

Satin Rouge

A film by RAJA AMARI

(France/Tunisia, 2002, 91 minutes, in Arabic with English subtitles)

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Synopsis

A widowed Tunisian seamstress takes an unlikely journey of self-discovery in writer-director Raja Amari's sumptuous and sensual SATIN ROUGE.

While investigating a suspected liaison between her headstrong teenaged daughter and a cabaret musician, young widow Lilia becomes drawn to an exotic nightclub netherworld of Rubénesque belly dancers and nocturnal pleasure-seekers.

She strikes up a friendship with one of the dancers, then eventually takes the stage herself—quickly becoming the favourite of both cabaret patrons and the club's hot-blooded drummer.

As she gradually sheds her shapeless, matronly housedresses for the flamboyantly sequined bar-girl garb, she also begins to emerge from her cocoon of melancholy and loneliness.

Variety critic David Stratton compares Amari's tale to Douglas Sirk's American suburban melodramas of the 1950's (particularly ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS) calling the film a "handsomely produced and exhilarating romantic drama."

About Belly Dancing

Belly dance has ancient roots and thriving international traditions that remain extraordinarily vital today. From the oldest ritual traditions of the eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Mideast, belly dancing has spread throughout the world, finding many adherents not only in its areas of origin but also in such areas as North America, India, and eastern Asia. The multitude of dance forms grouped in English as "belly dance" have a variety of names in the cultures that produced them. To Greeks, belly dance is the *cifte telli*; to Turks, *rakkase*; to Egyptians, *raks sharki*. Despite such variety, the belly dance traditions of different cultures share some generally recognized features. Other dances may also have long traditions and important functions, but belly dance is associated – at least in the minds of many scholars and practitioners – with the deepest sources of dance in ancient fertility rituals that blended the erotic with the religious.

One of belly dance's sources may lie in the existence in the ancient world of prostitutes attached to civic temples. Far from being part of any shady or criminal subculture, such women held high social position. Throughout the ancient cultures of Greece, Persia, Palestine, and North Africa, sacred dancing was an important part of the fertility rituals conducted by such temple priestesses. In the animistic, polytheistic religions of ancient times, erotic ritual dance was intended to placate gods, ensure crop fertility, and bring glory to a given city.

As belly dance developed from its ancient roots, some cultures endowed it with new meanings that belie the kind of "nightclub" eroticism often projected on the form today. In late-19th-century Persia, for example, belly dance was performed only privately, among women; it was not intended for male viewing pleasure. In keeping with its sources in fertility ritual, Persian belly dance was associated less with the act of conception than with the movements of labor in birth. The common practice among traditional belly dancers of avoiding high-heeled shoes and dancing barefoot also connects the dance to ancient

practice—the barefoot dancer remains in physical touch with the earth—while defying modern stereotypes of eroticism.

The sounds to which belly dancing is traditionally performed also have origins in ancient music. Unlike much Western music, which operates on principles of harmonic and rhythmic progress through conflict toward resolution, the music of the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Mideast tends to emphasize continuous flow, the development of rhythmic swirls of modal sound that envelop a listener in large, complex patterns and provide space for contemplation. In Eastern forms of music and dance, much may be improvised; such is certainly the case with belly dancing, which captures in movement the musical differences between East and West. Emphasizing the flow and ripple of belly muscles and the sway of the hips, belly dance is not based on patterns of steps, as in Western dance, but on continuous movement.

After a long, multicultural development throughout its areas of origin, belly dancing was discovered by Westerners during the age of Western expansion and colonialism. At the Chicago Exposition at the turn of the twentieth century, Americans and Europeans, at once scandalized and titillated by belly dancing, began to use modernized forms of the style in pseudo- "oriental" cabaret acts. As the modern world developed, immigrations to Europe and North America from the parts of the world in which belly dance flourished created crosscurrents of influence between Western pop styles and belly dance tradition.

Today, belly dance takes many forms. Some belly dance remains highly traditional; some employ Westernized music and glitzy show-biz ambience. In whatever form it expresses itself today, belly dance remains one of the world's strongest and most vital links to an ancient heritage.

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An interview with Raja Amari

Is the cabaret and belly dancing an excuse to tell the story of a woman's independence in an Arab society in general?

