

## Courtesan and Concubine

### LOVE MATCHES AND MARRIAGE PLOTS

Togo Mizrahi's musical melodrama *Qalb imra'a* (*Heart of a Woman*, 1940) features two weddings. The first wedding opens with a montage following a visual idiom established in Mizrahi's film *Layla mumtira* (*A Rainy Night*, 1939; see chap. 6). The image of champagne pouring into crystal glasses is superimposed over fashionably dressed youth dancing in pairs. The unhappy bride, Khayriya (Amina Rizq), like her counterpart Layla in *A Rainy Night*, is resigned to the union. When the film opens, Khayriya, the daughter of a landowning family in the Egyptian countryside, is engaged to her first cousin, Amin (Anwar Wagdi), the orphaned son of a noble. But Amin spurns Khayriya when he learns that, unbeknownst to her, her family has lost its wealth. Khayriya's mother and her brother decide to hide their changed circumstances from Khayriya to spare her a second blow. Fayiz (Sulayman Naguib), a wealthy factory owner, falls in love with Khayriya, and persists in his desire to marry her even after learning that there will be no dowry. Khayriya, still in love with her cousin, unenthusiastically accepts his proposal.

While in *A Rainy Night* the montage of the nuptials is accompanied by Felix Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," the montage of Khayriya and Fayiz's wedding in *Heart of a Woman* is accompanied by nondiegetic strains of Arabic music. The scene then cuts to the inside of a tent, where we see the source of the music: a male signer accompanied by traditional instruments is entertaining the villagers. His inspiring performance (*tarab*) is periodically interrupted by the celebrants' interjection of praise and appreciation. Female dancers wear long-sleeved, high-necked, ankle-length black dresses—not the revealing, spangled costumes worn by dancers in *A Rainy Night*. Khayriya and Fayiz's cross-class, communal wedding party celebrates not only their nuptials but also Egyptian village culture. The wedding party reflects the groom's generosity, civic-mindedness, and appreciation of local traditions—characteristics the bride comes to appreciate over the course of the film.

In the second wedding, Amin weds Fatima (Aqila Ratab), the daughter of butcher, whose nouveau riche family seeks legitimation via her marriage with a member of the elite. The well-matched social climbers, Fatima and Amin, whose first on-screen dialogue is conducted in affected English, wed off-screen in Cairo. Seeking to arouse the jealousy of Amin's cousins, now living in genteel poverty, they throw a lavish, exclusive wedding party in the village. Two professional dancers, backed by a small orchestra, perform to Ravel's *Boléro*. Fatima offers to sing for her guests, but the song turns into a suggestive flirtation with Fayiz, Khayriya's husband.

The audience's sympathies are with Khayriya and Fayiz—and the fusion of modernity with tradition, wealth, and generosity that their union represents. Walter Armbrust views the entwining of patriarchal society with trappings of Western modernity in Egyptian cinema as an articulation of a culturally specific Egyptian modernity. Armbrust argues that the 1938 film *Yahya al-hubb* (*Long Live Love*), directed by Muhammad Karim and starring Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahab and Layla Murad, presents a narrative of a modern love relationship in which familial love and romantic love work in consort, even when the parties' interests come into conflict.<sup>1</sup> In *Long Live Love*, the love match of the modern couple turns out to also be the perfect arranged marriage, endorsed by the two fathers.

In *Heart of a Woman*, the match is arranged by the lawyer who handles Khayriya's family affairs after the loss of the patriarch. Over time, Khayriya falls in love with the groom selected for her. Khayriya's esteem for Fayiz is sealed when she finally learns that Fayiz, aware of the family circumstances as she had not been, married her for love and not money. At the end of the film, Khayriya finds love, improves her social status, and achieves financial security. Upholding the cinematic conventions of the love match, *Heart of a Woman* also portrays marriage as a socioeconomic transaction.

In the 1940s, Togo Mizrahi departs from these love-marriage conventions in two musical films. *Layla* (1942), an adaptation of Alexander Dumas fils's novel *La dame aux camélias* (1848), stars Layla Murad in the role of a courtesan. *Sallama* (1945), an adaptation of 'Ali Ahmad Ba Kathir's novel *Sallamat al-Qass* (1941), stars Umm Kulthum in the role of a *qayna*, a singing slave girl. This chapter analyzes the performance of female sexuality and the sexuality of performance in these melodramas featuring two of the biggest female musical film stars in 1940s Egypt. These films, set in the past, lay bare the transactionality of the modern marriage plot and respond to significant changes in personal-status law in Egypt.

In what follows, I first discuss the social, legal, and educational transformations Egyptian women experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, I focus on the changes in women's lives affected by the success of two abolitionist movements: the late-nineteenth-century efforts to abolish slavery, and the movement to end the practice of legal prostitution in the first half of the

twentieth century. These interrelated issues, affecting not only indentured women and sex workers, but also family structure among the elites, influenced the cinematic construction of the modern marriage plot, and provide a background for my discussion of the films that diverge from these norms. In the second section below, "Courtesan/Queen: *Layla* (1942)," I explore how the film *Layla* reflects upon female performance, casting Layla (star and protagonist) as cinema royalty. The film thereby levies an indirect critique on the sexual improprieties of Egypt's monarch. Layla, the courtesan, resembles the female social climbers in the modern marriage plot, like Fatima from *Heart of a Woman*, more than she resembles the Egyptian prostitutes at the center of the abolitionist movement. But I argue that *Layla* can be read as a critique of prostitution's debasement of the nation—a central tenet of the abolitionist movement. The final section of this chapter, "A Modern *Qayna*: *Sallama* (1945)," unpacks the sociosexual implications of Umm Kulthum's preference to play the role of the singing slave girl. I begin this section by reviewing the implied sexual politics of her two prior appearances as a *qayna*: in *Widad* (1936, Fritz Kramp) and *Dananir* (1940, Ahmad Badr Khan). In *Sallama*, Umm Kulthum's character is bought and sold multiple times, making her sexually available to multiple owners. My analysis unpacks the way the film maintains the honor of Sallama, the slave, in a manner consistent with modern marriage conventions. In addition to granting Sallama a safe space within the palace, I argue, Togo Mizrahi elicits queer Levantine performances from the actors who play Sallama's owners to diffuse the sexual threat they would otherwise pose.

#### ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND LEGAL PROSTITUTION IN EGYPT

Women's roles in society and access to education in Egypt were significantly transformed in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Two laws, passed in 1923 and 1931, raised the marital age to sixteen for women and eighteen for men, respectively.<sup>2</sup> In 1929 the state extended universal elementary education to girls, opened secondary schools and teacher training programs for girls, and began admitting women into university.<sup>3</sup> By 1930 elite women were no longer secluded in the domestic sphere, and were widely abandoning the practice of veiling.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1940s, when *Layla* and *Sallama* were released, the processes that brought about the universal acceptance of conjugal marriage (and the abandonment of the Islamically sanctioned practice of concubinage), the dissolution of the harem, and the emergence of elite women into the public sphere were still part of the living memory in Egypt. The struggle for the abolition of legalized prostitution was still ongoing. Like other films produced in Egypt in the 1940s, neither *Layla* nor *Sallama* is overtly political. The two films neither explicitly represent nor directly comment upon the rapid changes in women's status that Egypt had experienced

in the preceding decades. Both films are based on works of literature and peddle in common filmic tropes. Nevertheless, it is worth asking how these two films—about a prostitute and a slave, respectively—might have been read by contemporaneous audiences who were inhabiting those changed circumstances.

