

# Women's Role in and Contribution

By Mohammad Soueid

Beyond the recognition of Lebanese film makers Asia Dagher and her niece Mary Queenie as belonging to the generation of pioneers in Egyptian cinema, Herta Gargour (of German origin) merits all the credit for laying the cornerstone of Lebanese cinema and film making after the end of the silent period. The 1930s witnessed the onset of these three women's careers. Even though they started in the 1930s their paths diverged. Dagher and Queenie paradoxically opted to migrate to Egypt where they succeeded in their acting and producing careers and in promoting Lebanese cinema abroad, leaving the floor to Gargour, a foreigner who lived, worked and died in Lebanon. Despite the dearth of information on Gargour's life and her cinematic background, it is well known that she married a Lebanese soldier but whose marriage ended in her husband's early death. Little is known of her life other than the recurrent rumors that either affirmed or denied her death. During the mid eighties, news spread that Gargour was still alive and living in the area of Monteverde, East Beirut; however, it was difficult to confirm or refute the occasional hearsay.

also directed by Pedutti. The film was a success and was attended by a favorable audience upon its release in 1932. Yet, with the worldwide introduction of sound and the waning of silent cinema, the possibility of making use of the old equipment previously employed in making Pedutti's films became impossible. So the need to improve the production mode and introduce sound into the cinematic film became apparent.

Herta Gargour's name emerged around that time. She headed "Luminar films" a production house founded in 1934. Earlier on Gargour concentrated on training a technical team to handle the production scheme of any film the company planned to produce. Given that the Lebanese film industry was still in its primal phases and run by amateurs, Gargour decided to send all those willing to master the art of film making to Europe. This was an impossible mission since her limited financial resources restricted her choice to those eligible to fill the gap in leading positions. Among those chosen was George Papadopolos later known as George Costi. He traveled to France where he received extensive training for several months in cinematography and laboratory techniques. Upon his return, Costi was appointed director of photography in *Bayna Hayaqil Ba'alback* the first movie produced by "Luminar films". The film, released in 1936, was adapted from a script by Karam Boustani and directed by the Italian Julio de Luca and is considered the first sound film in Lebanon. All what is left of the film in question is one single roll that depicts the principal features characterizing prominent films in the history of talkies.

Through incorporating song scenes and vocal recitals, talkies tried to attract the audience of the silver screen. *Bayna Hayaqil Ba'alback* is full of song scenes and in the background an exciting love story brews between a foreigner and a beautiful woman from Baalbeck, which stirs feelings of vengeance in the area. There is no exact data indicating how successful *Bayna Hayaqil Ba'alback* turned out to be in the box office. What is certain is the negative events that followed its production namely the migration of its director to a Latin American country, the closing of "Luminar Films", and Herta Gargour's disappearance from the cinematic milieu. News about her ceased until mysterious rumors began floating about her death and ambiguous past. Gargour was no different than many other prominent artists who realized the difficulties involved in a field that lacks the bare minimum for its subsistence.

## Disappearance and Re-appearance

After Gargour's disappearance from the lime light,



Picture Credit: Film Producer Assia Dagher during Camile Chamoun's visit to Cairo, 1953. Photo by Youssef Akl © Fondation Arabe pour L'Image.

## The Pioneer Producer

Italian Director Jordano Pedutti is the forefather of Lebanese silent cinema. In 1930 he directed the first silent film entitled "The Adventures of Elias Mabrouk". After Pedutti's successful attempt, the art of film making became popular and fans of the 7th art were eager to produce more material. Rachid Ali Shaaban better known as **Abu El-Abed the Bell** (*Abu El-'Abed Al-Jaras*) produced the second silent film "The Adventures of Abu El-Abed"

# to Lebanese Cinema

female presence in the fields of production and film making was nonexistent. Throughout the period between the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1970s women were mostly noticed in acting, costume design, and as make-up artists. Besides, women were responsible for various artistic duties on the set such as script writing, assisting directors and editing which became known to be traditionally performed by women. Moreover, women undertook technical responsibilities related to film laboratories, the printing press, and film development. These enterprises became popular and prospered during the 1950s with the establishment of big studios such as *Haroun*, *Baalbeck*, *Al-'Asri* and *Al-Sakhra* and remained so until the 1980's.