I have always wanted to make a film revolving around belly dancing. I trained for many years as a belly dancer at the Conservatoire de Tunis (Academic Dance Institute in Tunis).

I also grew up watching the Golden Age Egyptian musicals from the 40's & 50's that are still played today on TV. My mother and I loved the well-known belly dancer Samia Gamal and the singer Farid El Atrache.

Had you ever been in a cabaret night-club before the shoot?

I had heard about them. However in Tunisia, as in every Arabic country, no decent woman has their place in such a "depraved" milieu. I went there for the first time on location with the producer, the director of photography and the main actress, Hiam Abbass.

The first time we walked in, all conversations stopped and people looked at us in silence, but once the first moment of surprise passed, things went back to normal. It is not an aggressive environment.

They were all very welcoming. It actually turned out to be quite funny. One night, as I was walking out the door of my house, my father asked me where I was going. I replied "to the night-club" to which he answered "work hard, my daughter!"

Was it difficult to make two such opposite worlds meet ?

We're talking about two quite opposite worlds that everything opposes. On the one hand, the world of the day is strict, dominant and prudish. On the other, the world of the night is

relaxed, marginal and lascivious. I wanted them to join up at all costs through Lilia's character. In a typically traditional society, their paths would never cross because night-clubs are perceived as a bit creepy and a depraved environment. Lilia is a "regular" woman, a model housewife with a great deal of moral conviction and a strict sense of duty. She is, gradually and almost in spite of herself, going to go against everything that she stood for and everything that she forbade or reproached her daughter with: sleeping over, going out with a man... little by little, she gets attracted by the world of the night and finds joy in the process. It is almost as if she was becoming her daughter or taking over her daughter's life.

She hovers from one world to the other and finally loses touch. When she first goes to the night-club, she discovers a dangerous world more like the world she had in mind... the lights, the music, the belly dancers, the men and the pleasure... she is awe-struck and subsequently faints.

Why does she go back?

When she comes back, it is almost a second phase. At that point, she understands that people go to such places to have fun. She goes back and forges a friendship with Folla, the main belly-dancer of the night-club. It is the personal journey of a woman toward liberation because, after all, Lilia blossoms when she dances. Her daughter has grown up and is ready to leave. This widowed mother who is still young is going to find herself alone pretty soon. The nightclub offers her an alternative by providing her with new friendship and companionship. She strays from the rigid code of conduct she had set for herself. Her idea of losing oneself verges possibly on perversion. She wants to lose herself and the peak of her perdition is her sexual connection with her daughter's boyfriend who is a musician in the nightclub. It is a way of life that is not tolerated. Her next door neighbor and her uncle from the countryside are representative of the social pressure and repressive prevailing morality.

However this is a new life that is shamefully hidden and not overt at all...

Over there, it is the way things are done; everybody leads a double life in a way. It is very much linked to the relationship between men and women. In Arab society, there is a restrictive code surrounding the family, women and their place in society. My friends all have boyfriends and girlfriends but their families don't know about it or at least pretend not to. Social hypocrisy begets this behaviour. Lilia plays with that concept. She marries her daughter to Chokri, the cabaret musician. Everybody is there, her cabaret friends, her neighbor and her family.

Her success resides in the fact that she manages to combine both worlds. The end, however, is still very ambiguous. One could think that by letting the marriage happen she abandons her designs on Chokri; but for me, making it happen means keeping Chokri available for her. What could be seen as a renunciation or a submission on her part is actually just a social cover up: she keeps her lover by her side by becoming his mother-in-law.

The two love scenes and their treatment are extremely rare in Tunisian films. Do you think that it is likely to be interpreted as controversial when the film is released in Tunisia?

Yes, probably... in the social context of Arab culture, these scenes are probably going to shock some people because you don't show "that kind of thing" in such an explicit way. Yet the film is going to be released in Tunisia on April 8, 2002 and was co-funded by the Tunisian state. There is also an Algerian distributor that is interested in it. For me, if there is anything to be shocked about, it is more the fact that people refuse to see reality as it is. In the film, the mother is a widow but she still has sexual desires. Thanks to what she goes through, she puts an end to the stifling morality that was imposed upon her.