The changes in women's status effected in early-twentieth-century Egypt were driven by two abolitionist efforts: one against slavery and the other against legal prostitution. In Egypt, both the practice of slavery and that of prostitution were historically interrelated, and both are connected to the dissolution of the harem among the ruling elites. Beginning in Mamluk Egypt and continuing into the nineteenth century, the markets for slaves and sex workers were intertwined. Imported sex workers came from the same sources as slaves: Africa and the Caucasus.<sup>5</sup> Pimps sometimes purchased sex workers, and conversely, some slave merchants also operated brothels. Some African slaves were reportedly forced into prostitution by their masters.<sup>6</sup>

Despite state efforts in Egypt to outlaw the importation and sale of slaves beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, the practice persisted until the turn of the twentieth century. Slavery in nineteenth-century Egypt, as in the rest of the Ottoman Empire, was sanctioned by and practiced according to Islamic law. Freeborn Muslims could not be enslaved; non-Muslims captured by slave traders in the Caucasus and sub-Saharan Africa were torn from their homes and families to supply the demand for slaves in Egypt. According to Liat Kozma's estimates, in nineteenth-century Egypt female slaves, employed largely for domestic labor, outnumbered male slaves three to one.<sup>7</sup> Male slave owners could take their female slaves as concubines. Children born from such unions were free and were considered eligible to inherit their father's property; concubines who bore children were freed upon the death of their master.<sup>8</sup>

Efforts to reduce or abolish slavery in Egypt through much of the nineteenth century met with limited success. The 1877 Anglo-Egyptian Slave Trade Convention, in conjunction with increased local policing efforts, served to slow the slave trade.<sup>9</sup> In the following two decades, slave ownership declined, and, according to Kozma, "the emerging Egyptian nationalist intelligentsia started condemning slavery as un-Islamic."<sup>10</sup> By 1895, when Egypt and Britain signed the Anti-Slavery Convention prohibiting all sales of slaves, even between individuals, both the number of enslaved people and the number of slave owners had significantly declined. Although no new slaves could be brought into Egypt or sold between families, Gabriel Baer finds evidence that slaveholding persisted until 1907.<sup>11</sup>

The abolition of slavery and the legalization and regulation of prostitution were effected contemporaneously. In 1882, following the British occupation of Egypt, colonial authorities implemented regulations to legalize and thereby regulate prostitution. The Comprehensive Law on Brothels was promulgated in 1896, a year after the Anti-Slavery Convention, and the year in which the opening scene of

*Layla* is set.<sup>12</sup> This law established a licensing system of brothels and sex workers, both under surveillance by the authorities. Prostitutes were subject to weekly medical exams, and brothels were permitted only in designated urban areas.<sup>13</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, public opposition to legal prostitution grew among a number of constituencies. According to Hanan Hammad and Francesca Biancani, “nationalists, religious authorities, local feminists, British purity movement advocates, and colonial administrators” all opposed legal prostitution, each group defending its position from a different perspective.<sup>14</sup> Elite women objected to prostitution on basis of hygiene, and as a means of opposition to the Ottoman-era capitulations under which residents with foreign citizenship were governed by a different legal standard than Egyptians. Professional women such as Labiba Ahmad and Munira Thabit also objected to prostitution, but they blamed the country’s moral decline on Egyptians’ embrace of Western consumerism.<sup>15</sup> According to Beth Baron, Egyptians across the political spectrum, “from the Muslim Brotherhood to the Egyptian Feminist Union,” concurred that legal prostitution in Egypt “dishonored the nation.”<sup>16</sup>

In response to these wide-ranging calls to abolish prostitution, a mixed Anglo-Egyptian commission was formed in 1932. The proposals laid out in the commission’s 1935 report to further limit and regulate prostitution were put into effect in by a Ministry of Health decree in 1938. The regulation forbade the registration of new brothels and the licensing of additional prostitutes. The Egyptian parliament first addressed the issue of prostitution in 1939. Despite the increasing public and administrative opposition, with the increased number of British Commonwealth soldiers in Egypt, the sex market expanded during World War II.<sup>17</sup> In 1943, prostitution was abolished in provincial towns.<sup>18</sup> Legal brothels continued to operate in provincial capitals, including Cairo and Alexandria, until 1949, when prostitution was abolished nationwide by military decree. A law passed in 1951 officially criminalized sex work.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, according to Haytham Bahooora, Egyptian efforts to abolish legal prostitution were “concerned less with the marginalized figure of the prostitute than with symbolically restoring the nation’s purity and overcoming colonial violation.”<sup>20</sup> The film *Layla* was released in the midst of this nationalist abolition effort. *Layla*, the fictional courtesan, does not resemble the typical prostitute in Egypt. During the period between 1896 (the film’s setting) and 1942 (its release date), sex workers hailing from a number of working-class backgrounds worked out of legal brothels or in illicit “*maisons de rendez-vous*” located in popular neighborhoods.<sup>21</sup> *Layla*, by contrast, lives the high life, supported by her aristocratic lovers, whom she visits in their country homes or entertains in her own apartment. Despite the characteristics that distinguish the filmic figure of the prostitute from those who plied their trade in Egyptian brothels, I take the anticolonial discourse of national purification as a point of departure for my analysis of the film *Layla*.

## COURTESAN/QUEEN: LAYLA (1942)

In the first decades of Egyptian cinema production, star salaries made up a significant proportion of production budgets, since, as Jacob Landau notes of Arab cinemagoers, “the public hankers first and foremost for the stars.”<sup>22</sup> Over the course of her films with Togo Mizrahi, Layla Murad’s star power grew exponentially. When Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahab offered the young singer a role in the film *Long Live Love* in 1938, she earned 350 Egyptian pounds for her appearance.<sup>23</sup> After the success of their first film collaboration, Togo Mizrahi reportedly offered Layla Murad a two-film contract for a combined 3,500 Egyptian pounds, but she insisted on 3,000 each. By the time Togo approached Layla about appearing in a fourth movie, *Layla*, he offered her a contract worth 7,000 Egyptian pounds.<sup>24</sup> The legendary rapid rise of Layla Murad’s salary was an integral part of her image as a star.