This minimal female representation in Lebanese Cinema lasted three decades and could be attributed primarily to the delay in the rise of Lebanese cinema until after Independence. Besides, the cinematic milieu was greatly affected by the immigration of Egyptian film makers who arrived in Beirut in the 1960's fleeing the Jamal Abdel Nasser nationalizations. This resulted in the weakening of the newly established Lebanese film industry. Joint projects, whose sole aim was material profit, between Egyptian film makers and Lebanese producers and distributors ruled out the possibility of undertaking local projects. The outcome of this collective effort was a series of commercial films that made use of Egyptian stars and the Egyptian dialect as marketing tools.

In fact, the Lebanese film industry blossomed during the late 1960s because of political, cultural and social developments that directly influenced Arab Cinema in general and the youth cinema in particular. In the late 1970s, during the civil war, Lebanese cinema succeeded in establishing its own distinct identity following the return of Egyptian film makers to their country. Following the Arab debacle in 1967 many voices were heard calling for the liberation of Arab cinema from its prevailing commercial guise. The initial appeal came from Egypt, in 1968, where a number of film makers declared the establishment of a "New Cinema Group" whose first work **A Song on the Borders** (*Oughniya 'ala al-Mamarr*) directed by Ali Abdel Khalik embodies the spirit of resistance and combat against Israel. In 1972 a youth film festival was held in Damascus and a statement was issued, in its closing session, by the participating Arab film makers requesting the establishment of an "alternative cinema". This appeal soon became a slogan which in turn developed into an intellectual debate whose echoes resonated all over the Arab world and lingered for several years.

## A Different Generation

With the emergence of a new generation of film makers, between the new cinema and the alternative cinema movement, the features of Lebanese cinema began to develop. Other than being united by their spirit of rebellion and yearning for political change, the new generation enjoyed a rich academic and cultural background acquired either by experience or from studying Film in European institutes. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of several names that became prominent in the film industry such as Bourhan Alawiyeh, Maroun Baghdadi, Jocelyne Saab, Randa Chahhal, Heiney Srour, Mai Masri etc.

Over the past three decades Lebanese cinema has witnessed a rise in films that deal with women's issues. This increase in the number of women film makers is attributed to the pioneering efforts of Nabiha Lutfi, a Lebanese film director who emigrated to Egypt many years ago. The above mentioned female film directors actively participated in providing documentary films with new prospects. Even though some female directors continued their work in documentary films, others favored working in the field of fiction and feature films following international standards. [**Leila and the Wolves** (*Leila wa al-Dhi'ab*), by Heiney Srour, **Suspended Life** (*Hayat Mou'alaqa*) by Jocelyne Saab, **Sand Screens** (*Shashat Al-Raml*), **The Infidels** (*Al-Koufaar*) and **Civilized** (*Moutahadirat*) by Randa Chahhal]. However, along with the development in film technique the Lebanese film industry witnessed an increase in the number of female directors with the spread in the use of video, electronic media, and audiovisual schools which graduated hundreds of students in various film jobs.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s major local production shifted from documentary film making and experimental work to video art. Several directors such as Mona Hattoum, Chirine Tannous, Rima Karimeh and Rania Stephan had a big impact on developing the language utilized in documentaries and incorporating "video art" into the field of visual expression. In this context, video art might appear to be women's friend par excellence due to the freedom of creation it allows and the relatively light burden it imposes compared to the cinema. It should be observed that Lebanese women do not experience the same impediments encountered by women in other Arab countries. Despite the fact that women's issues potently surface in films, yet, women's conditions in the film industry is no different than that of men. Among their many demands is creating an infra structure for the film industry and government funding to help film makers to meet the conditions of co-production with other film makers and countries.

Translated by  
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