



Ladder to Damascus
a film by Mohamad Malas



Ladder to Damascus (Sulam Ila Dimashq) سلم إلى دمشق

Content

Ghalia is possessed by Zeina's spirit. Haunted by the life of a girl, who drowned the day she was born, Ghalia travels to Damascus, where she studies acting. There, she meets Fouad, an aspiring film-maker who becomes fascinated by Ghalia's duality. He takes her under his wing and helps her find a place to live. Fouad's love for Ghalia and Zeina blossoms, while the tumultuous events in Syria start unfolding in the streets around them and gradually encroaches on their idyllic isolation.

Credits

Syria/Lebanon/Qatar 2013, Arabic with English subtitles, Colour, 97 minutes

Director	Mohammad Malas
Producer	Georges Schoucair
Scriptwriter	Mohammad Malas, Samer Mohamed Ismail
Cinematographer	Joude Gorani
Editor	Ayhan Ergursel
Composer	Toufic Farroukh, Charbel Haber

Cast

Najla El Wazza, Bilal Martini, Gianna Aanid

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Film-maker Mohamad Malas

Mohamad Malas was born in 1945 in Quneitra on the Golan Heights. He is a prominent Syrian filmmaker whose films garnered him international recognition. Malas is among the first auteur filmmakers in Syrian cinema.

Malas worked as a school teacher between 1965 and 1968 before moving to Moscow to study filmmaking at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). During his time at VGIK he directed several short films. After his return to Syria Malas started working at the Syrian Television. There he produced several short films including Quneitra 74, in 1974 and al-Zhakira (The Memory) in 1975.

Along with Omar Amiralay he co-founded the Damascus Cinema Club.

Between 1980 and 1981 Malas shot the documentary, al-Manam (The Dream), about the Palestinians living in the refugee camps in Lebanon during the civil war.

He directed his first feature film, Ahlam al-Madina (Dreams of the City), in 1983. The autobiographical coming-of-age film received the first prize both at the Valencia and the Carthage Film Festivals.

In 1995 Malas, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of cinema, shot with Omar Amiralay Nur wa Zilal a documentary film about Nazih Shahbandar whom he described as Syria's first filmmaker. The film was banned by Syrian authorities and could only be screened one time in 1993 at the American Cultural Center in Damascus.

Malas's second feature film, al-Lail (The Night), was realized in 1992. The autobiographical film is set in Quneitra in the years between 1936 and the Arab–Israeli War of 1948. It forms, along with Ahlam al-Madina, the first and second parts of a yet unfinished trilogy. Both films were shown at Berlinale's Forum section. Al-Lail received international recognition and won first prize at the 1992 Carthage Film Festival. However, the film was banned in Syria until 1996. In 2013 Ahlam al-Medina was among the top 10 of the "100 Greatest Arab Films List", which film professionals from the Arab World and associates of Dubai International Film Festival voted for.

Another collaboration between Malas and Omar Amiralay is the 1996 documentary film Moudaress about the Syrian pioneer painter Fateh Moudarres.

Bab al-Makam (Passion), released in 2005, was Malas's third feature film, it won the Special Jury Award at the Marrakech International Film Festival. Sullam Ila Dimashq (Ladder to Damascus), released in 2013, premiered at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival and was screened in more than 50 festivals since.

Mohamad Malas' 1991 book "The Dream. A Diary of the Film" was translated into English and published by the American University of Cairo Press in 2016. A monograph on Mohamad Malas will be published at Palgrave MacMillan by the end of 2017.



Texts about the film

Between dream and disaster - by Charlotte Bank for *Qantara.de*, 24.3.2014

In his new film, "Ladder to Damascus", the renowned Syrian filmmaker Mohammad Malas has succeeded in portraying the whole tragedy of the Syrian conflict without depicting any scenes of violence. By Charlotte Bank

On 4 March, unsettling news began to spread throughout Internet social forums. It was said that the Syrian filmmaker Mohammad Malas had been arrested on the Syrian-Lebanese border. He had been on his way to Beirut to fly from there to Geneva, where his latest film, "Ladder to Damascus", was to be shown at the International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights (Festival du film et forum international sur les droits humains).

Luckily, he was released later the same day. However, he had to cancel his trip and has not been able to leave the country since then. This is not the first time that the Syrian secret police have employed the tactic of apprehending Syrian artists or filmmakers who support the uprising against the regime as they attempted to leave the country.