With her rising star power, Murad also commanded greater control over production. Murad reportedly insisted upon reviewing the script of *Layla* with Mizrahi prior to the start of shooting. Mizrahi had also intended to once again cast the veteran actor Yusuf Wahbi as her costar, but Murad insisted that the more youthful Husayn Sidqi play the role instead.<sup>25</sup>

Critics agree that Togo Mizrahi recognized and cultivated Layla Murad’s star potential. In contrast to her performance in *Long Live Love*, under the shadow of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahab, Murad emerges as a true leading lady in Mizrahi’s *A Rainy Night*. The benefits of their collaborations were mutual: Layla Murad’s popularity boosted Togo Mizrahi’s career as well. Their fourth film together, *Layla*, was a huge success, running for nineteen weeks at the Cinema Cosmo.<sup>26</sup>

From his earliest film efforts, Togo Mizrahi cast some actors to play characters who shared their name or their stage name. This phenomenon is most pronounced, and most successful, in the case of Layla Murad. The close association between the singer’s name, the titles of her films, and the characters she played on-screen was unique in Egyptian cinema. The name “Layla” appeared in the title of seven of her movies, spanning her career. In addition, the first film she made with Togo Mizrahi, *A Rainy Night* (chap. 6), contained a play on her name. Her four additional films directed by Mizrahi were *Layla bint al-rif* (*Layla the Country Girl*, 1941); *Layla bint madaris* (*Layla the Schoolgirl*, 1941); *Layla* (1942); and *Layla fi al-zalam* (*Layla in the Dark*, 1944). Anwar Wagdi followed suit in choosing titles for three of the films he directed starring Murad: *Layla bint al-fuqara’* (*Layla the Poor Girl*, 1945); *Layla bint al-aghniya’* (*Layla the Rich Girl*, 1946); and *Layla bint al-akabir* (*Layla the Aristocratic Girl*, 1953). In these films, Layla was cast as an ingénue—a role she continued playing until well into her thirties. In what follows, I analyze the film *Layla* (1942) to explore the relationship between “Layla” and Layla: character and star, performance and performer.

*Layla* is based on *La dame aux camélias*, a story about a prostitute, Marguerite Gautier, who sacrifices herself to save the honor of the man she loves, Armand

Duval. Dumas adapted the story for the theater in 1852. Inspired by Dumas's play, Giuseppe Verdi began work on an opera that was to become *La Traviata* (1853). There have also been multiple film adaptations of the story, including several in the silent era featuring the biggest stars of the day. In 1934, Abel Gance—a mentor and early influence on Togo Mizrahi—codirected the first French sound film production of *La dame aux camélias*.<sup>27</sup> The first Hollywood adaptation of the sound era was *Camille* (George Cukor, 1936), starring Greta Garbo. Layla Murad loved the novel when she first read it, and was thrilled to have the opportunity to play the role of Marguerite. Referring to the part as her “dream role,” Murad reread the novel in French and in Arabic translation to study the part.<sup>28</sup>

All versions of the story—novel, play, and film adaptations—share several core plot elements. The prostitute, suffering from tuberculosis, is pursued by an earnest young man.<sup>29</sup> While she is ill, he asks after her every day, but declines to identify himself. After her recovery, they meet. She tries to dissuade him from besmirching his good name by associating with her, but he rebuffs her admonitions, and they fall in love. They leave the city together and settle in the countryside, where she can recuperate. While living the high life, she had accumulated significant debts. Having distanced herself from the wealthy lovers who used to support her lifestyle, she secretly sells her belongings to pay off her remaining debt. The young man discovers her secret and decides to help support her with his family's money. The young man's father is thus alerted to his son's profligacy and what he deems his poor judgment. The father appeals directly to the former prostitute to leave his son for the sake of his future and the family's honor. She agrees and breaks with her lover in dramatic fashion so he won't wish to reconcile. The prostitute then returns to her former life, and ultimately succumbs to consumption. Her lover learns of her sacrifice. In the novel, the knowledge comes too late, but in the play and in most film adaptations, the lovers are granted a parting scene on her deathbed.

In Mizrahi's adaptation, the kept woman is a singer named Layla (Layla Murad). The young man, Farid (Husayn Sidqi), issues from a conservative Upper Egyptian landowning family.<sup>30</sup> The film is set in Cairo in 1896, an era often called the “veiled protectorate.” Britain had occupied Egypt in 1882, after suppressing the ‘Urabi Revolt. Egypt maintained its status as an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire. But Britain held a *de facto* protectorate over Egypt.

The film's historical setting invites a reflection on the shifting perceptions of female performance in Egypt. The first woman appeared on the stage of a high-brow theater in Cairo in 1894 when a Jewish actress—also, by coincidence, named Layla—performed in a production at the Cairo Opera House.<sup>31</sup> The first actresses to perform in public were Jews and Christians. But within the first two decades of the twentieth century, Muslim women began joining, and eventually leading, performing troupes.<sup>32</sup> As Sherifa Zuhur writes in her study of Layla Murad's contemporary Asmahan, “[I]n the middle of the twentieth century, [the female singer]

was never simply an individual, but also, and always a female body emitting poetic text through song.”<sup>33</sup>

The film’s setting also indexes Egypt’s entrance into the cinematic era. The opening party represented in the film occurs in June 1896; in November of the same year the Lumière brothers arrived in Egypt to screen their moving pictures in both Alexandria and Cairo, mere months after the premiere in Europe. *Layla* draws attention to the star system introduced by the film industry and the respective shift it ushers in of the social valences attached to performance as well as to spectatorship.

The opening scene lays out these tensions—between women’s public performance and confinement; and between Turkish influence and British power in Egypt. The sound of a waltz plays as the credits roll. The scene cuts to a hand holding an invitation to a party hosted by “Sulayman Pasha” on 3 June 1896. In the entry hall, a servant opens the French doors for arriving guests. As the scene cuts to the main hall, we catch a glimpse of the dance floor framed on the bottom by the balustrade of the musicians’ balcony, and an arch supported by two columns. An ornate crystal chandelier hangs from the center of the ballroom, partially obstructing our view of the dancers. The architecture is modern, Western.

The camera then zooms in for a medium shot of the dancers. The dancing men are wearing tuxedos, and the women are in ball gowns. Only the men’s headgear distinguishes between members of the elite. European men check their top hats at the door—a detail that serves as the basis of a comic interlude as the scene proceeds—while some of the Egyptian men keep a tarboosh on their heads.

As the music continues, the scene then cuts to the exterior, where we see carriages lined up discharging their passengers—all women in ball gowns wearing white yashmaks, Turkish-style veils. The music ends. The scene cuts back to the long shot of the main hall as dancers applaud the orchestra and exit the dance floor.

The first words of the film are uttered by an unidentified British official in military garb. He is shown, in partial profile, addressing the host—Sulayman Pasha, an elegantly dressed gentleman in a tuxedo and tarboosh. The British official exchanges pleasantries with the host, then asks, “Why are there no Egyptian women?”

The Egyptian women, Sulayman points out, sit upstairs “in the loge.” The loge is constructed in the manner of a theater balcony. Seated like spectators of a performance, the women observe—and comment upon—the party below. They watch the proceedings through thin, translucent drapery, which is occasionally drawn aside for a better view. In keeping with the Western decor of the venue, the separate women’s space is designed as a viewing balcony. It is not called a harem, nor is it constructed in the idiom of Islamic architecture—as appears in *Sallama*.

