and money. But I didn’t want to make it the subject of my film.

EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC is about lies and truth. Its main character, George Fahmy [played by Fares Fares], is a pathological liar, both at work and in his private life. It’s a talent that has made him rich and famous, and one that could lead to his demise. Conversely, Dr. Mansour [played by Amr Waked] embodies rectitude: he never lies. I think it’s a very “film noir” approach to make the antagonist the more honest of the two characters.

Speaking of “film noir”, are there any other genre elements that may have influenced the genesis of the film?

I feel very close to directors whose careers were affected by the Second World War. As the descendant of a Middle Eastern dissident, I draw my inspiration from my peers, the Jewish filmmakers who left to seek their fortune in America. Eastern European directors like Billy Wilder and Fritz Lang, who witnessed horrors on the Old Continent and crossed the Atlantic to survive. Once established in this new land, they saw their illusions gradually crumble, overtaken by the hypocrisy and pretense of another crushing machine. They tried to tell the story from the inside, through genuine genre films. I don’t think a masterpiece like THE BIG HEAT could be produced in Hollywood today, because no one would dare go so far in criticizing the system and the corruption that corrodes it. EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC is pure film noir, as was THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT. At its heart lies a fundamental, existential question: « Must I bow to this system? »

Do you consider yourself a political filmmaker?

No. For me, making a “political film” implies a calculation that I can’t bring myself to make. Politics is all about convincing: you try to convey a strong opinion, and you fight to make sure it gets through to the person you’re talking to. Problem is, today’s strong opinion is not tomorrow’s truth. You can be wrong. With art, you don’t have that luxury. You have to find a human truth that goes beyond politics and the obsolescence of opinion.

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I feel close to many exiled filmmakers: Asghar Farhadi, Andrei Zviagintsev or Ali Abbasi. We often have discussions about our situation and the role we play: what right do we have to tell the story of places we no longer inhabit? What is our responsibility towards the people who still live there? When Ali Abbasi makes *THE APPRENTICE*, or when I make my films, the gesture we claim as political is to say: I'm going to tell this story whatever the cost, regardless of the anger or satisfaction it may provoke.

During the writing process, I often surround myself with people I trust, who feed the story through long conversations. One of them, Magdi Abdelhadi, is an Egyptian journalist who works in London - among other things, he was an expert for the BBC. I ask him to read my scripts in detail, and in the context of *EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC*, for example, we talked a lot about the president's aura. Al-Sisi has been at the head of the country for over ten years now and, like most heads of state who cling to power for so long, he is no longer really a person in his own right, but an abstract figure, a symbol, an institution.

Why name al-Sisi and not choose the distance of fiction?

We talked a lot about this with my father. He was very reluctant to see me tell this story using al-Sisi's name, repeating that his presence would be the film's weak point. I initially shared his opinion and, during the writing phase, explored various options: changing the era, setting the plot during the reign of Hosni Mubarak [president from 1981 to 2011], imagining a fictitious statesman. But I quickly realized that without al-Sisi, the story would have seemed unclear. And the viewer would have thought I was talking metaphorically about him anyway.

How do you approach the realistic aspect of your directing?

I come from a documentary background, a medium to which I'm still very attached. I started working with fiction because I think it can convey a truth without necessarily having to take into account the opinions of the people involved. I'm talking about very personal things here, like the industry I belong to, what it's like to be an artist, and to be as honest as possible, I have to lie - which is

the irony of the thing. I insist, this film is fiction. But if you look closely, it describes events that actually took place in Egypt - as well as in Hollywood. When I started *EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC*, I was convinced I'd be stopped in my tracks. In the end, I felt supported, not least by the Egyptian actors and actresses in the film. Given the conflicts in the region, I think the country has bigger fish to fry at the moment than my fictional film.

How did you work on the allegorical dimension of Dr. Mansour?

In the shadow of every president, whatever the country, there is a Dr. Mansour. They are the "éminence grise", the "brain" or the "right-hand man". When I was writing this character, I identified with him enormously, because he's a puppeteer and I know this role perfectly well. I know he's trying to see the big picture and keep everything under control. To do that, he has to take his ego out of the equation and be operational: observing the weaknesses of some and identifying the vulnerabilities of others. I had written a whole scene in which a character told Dr Mansour's story. It was great, but I'm glad I took it out in the edit. I'm not sure it would have rung true, and I wanted to keep the mystery alive. Of course, you could say that Dr Mansour is a Faustian character, but for me, he's just the director of everything,

Noredin, the hero of THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT and Ibrahim, the colonel in BOY FROM HEAVEN, both played by Fares Fares, hated to see Egyptian society evolve. Do you feel that George is resisting more actively?