A similar thing happened to filmmaker Nidal Hassan in late 2011, when he tried to fly to Copenhagen to take part in the Copenhagen International Documentary Festival (CPH: DOX). In the summer of 2012, the producer and festival director Orwa Nyrabia was arrested at Damascus airport as he was on his way to Cairo.

However, even if Mohammad Malas is unable to leave the country himself, his film is nonetheless circling the globe. It is a film that conveys an urgent message of humanity to mankind – something that has become a rarity in Syria.

The "concealed film"

"Ladder to Damascus" tells the story of two young people, who meet each other through a film project and fall in love, and their colourfully diverse shared household in the Old City of Damascus. The protagonist Fouad is so obsessed with making films that others simply call him "Cinema". He meets Ghalia during a theatre rehearsal and is at once fascinated by her. He follows her, because he surmises that "a film lies concealed" in her, a film he would like to discover.

Ghalia's life and consciousness are intertwined in a peculiar way with that of Zeina, a young woman who committed suicide on the day Ghalia was born after learning of her father's arrest. Fouad helps Ghalia, who is new in Damascus, to find a place to live. She eventually moves into the same house as Fouad, a house that is also home to a group of artists, graphic designers, writers and philosophers. It is a colourful mix of people belonging to different religions and ethnic groups, something that was very common in Damascus before the revolution, but is today becoming increasingly impossible.

This artistic household embodies the hopes that Syrians held for a peaceful transformation, which still seemed possible at the start of the uprising but now threatens to shatter amidst



anxiety, terror and fanaticism. The film is interspersed with arrests, torture and threats, and demonstrates in the most penetrating manner how life in Damascus has changed. It also shows just how much effort it takes to find the will to resist each and every day.

No one is spared by the unfolding events. The landlady is a pious, elderly woman, who unites all her tenants under one roof and gives each of them their own personal password to allow them safe entry into the house. She is usually immersed in prayer. One day, on her return from Friday prayers at the Omayyaden Mosque, she breaks down crying. She can only relate in fragments the horrible scenes she has just witnessed on the street. "Young people, with their lives still ahead of them..." is all that she can articulate, before breaking off into tears.

A Syrian microcosm

Malas weaves the stories of his characters together; their paths cross time and again in the courtyard of their house in Damascus. Their faces are often lined with worry and anxiety. Yet there are moments of hope and real solidarity: the open film screenings in the courtyard, for example, shared memories and common concerns when one of the tenants is arrested. In many respects, the house is like a microcosm of Syrian society.

The renowned Syrian filmmaker Mohammad Malas, who attended the International Film Festival in Dubai just a few months ago, is now no longer allowed to leave Syria. Malas may not be able to leave the country, but his film is already being shown around the world

With his film "Ladder to Damascus", Mohammad Malas has succeeded in portraying the whole tragedy of the Syrian conflict without depicting any scenes of violence. The threatening atmosphere is omnipresent – from the background noise of the overhead military jets and the distant bombings to the never-ending fear of being arrested, a fear that flares up with every heavy knock on the door and in those moments when the whereabouts of a friend is unknown, as this could mean the worst. As in all of his films, "Ladder to Damascus" is interwoven with poetic images that drift between dreams, memories and reality, impressing the viewer with their symbolic force.

For the most part, the film is shot indoors. It is almost as if the film wanted to adhere to the words of Fouad himself, whose father gave him a camera and said "Go out and film everything you see", but who then realised that to take your camera out onto the street in Syria means taking your life into your hands.

A cry for freedom

It is a fact that a large number of people were deliberately killed during the Syrian uprising just because they were holding a camera in their hands. One of these was Bassel Shehadeh, a young film student who had broken off his studies in the USA in order to teach young citizen journalists in Syria film and editing techniques. Shehadeh was shot dead in the street in Homs, a camera in his hand. His death plays a role in Malas' film as well. When Hussein, who has just been released from prison, hears the news, he throws his television out the window, creating such a crash that it sounds like a bomb going off.