Layla’s reputation precedes her. When she enters, the crowd gossips about her recent affairs. Farid is captivated by her. When he asks his friend Hamdi (‘Abd al-Salam al-Nablusi) to make an introduction, Hamdi warns him that “she wrecks the homes [*bi-tikharab baytuh*] of those she meets.” The commodification of Layla’s

body is signaled in her first song, “Min yishtiri al-ward minni” — “Who Will Buy a Flower from Me?” For the performance, she dons a vendor’s tray full of cut flowers, which she tosses into the crowd as she sings. Her costume, however, is not that of a salesgirl. Her white lace gown is a modest—high-necked, long-sleeved—version of period French fashion, with corseted waist and full skirt. After Layla makes her grand entrance into the reception hall, a male guest proclaims to his female companions (in Arabic) that she “always dresses well,” and then adds (in French), “*Chic*.” Reminiscent of a wedding gown, Layla’s dress signifies the dichotomy of her character as heroine-whore. Layla, both as performer and as an Egyptian woman given access to the mixed space of the reception hall, stands out. Both within the diegesis and external to it, as the star performer Layla is an object of desire for the men, and of emulation for the women.

The film, I argue, further elevates Layla’s status—both diegetically and extradiegetically. Layla is visually and narratively aligned with symbols of the ruling family, casting both character and star as cinematic royalty. *Layla* accomplishes this alignment through the vernacular of fashion and via her mode of transportation.

In 1890s Egypt, elite women would have worn the Turkish-style veil when they were out in public—as are the women depicted arriving in carriages to attend Sulayman Pasha’s party. Layla and her friend Zuzu (Zuzu Shakib) arrive together. Underneath their cloaks and the Turkish veil, they both wear elegant ball gowns. We are not given much of a view of the other Egyptian women: those populating the loge are seated behind a balustrade and partially obscured by the curtain. Some wear the yashmak, while others are coiffed and bareheaded. A woman—perhaps a servant—standing in the back of the loge wears a black hijab and a white face veil. Layla is shown in public only one other time in the film—during a carriage ride (discussed at greater length below)—and there, too, she is shown wearing a yashmak.

A great deal has been written about veiling in Egypt and the Islamic world in general. Photographs of women’s demonstrations from 1919 show Egyptian women—many of them elites—wearing black robes draped over their head and body, accompanied by a translucent white veil covering their faces from the bridge of the nose down. In May 1923, returning from a women’s conference in Rome, Huda Sha’arawi and Saiza Nabarawi publicly removed their face veils upon descending from the train in Cairo. Other politically engaged elite women followed suit.<sup>34</sup>

In 1940s Egyptian cinema, veiling (or the lack thereof) indexes a web of social cues. In films set in the present, lower-class urban women, or fellahin, are shown veiled in public, wearing traditional *baladi* head coverings, and wrapped in a black *milaya* (a long wrap draped over the head and shoulders).<sup>35</sup> When at the end of *Layla* the maid goes begging for money to buy Layla medicine, she is dressed in a black wrap and a white face veil. Layla’s veil in the film, by contrast, comprises two pieces of white fabric—one draped around the head, and a second one draped loosely around her head and neck—with her face uncovered.<sup>36</sup>

When *Layla* was released in 1942, the only women wearing the yashmak paired with Western fashion were members of the royal family and women of the court. The most visible female member of the royal household was the young queen, Farida. In 1938, the recently installed, youthful King Farouk married Safinaz Zulfikar, the daughter of an elite Egyptian-Circassian family, who adopted the name Farida. Images of the royal couple regularly graced the pages of the strictly censored local press. In keeping with the practices of modern royalty, Farida was frequently shown at charity events and at state functions. During these occasions as an official representative of the state, she wore the Turkish-style yashmak.<sup>37</sup>

Within a month of *Layla*'s premiere, the queen appeared twice on the cover of the weekly popular journal *Al-Ithnayn*. On 16 March 1942, the journal published a reproduction of the queen's official portrait commemorating the royal couple's fourth wedding anniversary (fig. 41). The cover of the 4 May 1942 issue of *Al-Ithnayn* features a photograph of the queen visiting an orphanage in a fashionable dress, with a stylish finger wave peeking out from under her veil.<sup>38</sup> The week of *Layla*'s premiere, *Al-Ithnayn* included a two-page spread about the women who attended the opening of parliament, viewing the proceedings from box seats. The notable women are identified as the daughters and wives of ministers and political elites. The copy accompanying the photographs compliments the women's elegance and fashion choices: "[T]he ladies were noticeably elegant. We saw the latest hairstyles as well as the most modern designs." In all of these pictures, the queen and the ladies of the court wear smart skirt suits—the height of 1940s fashion—and a white Turkish-style yashmak.<sup>39</sup>

The advertisement that ran in *Al-Ithnayn* on 6 April 1942, the week of *Layla*'s premiere, featured the characters Layla and Zuzu dressed as they were upon their arrival at Sulayman Pasha's party, wearing this same style of veil (fig. 42).<sup>40</sup> The image is a publicity photo, not a still from the final cut of the film. They are shown in an interior space: behind them a picture frame—image obscured—hangs on a wall that is horizontally bisected by a chair rail. Peeking out behind Layla's shoulder is a lone white flower—a camellia, with which her character is associated. The image makes an effective advertisement for an escapist costume drama released at a time of domestic and international crisis; we see popular actresses dressed in elegant finery. But, the ad's visual identification with the ruling family, I argue, is also unmistakable. First, the image pairs haute couture with the yashmak, the Turkish veil. Second, the title of the film is bordered by an ornate oval frame, much like the frame of the royal portrait—and more generally associated with Farouk and his family.

The advertisement promotes both the film itself and Layla's star image. The ad copy reads: "Togo Mizrahi, the producer of the three big hits *A Rainy Night*, *Layla the Country Girl*, and *Layla the Schoolgirl* closes out the cinema season with his new, outstanding film *Layla*." The titles of the first three films are listed in an angled column, bordered on the right by a line connecting the words to the image of Layla Murad appearing as the eponymous character, Layla. Other versions of the advertisement also include this repetition of the titles, linking star



FIGURE 41. Portrait of Queen Farida on the cover of *Al-Ithnayn*, 16 March 1942.

and character. Visually and textually, the connection between character and star promotes the idea of Layla Murad as cinema royalty.

Layla's mode of transportation also contributes to the identification of Layla with royal symbols. In the opening scene, other female guests are shown arriving at Sulayman's party in two-seater carriages with the hood pulled up to partially

توجع مزراحى: منتج الافاد الكبرى

ليلة مطرة  
ليلى بنت الريف  
ليلى بنت مدارس

يختتم الموسم السينمائي بفيلمه الجديد الرابع...

ليل

تتلى  
ليلى مراد  
عصية حسنة

زوزو شكيب  
فردوس محمد  
منسى فتحي  
بشاره واكيم  
فتاد فتيم  
نركى ابراهيم  
عبد السلام النابلسي

اضراج: توجع مزراحى  
انشاج - شاركه

بعض يوم الخميس ٢ ابريل سينما كورنيش القاهرة والكورنيش اركسز ٦ ابريل سينما مصر بطريق

الموزعون القطري وجميع انحاء العالم: منتخبات هسافيلم

FIGURE 42. Opening-week ad for *Layla*, featuring Layla Murad (right) and Zuzu Shakib. *Al-Ithnayn*, 6 April 1942.

obstruct public view of the passengers. Layla, by contrast, rides in a large open carriage. In distinction from the other arriving guests, two uniformed, dark-skinned servants carrying staffs run barefoot alongside the pair of horses pulling Layla's carriage.