Indeed, aren't you afraid to shock by tackling the symbolic figure of the mother and moreover, a widow?

It is true that what may bother people the most is the fact that the main character is a mother. The mother is supposed to represent the pillar on which the whole society, i.e. the family, the virtues and values to be passed on, is based. Making her lose control in a way unbalances the perception of "good morality". Lilia is going to do everything in her power to fulfill her desire up to the very end, in the final scene, when she becomes literally perverse.

If Lilia loses herself, it is because she no longer wants to fight her desires, and that she indulges in her needs. She follows her dream, without rebellion and her experience at the night-club will enable her to leave her position as a "mother" and become a woman who is looked at and desired. In her journey, she discovers that she has conflicting feelings of desire, love, humiliation and jealousy.

Why do men hardly talk or are mute in the film?

I told myself that I was going to make a film about women. The main character is a woman, her friends are obviously women, but the man is at the centre of their concern, including when Lilia is fearful for her daughter because of a man. He is there even if he does not talk much. He is at the core of the story since he is the trigger.

Is it credible to show Lilia walking alone at night in the streets of Tunis? By the way, you hardly show the city itself...

It is not exceptional to see a woman walking alone in the street at night even if it is not very favorably regarded. It is quite common nowadays. Besides, my intention was not to show shots of the Medina or of picturesque artisans. It was not a film about the city itself. I minimized the social context to concentrate on the story of a character who evolves in contemporary Tunisia. It is a universal story in a modern context.

Filmographies

RAJA AMARI (Director)

Raja Amari was born in Tunis in 1971. She trained for many years as a belly dancer at the Conservatoire de Tunis. She studied Romance Languages with an emphasis on Art History at the University of Tunis. She completed her film studies at the Paris film school FEMIS where she directed two short films. SATIN ROUGE is her first feature length film.

1998 AVRIL (short film)

Winner Special Jury Prize - Milan Film Festival

Winner Special Jury Prize - Tunis Short Films Festival (Tunisia)

Winner Best Cinematography Award -International

Short Film Festival, Larissa (Greece)

2000 UN SOIR DE JUILLET (short film)

2002 SATIN ROUGE

Winner New Director's Showcase Award-Seattle International Film Festival

HIAM ABBASS (Lilia)

Born in Haïfa, Hiam Abbass moved to Paris where she works on North African as well as European projects. She is working on a feature length film set in the occupied territories.

1995 HAIFA by Rachid Masharawi - Palestine

1996 THE KID FROM CHAABA (LE GONE DU CHAABA)

by Christophe Ruggia - France

1998 LIVING IN PARADISE (VIVRE AU PARADIS) by Bourlem Guerdjou - France

1999 LIGNE 209 by Bernard Dumond - France

1999 ALI RABIAA ET LES AUTRES by Ahmed Boulane - Morocco

2000 ONCE WE GROW UP (QUAND ON SERA GRANDS) by Renaud Cohen - France

2000 FAIS-MOI DES VACANCES by Didier Bivel - France

2001 L'AGE DU GOUDRON by Denis Chouinard - Quebec

2002 SATIN ROUGE by Raja Amari - France/ Tunisia

2002 AIME TON PÈRE by Jacob Berger - France

As Director:

2000 LE PAIN (short film)

Credits

Lilia Hiam Abbass
Salma Hend El Fahem
Chokri Maher Kamoun
Folla Monia Hichri
The neighbour Faouzia Badr
Hela Nadra Lamloum
The boss Abou Moez El Fazaa
Béchir Salah Miled

Written and Directed by Raja Amari
Cinematographer Diane Baratier
Sound Frédéric De Ravignan
Set Designer Kaïs Rostom
Editor Pauline Dairou
1st Assistant Director Pamela Varela
Script Saïda Ben Mahmoud
Sound Editor Thomas Robert
Sound Mixer Cyril Holtz
Costume Designer Magdalena Garcia Caniz
Make-up and Hair Hajer Bouhaouala
Original Music Nawfel El Manaa

Produced by ADR PRODUCTIONS (Alain Rozanes & Pascal Verroust),
NOMADIS IMAGES (Dora Bouchoucha Fourati), Arte France Cinéma,
l'Agence Nationale de Promotion de l'Audiovisuel-Tunisie (A.N.P.A).

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