At the end of the film, Hussein climbs a ladder that he has erected on the roof of the house. The other tenants hold on tightly to the ladder as he climbs up loudly crying "hurriyyah" (freedom). An explosion silences the cry and the screen turns black. There could hardly be a clearer way to express the story of the Syrian revolution – a story of the collective cry for freedom suppressed with deadly armed force.

source: qantara.de

Ladder to Damascus - by Jared Mobarak for *The Film Stage* on September 17, 2013

A non-violent, secular movement began in Syria in early 2011 led by young protestors calling for democratic freedoms and the fall of president Bashar al-Assad's Ba'ath regime. It evolved into a civil war that rages on today with mounting chemical attacks by Assad's government raising the threat of international interference to the point of our own country's possible involvement. But while it's easy for American media to speculate and fear-monger as thousands die in the streets, there's no way to truly understand what the Syrian people are feeling during their struggle for freedoms our own ancestors won centuries ago other than hearing their voices and seeing their pain. Mohamad Malas' *Soullam ila Dimashq* [Ladder to Damascus] is therefore as much a document of an actual war as it is the fictional drama inspired from it.

Shot in Damascus months after the first protests turned into battles, the production inevitably put cast and crew in constant danger. As the character Fouad—nicknamed "Cinema" (Bilal Martini)—explains at the start, having a camera to shoot the injustices outside your door is as good as holding a gun to the opposition. Whereas documentarian Omar Amiralay openly spoke out against government oppression through his work in the decades previous, this new flood of chaos won't afford such luxuries. His films and the art of many others inspired this new mobilization of twenty and thirty-somethings and anything more would only exacerbate the situation by increasing the number of citizens against Assad. But as Malas' story—co-written by Samer Mohamad Ismail—shows, it's never long before war knocks on your door anyway.

There is a powerful notion of human universality at play with an Ibn Hazm quote, "You are haunted by people who are like you," leading us into the fantastical idea that Ghalia (Najla El Wa'za) lives with the soul of another young girl who died the day she was born named Zeina (Gianna Aanid). It points towards a sort of survivor's guilt wherein soldiers your age are dying in the streets for their and your freedom while you stand on the fringes watching it happen. When will enough be enough before you too join the war? How many friends and family must die or be imprisoned before you realize the rebellion is no longer something you can pretend is happening farther than the suburbs mere miles away. The bombs will always get closer.

It is the meeting of Ghalia and Fouad at art school that begins our journey. Her passionate embrace of Zeina's ghost intrigues him as a subject he could film on his camcorder while her



desire to be with those of like mind and spirit nudges her to move into the large and elegant home he shares with other artistic souls slowly letting the revolution creep into their work. This refuge serves as an escape from the bombs still only heard in the distance—a place where Fouad can screen films on the wall as a cathartic reprieve the rest may use to forget what's happening if only for a brief moment. While some images soothe, however, others can embolden. An interview with Zeina's father released from prison proves one that touches the souls of all watching.

At this point things escalate and Ghalia's duality converges into one young girl tired and determined in the face of unavoidable turmoil ripping families apart. She feels the pain Zeina must have felt, believing her own father is the one who wallowed in prison when we've already seen him sitting by a fire at her childhood home. This empathy spreads like wildfire as the more radical housemates—Hussein (Hussein Marii) and Lara (Lara Saade)—leave to join the resistance at meetings setup via Facebook; landlord Emm Sami (Rana Malas) is seen breaking down during prayers courtesy of the heartbreaking tragedies around her; and Zarzour (Mohamad Zarzour) finds himself the victim of abuse in the streets without provocation. The war has arrived at their door and Malas shows us their newfound readiness to enlist.

Malas constantly juxtaposes archived footage onto his scenes through Fouad's projector or Ghalia's dreams, injecting the emotional tug of war at play that finally proves too much to ignore. At times he'll cut scenes so the voice we just heard coming from a character's mouth is playing over a briefly silent image before synching back up as though reading his/her thoughts. There is an introspective quality throughout as we evolve alongside these men and women and let the passion rise within us too. We understand the burgeoning love between them all as couplings become clear, each embarking on an existence wherein they no longer are living for just themselves. It's a microcosm of rebellion with their house becoming a metaphorical Syria its inhabitants must fight tirelessly to keep free.

We see this through instances of Malas turning Fouad's camera into our eyes so Ghalia can bare her soul directly to us or so Hussein can tellingly joke about his friend needing to film indoors as it's unsafe outside much like cinematographer Joude Gorani must for this whole. A majority of is captured within these walls out of necessity, but also as a way to instill the claustrophobic feeling Syria has felt since the Ba'ath Party took over in 1963. These artists and philosophers must break free from the constraints of their own bodies and fears as much as the establishment suppressing their humanity. And as the war inches closer and their anger and frustrations rise, Ladder to Damascus' title finally comes to fruition on their rooftop. They will no longer be contained.

source: The Film Stage



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