In the 1890s, when the film is set, state officials and wealthy families would employ foot guards, known as *amshagiyya*, to run in front of horse-drawn carriages to clear a path through the crowded streets. With the advent of the automobile, *amshagiyya* became all but obsolete.<sup>41</sup> By the late 1920s, members of the urban elite who had previously employed *amshagiyya* to accompany their carriages had widely adopted the new mode of transportation. The royal family continued to employ *amshagiyya* for ceremonial occasions into the early years of Farouk's reign. In 1937, Farouk was transported to his investiture via royal carriage, accompanied by both cavalry and *amshagiyya*.<sup>42</sup> In 1942, when *Layla* was released, the only remaining *amshagiyya* were those employed by the palace for ceremonial purposes.

In the film, on the night of Sulayman Pasha's party, Layla's carriage is the only one accompanied by *amshagiyya*. The primary function of the *amshagiyya*—as becomes evident in their second appearance—is to support the identification of the character Layla with the royal court, and the identification of Layla Murad as cinema royalty.

In the film, Layla, after recuperating from her first illness, takes a ride with Zuzu in the open carriage. When Farid learns of Layla's outing, he eagerly runs to catch a glimpse of her. Farid's guardian, 'Abd al-Mas'ud (Bishara Wakim), follows after him. They stop short as they catch sight of the approaching carriage. Farid signals to 'Abd al-Mas'ud to keep silent. Shot in broad daylight, Layla's carriage is in clear view as it travels at a moderate pace down a wide street, accompanied by a pair of *amshagiyya* (fig. 43). First, we see a tight two-shot of Layla and Zuzu; then the scene cuts to a long shot of the approaching carriage. There are no pedestrians, no donkey carts, no throngs of vendors that the *amshagiyya* must part for the carriage to pass through. Like the footmen accompanying the royal carriage as it processes along a cleared parade route, Layla's *amshagiyya* position themselves next to, rather than in front of, the horses.

At the conclusion of the scene, the camera tracks back slightly as the carriage approaches, and then pans to follow it as it passes, catching the back of Farid's and 'Abd al-Mas'ud's heads as they, too, turn to watch Layla go by. The two spectators stand in awe—frozen as if at attention—as the procession passes. The music swells; throughout this scene the audience hears a nondiegetic reprise of the opening waltz. The passing of Layla's carriage is rendered a spectacle.

The opening sequence and this carriage scene are the only times in the film that Layla wears the Turkish veil, and also the only times the film depicts *amshagiyya*. Multiple other carriages are shot in motion in the film without *amshagiyya*. After the summer vacation, Farid leaves his family home by carriage, and twice is



FIGURE 43. *Amshagiyya* accompany Layla's carriage. Screenshot from *Layla* (Togo Mizrahi, 1942).

shown departing by carriage from the home he shares with Layla in the country. A doctor arrives by carriage to treat Layla. Farid's father arrives and departs by carriage, framing his dramatic interaction with Layla. The film also features a carriage chase. At one point Farid storms out and rides off into the night on a simple buck-board. Layla follows after him, jumping into an enclosed carriage, a thin black veil pinned, as if in haste, to the back of her head. In this scene, as she rushes to reconcile with Farid by renouncing her reliance on the financial support of other men, Layla no longer wears the *yashmak*, and her carriage proceeds without the services of the *amshagiyya*. Within the diegesis, the loss of these royal symbols maps the character's disavowal of wealth in favor of happiness. But for the audience, the star, Layla Murad, remains associated with the trappings of royalty.

The film visually constructs its heroine in the image of the ruling Egyptian-Turko-Circassian elites. I have articulated what this gesture says about Layla, the character and the star, but it is less clear what it might say about the ruling family. Egyptian censors would hardly have tolerated any criticism of the ruling family, or any depiction of a despotic ruler that could have stood in for the Egyptian monarch. The film was produced during a period of intensification of World War II. Egypt maintained nominal neutrality in the conflict, although it was a base of operations for Allied troops, and was the site of key battles. In July

1941, a German air raid on Alexandria caused substantial damage, including four hundred casualties. A covert Italian operation in Alexandria harbor in December 1941 disabled two British ships.<sup>43</sup> On 4 February 1942, the British intervened in an Egyptian parliamentary dispute, giving Farouk an ultimatum: either accept formation of a government led by the Wafd Party, or abdicate. He accepted the formation of a new government to stay in power, but with his power significantly weakened vis-à-vis the British. King Farouk publicly reiterated Egypt's noncombatant status at the opening of parliament on 30 March 1942—restating that according to the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty, Britain was responsible for the protection of Egypt.<sup>44</sup>

*Layla* is unique among Egyptian films of the era for representing the recent past—a past still in living memory. Further, the film takes the unprecedented step—for the era—of including a British official in the opening scene. Egyptian historical films of the 1930s and 1940s tended to be set in the distant past to avoid running afoul of the censors. Perhaps because the film was an adaptation of a popular work of literature, it was given surprising latitude by the censors. Taken together, the historical proximity and the presence of the British officer in the opening scene invite viewers to draw parallels between a fictional representation of the past and the politics of the present.<sup>45</sup>

While King Farouk was politically impotent in the face of the British, rumors abound about his virility in the conduct of his private affairs. King Farouk was known to attend wild parties and engage in illicit liaisons with women. The rowdy party *Layla* hosts in the film echoes rumors of royal debauchery.

Selective use of anachronisms in the film draws attention to the parallels between the fictional past and current affairs. While the film does not for the most part aim for period authenticity, *Layla*'s costumes evoke 1890s fashions. Many of *Layla*'s dresses, including the white gown she wears in the opening scene, feature tight bodices and sleeves that puff at the shoulder—reminiscent of period corseted waistlines and gigot sleeves. By contrast, when she sings “Bi-ti-buss li kidda leh?” (“Why Do You Look at Me That Way?”), her dress—also white—features a 1940s waistline and neckline. Throughout the film, evening gowns worn by extras in the party scenes are more 1940s than 1890s, but the guests' costumes at *Layla*'s party are strikingly more revealing than those worn by the guests in the opening scene. Collectively, then, costumes at *Layla*'s party read as contemporary—not period. A contemporaneous reviewer noted another anachronism—style of dancing.<sup>46</sup> The party scene, shot largely from the point of view of the upstanding character Farid, casts a critical eye on the excesses and moral laxity of the elites, and the scene's anachronisms encourage viewers to make the connection to the present.

Although some of the biggest scandals broke later in King Farouk's reign, including his affair with the Egyptian actress known as Camelia (née Lilian Cohen), by 1942 relations between the monarch and Queen Farida were already strained.<sup>47</sup>

Is Farid's attraction/repulsion to the debauchery perhaps a gesture toward spurned Queen Farida, who struggled to maintain her honor in the face of her husband's philandering?

While telling a crass story, Layla, to illustrate a point, lifts her dress. Farid looks on horrified. When they have a private moment alone, Farid asks, "Why do you speak that way? Only beautiful words should issue from that beautiful mouth and those beautiful lips."

Layla starts to respond, and he silences her. Raising his hand in front of her mouth, Farid implores her, "Don't speak. Don't say a word. I thought you were different."

Layla echoes, "Different?"