No. In *EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC*, the change comes about because the Army decides to start making films. Under Mubarak, you could make jokes about the President of the Republic. You could even make a film poking fun - very soberly - at him. Mubarak gave one speech a year. Al-Sisi, on the other hand, speaks all the time. It's a sign of insecurity. He's not confident in his stature and nobody can criticize him. I think that if George doesn't like al-Sisi, it's not because he's a dictator but because he's small and weak. But George is not a radical. If Egypt were a democracy, it would be an Islamic republic, which would not be good at all for the Coptic minority.

How did you achieve the timelessness of the film and its contemporary identity?

My films usually revolve around a symbolic location. The police station for *THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT* and the university courtyard for *BOY FROM HEAVEN*. The keystone of *EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC* is the military parade. I designed it as if it were still 2015. I tend to think that Egypt has been stuck in time since the day I was thrown out. I haven't been there for ten years or so, and I feel that in my head I'm still holding on to a fantasy version of it, like those old photos that fade away and leave only vague memories behind. While shooting, I realized that Cairo, like Hollywood, was frozen in time. Even if the city seems to be evolving, it remains true to itself. To a state of mind. No matter how hard you try to change it, it always ends up swallowing you up.

In the past, you've said that directing was not your favorite stage...

It's different for this film. I really loved making *EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC* for many reasons, but in particular because I wanted to work with Egyptian actors. They understood the meaning behind every word of the script, which enabled me to go even further than I had originally written. They have a deep knowledge of their characters and the situation they're in, as if the narrative material were flowing through their veins.

You've written some very fine roles for your actresses.

Zineb Triki, who plays the minister's wife, has a breathtaking level of acting. As for Cherien Dabis, I'll always be grateful to her for coming to play when she was in the middle of directing one of her own projects. It was difficult to play these women, as they are all seen through George's "male gaze". But they all managed to make their characters their own, adding a great deal of mystery. I think my favorite scene is the one at dinner when Zineb starts to castrate them all

when she contradicts them about this « Arab Shakespeare » tale - I myself, when I was a kid, thought Shakespeare was Arab - it's absolutely thrilling. I was totally impressed by Lyna Khoudri's comic talents too. She's able to keep a straight face like no one else, even though I couldn't stop giggling while watching her. Finally, I'd like to say how much I admire Donia Massoud, who plays George's wife. She's a great actress, but also a wonderful singer. Today, she lives in France as a dissident.

You're working with Fares Fares again. Why was his presence in each of the films in this unofficial trilogy important to you?

Every director has his or her favorite actor or actress, with whom communication seems to flow naturally. When we're shooting, we have lunch, dinner and weekends together. We never tire of each other. He's my best friend. Before we started our respective families, we were as thick as thieves. I write for Fares. He has an exceptional capacity for transformation. But he doesn't get any special treatment. Above all, he's one of the greatest actors in the world. And he's never been better than in *EAGLES OF THE REPUBLIC*.

You open and conclude the film with images of elderly people betting on horse races while listening to the radio. What do these scenes mean to you?

When Nasser came to power [in 1956], one of his first decisions was to ban horse racing and, consequently, to close the Giza racecourse. Yet every Saturday, these old men continue to gather, listen to the radio and gamble their money away. For me, these gamblers represent a shattered dream, as if life goes on, but in another dimension. No matter who's plundering the country, they're always there. Invariably, each weekend, they bet on horse races and hope to win.

Tarik Saleh has a background as one of the most influential graffiti artists in Europe in the 80's. His dramatic feature film debut came with *METROPIA*, 2009, a dystopic animation with Stellan and Alexander Skarsgård, Juliette Lewis, Vincent Gallo and Udo Kier. The film premiered at Venice Film Festival as opening film for Critics' Week. *THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT* won 'The Grand Jury Prize' at Sundance 2017, received a Guldbagge Award for 'Best film' in 2018, was nominated as 'Best Foreign Film' at the César Awards and was a box office hit with more than 400 000 tickets sold in France. Tarik Saleh won the Prix du scénario for 'Best Screenplay' at the Cannes Film Festival 2022 for *CAIRO CONSPIRACY* aka *BOY FROM HEAVEN*, Sweden's Oscar entry in 2023, received a César nomination for 'Best Foreign Film' and achieved over 500 000 cinema admissions in France.

**TARIK
SALEH
Director &
Scriptwriter**

Cast

George Fahmy
Donya
Suzanne
Dr Mansour Rula
Fawzy
El Ghul
Yasser Islam
Ramy

Fares FARES
Lyna KHOUDRI
Zineb TRIKI
Amr WAKED
Cherien DABIS
Ahmed KAIRY
Nael
Sherwan HAJI
Suhaib NASHWAN

EAGLES
OF THE
REPUBLIC

Crew

Direction and Screenwriting
A production by

A co-production by

Production Design
Editing
Original Score
Costume Design
Makeup and Hair
Visual Effects
Sound
Executive production

A production by

A co-production by

With the participation of

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Linda MUTAWI
Alexandre MALLET-GUY
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Mark LWOOF
Roger ROSENBERG
Theis SCHMIDT
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