"Please, let's leave it with what I thought. Leave me to my imagination."

"Imagination?"

The oud player interrupts, and takes Layla away to prepare to perform the song "Why Do You Look at Me That Way?" The performance permits Farid to live in the world of his imagination as beautiful words and music issue from Layla's lips. The lyrics pivot some of the attention from the auditory to the visual, the relationship between female performer and male spectator:

Why do you look at me that way?

Tell me, what are your intentions? Why do you look at me that way?

Are you trying to tempt me?

Or did you feel sorry for me and wish to console me?

Or did you see the love asleep in my heart? Did you want to engage my heart and awaken my love?<sup>48</sup>

Layla sings the opening refrain and the first verse directly to Farid. As she sings this verse, Layla is shot in close-up, over Farid's shoulder, interrupted by a brief reaction shot. In the opening scene, Farid mistakenly thought Layla was singing directly to him; here, there is no ambiguity. Formulaic features of love songs abound in "Why Do You Look at Me That Way?" 'Ali Jihad Racy notes that these formulae "are emotionally effective not despite, but because of their tendency to generalize, abstract, and stereotype."<sup>49</sup> Layla's performance of the first verse inverts the typical formula. Since the verse is sung by a prostitute to an honorable young man, the temptation to which the lyrics allude is not sexual desire, but rather the temptation to become emotionally engaged, to fall in love.

The second verse reverts to form. During the instrumental interlude between verses, the camera pans to follow Layla strolling through the crowd, then cutting back to Farid's gaze. She delivers the second verse to Hamdi, hands on her hips, as if indignant. He turns to look at her, his back to the camera. At the end of the verse, feigning disgust at his desire to "pick a flower" seen "blooming on the branches" as a "salve for his grief," she throws her handkerchief at his chin, in lieu of a slap in the face, and storms off into the crowd. Continuing with the theme of grief, Layla

directs the third verse to an anonymous seated male guest. Between each verse, the camera cuts to a shot of Farid's longing gaze.

While the first three verses are addressed to a singular "you," the final verse is delivered in the plural. This verse is shot with an unmediated view of Layla: the spectators are positioned behind her, blurry, beyond the focal point of the camera. She faces the camera as she sings, looking slightly off-center in the medium distance, not directly at the camera—refusing to return the audience's gaze.

Why are your eyes thirsty, always seeking someone to quench their thirst?  
 Why are your hearts confused, not finding anything to satisfy them?  
 I make you laugh, I entertain you, I carouse with you, I console you.  
 Then you take what beauty gives, and me, what do I get from you in return?

At the end of the verse, Layla steps out of the frame, and the camera focuses in on the guests standing behind her. The crowd of both men and women respond to the song's final question, "What do I get from you in return?," by chanting, "Money, money, money." Just before the start of the song, Hamdi had quipped to Farid that for nice words from Layla one pays their weight in gold.

Layla's performance of "Why Do You Look at Me That Way" closely resembles Fatima's performance of "Illi wayak al-fulus" ("You Who Have Money") at her engagement party in *Heart of a Woman*. The fiancée and fiancé—Fatima, a butcher's daughter, and Amin, the impoverished orphan of a pasha, respectively—have been deceiving one another about their respective financial situations and social statuses. Wearing a white dress, Fatima sings to the assembled guests. The two party scenes are similarly shot: medium shots or close-ups of the singer interspersed with reaction shots between verses. As Fatima passes among the guests, she reaches into one man's suit jacket and extracts a bill, which she tosses away. "With money," she proclaims, "I could buy myself a million fiancés." When Amin starts looking concerned, she reassures him that she is ventriloquizing: "Everyone's opinion, except mine."

Layla the courtesan and Fatima the social-climbing bride are not so different after all. Layla, unlike Fatima, finds her love match, and seeks to reform herself, but is thwarted by social convention. *Layla* may not directly address the abolitionist debates swirling around Egypt at the time of the film's release, but it addresses the question of national honor that underpins the nationalist abolitionist movements. *Layla* also lays bare the transactionality of the modern marriage plot.

#### A MODERN QAYNA: SALLAMA (1945)

A few weeks after *Layla* opened, the magazine *Rose al-Yusuf* reported on Umm Kulthum's reaction to the film. Umm Kulthum attended a screening with a friend. While they were waiting in the theater for the film to begin, her companion said she had heard that Togo Mizrahi had thoroughly succeeded in Egyptianizing the

story of *La dame aux camélias*. Umm Kulthum expressed her doubts about adapting the story to “the Egyptian mold.” But after watching the scene where Farid’s mother tells him that she prepared *mulukhiyya*, a traditional Egyptian dish, for his return home, Umm Kulthum turned to her companion and exclaimed, “It’s true, Togo really managed to Egyptianize the story!”<sup>50</sup> A little over two years later, Umm Kulthum signed on to make a film with Togo Mizrahi. Mizrahi has been acknowledged for capturing Umm Kulthum’s most affective performance on-screen.<sup>51</sup> Umm Kulthum was already a star performer in the 1930s, when the Egyptian film industry began to develop. Umm Kulthum “cultivated sophistication and respectability” and “styled herself as an elegant exponent of Egyptian romanticism.”<sup>52</sup> Umm Kulthum’s public persona “fuse[s] two nationalist symbols prevalent at the time: economic nationalism, on the one hand and ‘cultural authenticity’ on the other.”<sup>53</sup> Studio Misr contracted with Umm Kulthum to star in its first production. As Ifdal Elsaket has noted, “The nationalist aura that surrounded Umm Kulthum was fundamentally shaped not only by the film characters she portrayed . . . but also by her off screen link to Studio Misr.”<sup>54</sup>

Between 1936 and 1947 Umm Kulthum starred in six feature films. Umm Kulthum commanded significant creative control, insisting on playing a role in developing her character and the scripts for the films in which she starred.<sup>55</sup> Three out of six of her films are set in an imagined imperial Islamic court of the past, and feature Umm Kulthum in the role of a *qayna*, a singing slave girl: Kramp’s *Widad*, Badr Khan’s *Dananir*, and Togo Mizrahi’s *Sallama* (1945).<sup>56</sup> Virginia Danielson quotes an interview in which Umm Kulthum articulated her preference for playing the role of *qayna*: “There is sincerity in the character of the slave girl and modesty is a mark of historical heroines. I value sincerity and I incline to modesty.”<sup>57</sup> Umm Kulthum also preferred playing characters who were also singers, to avoid some of the awkwardness in musicals that arises when characters spontaneously break into song.<sup>58</sup> As such, her slave-girl character was not the standard domestic worker or *jariya*; rather, she was a *qayna* (*qiyan*, pl.).<sup>59</sup> *Qiyan* were female slaves trained as singer-poets. The practice of training slave girls as entertainers appears to have begun in the Umayyad period (661–750 CE), reaching its pinnacle under the Abbasids (750–1258 CE). Two of Umm Kulthum’s characters were based on known *qiyan*: *Dananir al-Barmakiyya* (late eighth to early ninth century CE), author of *Kitab mujarrad al-aghani* (*The Book of Choice Songs*);<sup>60</sup> and *Sallamat al-Qass* (d. after 740), who was known as a composer, oud player, and Qur’an reciter.<sup>61</sup> *Qiyan*, like other female slaves, were considered concubines, sexually available to their owners. As Fuad Matthew Caswell describes them: “The *qiyan* were the select class of entertainers—chosen, educated, trained and ‘finished’ with the object of entertaining the better class of people and presenting themselves as objects of desire in refined social and artistic surroundings.”<sup>62</sup>

In order to understand Umm Kulthum’s role in *Sallama*, I begin by reviewing her prior appearances as a *qayna*. I trace how each film addresses the sociosexual

dilemmas the figure of the female slave poses for modern Egyptian viewers. My analyses unpack the intersection of Umm Kulthum's association with the nation and her appearance as a *qayna*. I conclude with a discussion of how Mizrahi utilizes the queer Levantine idiom to navigate the complications imposed by the plot of *Sallama*.

*Widad: The Singing Slave Girl and the Nation*

In Fritz Kramp's *Widad*, the title character (Umm Kulthum) is a slave owned by a wealthy merchant, Bahir (Ahmad 'Allam), who buys her extravagant gifts as expressions of his love. He invests all his capital in a shipment of new merchandise, but the caravan is sacked, and he loses his investment. Bahir sells off his possessions, moves to a smaller house, and turns over his shop to a wealthy uncle in the interest of servicing his debts. Having lost the faith of his creditors, Bahir has no capital to invest in a new venture and is caught in a cycle of poverty. *Widad* insists that Bahir sell her, too, to generate funds so he can return to his livelihood.<sup>63</sup> *Widad* is brought to the slave market and ultimately sold to a respectable older man, Radwan, whose rakish nephew Sa'id can barely control his desire for her. On his deathbed, Radwan grants *Widad* her freedom. Upon Radwan's death, *Widad* tries to escape before Sa'id hears the news. But Sa'id catches *Widad* alone in a dark stairway. After this frightening encounter, the film abruptly cuts to *Widad*'s escape to Cairo via felucca. When she arrives, *Widad* discovers that Bahir has once again succeeded in commerce. *Widad* returns to Bahir as a free woman, of her own free will. The film ends with an embrace between the reunited lovers.

*Widad* is set in Islamic Cairo in some vague period of the past.<sup>64</sup> There are no titles to help the viewer situate the film in time. But commerce in the film is conducted with Ottoman-era currency phased out in the nineteenth century, the mah-bub. Trade, in the film, is conducted entirely with the East: Bahir's awaited caravan originates in Damascus. There is no sign of European merchants or merchandise. We are meant to understand that the film is set in a period prior to the French invasion in 1798, in an imagined, protected, and isolated Islamicate sphere.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, even without the nationalist fanfare surrounding Studio Misr and the film's production, *Widad* begs to be read as national allegory in the context of the modern anticolonial struggle. Bahir's caravan is attacked at Tell el-Kebir, on the edge of the eastern Egyptian desert. Egyptians would recognize Tell el-Kebir as the site of the devastating defeat of the nationalist uprising led by Ahmad 'Urabi in 1882. Further, Bahir's debilitating burden of debt parallels national circumstances; Egypt's debt to foreign powers undermined its sovereignty. In *Widad*, female sacrifice permits the astute, hard-working Egyptian man to regain his independence from his creditors and return to rule over his domain. *Widad*, too, secures her independence, and returns to her love as his equal.

But what of the *qayna*'s sexual availability to her owners? Elsaket claims that *Widad* "does not allow room for speculation about her potential sexual infidelity":

she nurses her elderly, infirm owner “like a daughter,” and shuns his son “to maintain her ‘honour.’”<sup>66</sup> While the film downplays the possibility of a sexual encounter between Widad and Radwan, it nevertheless depicts Widad alone in a bedroom with three different men: Bahir, Radwan, and Sa’id. Widad repels Sa’id’s advances while Radwan is still alive, but their last encounter in a dark staircase is threatening, and, I argue, should be read as a prelude to implied rape.

On the night of his uncle’s death, Sa’id is shown in his quarters drinking, cavorting with women, listening to music, and watching scantily clad belly dancers. Framed by the backlit doorway, the servant, his back to the camera, whispers the news to Sa’id. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Sa’id’s face as, in the melodramatic idiom of silent Hollywood cinema, he adopts a conniving expression. Drunk, he staggers out to find Widad. Widad has packed a small satchel of her belongings and donned a *milaya*. She attempts to escape via a dark staircase. Sa’id hears her before sees her. The two exchange few words:

Sa’id: Who’s there? Widad?

Widad: Yes, Widad.

Sa’id: Where are you going? [*He looks at her satchel, reaches for it, and she hides it behind her back.*] What are you hiding?

Widad: I owe you nothing.

Sa’id grunts, “*Eh?*” (Is that so?) as he reaches for her and she backs away. Sa’id’s verbal response effectively dismisses Widad’s claim. His body language is threatening, and she backs away in fear.

Following this menacing encounter, the scene cuts abruptly to a shot of a felucca’s sail in broad daylight. As the camera tilts down the sail to show the boat, we hear the crew and passengers singing a love song that begins: “Take me to my beloved’s village, the longing and distance torture me. *Ya habibi*, my heart is with you.” The camera cuts to Widad sitting silently, surrounded by singing and clapping passengers. At no point in the scene does Widad join the other passengers in song. She has drawn her *milaya* across the lower half of her face, and her eyes nervously dart around. No other women aboard the felucca cover their faces. Widad is a free woman, with documents to prove, it, and she is returning to her beloved. What is she hiding with her excessive display of modesty in this scene, if not the shame of what implicitly transpired off-screen?<sup>67</sup>

Within a few years of *Widad*’s release, rape or seduction narratives had become commonplace in Egyptian melodrama. According to one estimate, “in the 1942–43 season, more than 50 percent of Egyptian films presented seduced or raped women.”<sup>68</sup> Viola Shafik argues that this proliferation of rape and seduction narratives should be read in the context of the “strong national sentiments” in the years prior to the 1952 Free Officers revolt.<sup>69</sup> As Beth Baron has extensively documented, dating back at least as far as 1919, the nationalist Egyptian press commonly depicted Egypt as a woman, and British occupation was viewed as a “rape of the nation.”<sup>70</sup>

Kay Dickinson identifies ‘Aziza ‘Amir’s *Layla* (Vedat Örfi and Stefan Rosti, 1927), widely hailed as the first Egyptian feature film, as establishing the filmic idiom of the nationalist allegory “Egypt as a Woman.”<sup>71</sup> Sa‘id’s implied rape of Widad, then, plays an important symbolic function in the film’s allegorical representation of the national struggle.<sup>72</sup>

*Dananir—Loyalty and Monogamy*

While *Widad* presents an allegory of Egypt’s struggle for independence, Ahmad Badr Khan’s *Dananir* articulates nationalist sentiment somewhat more obliquely. When the film opens, Dananir, a Bedouin orphan, is living with her adoptive family. Her singing catches the attention of Ja‘far, the vizier of the caliph Harun al-Rashid, while he is on a hunting expedition accompanied by poet Abu Nuwas. Ja‘far purchases Dananir from her adoptive father—a bag of coins changes hands—so she can accompany him to the capital and study music. Ja‘far promises to look after Dananir.

Unlike Umm Kulthum’s characters in the other *qayna* films, Dananir is unambiguously monogamous. She and Ja‘far are devoted to one another. When the caliph inquires about purchasing her, Ja‘far refuses. The caliph prevails upon Ja‘far to “send her to him” upon request. This conversation transpires after Dananir’s first and only performance before the caliph. While the context suggests that the caliph wishes to send for Dananir to perform in his court, the request is left open-ended, as is Ja‘far’s reluctant, ambiguous gestural response.

The film maps Ja‘far’s fall. At the beginning, Ja‘far serves as the powerful vizier of Harun al-Rashid. The film ends following his execution by order of the caliph. After Ja‘far’s death, Dananir defies the caliph twice—first by audibly mourning for Ja‘far, and then by refusing to join his harem. The caliph spares her his wrath, and she returns to her adoptive father, who has lost his wealth and his eyesight.

Ja‘far is portrayed as a good, kindhearted, and loyal figure. We see Ja‘far’s compassion early in the film when he agrees to free an elderly and infirm prisoner, Yahia Ibn ‘Abd Allah al-‘Alawi. Al-‘Alawi was imprisoned for plotting against the caliph. By freeing al-‘Alawi, Ja‘far oversteps the bounds of his power, angering Harun al-Rashid.

Jealous plotters in the court seek to overthrow Ja‘far, sowing doubt about his loyalty in the mind of the caliph. Ja‘far is a member of the Baramika (also known as the Barmakids), a family of Persian origin who became influential in the Abbasid court. The plotters, like the caliph, are Hashimi—deriving their legitimacy as descendants of the prophet’s tribe. The fight against Ja‘far is also characterized as a consolidation of power. In the minds of the Hashimis, the Barmakids are interlopers, and Ja‘far has usurped their power. To make clear the extent of the power conflict, after Ja‘far’s execution, the caliph’s troops set upon the Barmakid quarter and kick the residents out of the city.

While *Dananir* is based on historical figures, the film’s depiction of the power struggle between Ja‘far and the caliph is, as Viola Shafik notes, “neither realistic

nor put into a proper historical context. . . . The events are forced into the sentimental corset of melodrama. The history forms the extraordinary frame of a quite ordinary drama.”<sup>73</sup> But the film’s detachment from historical sources makes it a better vehicle for articulating contemporary political grievances. The caliph’s complaints against Ja’far would have resonated with the Egyptian viewing public. After the caliph has learned about Ja’far’s treachery, he looks around the fairgrounds, where a sporting match has just been held, and asks who owns the land. Confirming that it belongs to the Barmakid Ja’far, who also owns the land surrounding Baghdad, the caliph concludes: “See how we made them [the Barmakids] rich and impoverished our own!” When a member of the court tries to defend Ja’far for his generosity to the poor, the caliph retorts that it is a bribe to win over the peasants. The caliph’s words undermine Ja’far’s credibility: he is attributed characteristics of both the reviled landowning class and the foreign-minority opportunists.

Another scene suggests that Ja’far’s detractors see his internationalism as a source of his treachery. The caliph receives emissaries from Charlemagne before a gathering of notables in his court. He asks Ja’far to read aloud the letter from the king of the Franks. The letter praises the caliph and thanks him for “securing the road for the pilgrims to Jerusalem.” The letter continues: “We are assured of the Franks’ safety in your nation, as you are well known for your justice and spreading of peace and toleration among the people. Peace be upon you.” As Ja’far is rolling up the scroll, the camera cuts to a group of plotters, and one whispers, “Which one of them is in charge here?” Only after they grumble their dissatisfaction with Ja’far’s power—justifying their position with a Qur’anic citation<sup>74</sup>—does the camera cut back to the royal visit, at which point the caliph responds: “Inform your king that I am keen to spread equality, with no racial or religious discrimination.” If we are to believe the plotters, the caliph’s statement of tolerance and coexistence reflects the interests of Ja’far (and by extension the Barmakids) rather than those of his own tribe and nation.

Viola Shafik also outlines another way the film evokes a sense of cultural pride. She argues that *Dananir* “feed[s] the myth of a legendary golden age of Islam, which in turn underlines the splendor of Arab Muslim culture in general and serves as a cultural reaffirmation.”<sup>75</sup> The dialogue, she notes, is “embroidered with quotations from the great poet Abu Nuwas.”<sup>76</sup> Bucking the trend for presenting film dialogue in spoken dialect, the characters in *Dananir* speak literary Arabic (*fusha*). Shafik claims that language use in the film “serves as a bridge to a mythically transfigured past.”<sup>77</sup>

### *Sallama—The Virgin Concubine*

Togo Mizrahi’s film *Sallama* is based on the historical novel *Sallamat al-Qass*, written by ‘Ali Ahmad Ba Kathir, first published serially in *Al-Thaqafa* starting in June 1941,<sup>78</sup> and issued as a book in 1943.<sup>79</sup> In the novel Ba Kathir retells and adapts a narrative tradition about an encounter between a *qayna*, Sallama, and a holy man,

‘Abd al-Rahman al-Qass. Both characters are based on historical figures: Sallamat al-Qass served in the court of the Umayyad caliph Yazid Ibn ‘Abd al-Malik (720 to 724 CE), where, in addition to performing, she composed elegies to both Yazid and his son; ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Abi ‘Ammar is identified as a transmitter of hadith.<sup>80</sup> Ba Kathir’s novel is derived from earlier Islamic retellings of what Marlé Hammond calls the folktale of Sallama and the Priest.<sup>81</sup>

In the film adaptation, Sallama (Umm Kulthum) starts out as a slave (*jariya*), indentured to a strict elderly couple, Umm al-Wafa’ (Esther Shattah) and Abu al-Wafa’ (‘Abd al-Warith ‘Ashir). Sallama and another *jariya*, Shawq (Zuzu Nabil), are charged with domestic labor and tending sheep. The family live in a quarter of Mecca dominated by the palace of the merchant Ibn Suhayl (Fu‘ad Shafiq). As the opening voice-over establishes, Ibn Suhayl engages in nightly debauchery, disturbing the peace of the pious townsfolk. The music that issues from the palace sparks Sallama’s desire to sing. Sallama learns a song from a fellow shepherd, which she sings as she returns to town, followed by an appreciative audience. Abu al-Wafa’ encounters the crowd as he leaves the mosque. Angered, he sells Sallama on the spot.

Sallama ends up as a *qayna* in Ibn Suhayl’s harem. ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Qass (Yahya Shahin), an upstanding young man who has captured Sallama’s heart, goes to the palace to purchase her back for her former owners. When he arrives, Ibn Suhayl stops the ongoing revelry in deference to the young man’s piety. Sallama learns that ‘Abd al-Rahman is in the palace, and to get his attention, she recites verses from the Qur’an from behind a screened balcony. The two meet in the courtyard, sparking the chaste romance between them. ‘Abd al-Rahman resolves to purchase and free Sallama so they can marry, but his plans are thwarted when Ibn Suhayl goes bankrupt and Sallama is sold to Ibn Abi Rumana (‘Abd al-‘Aziz Khalil), a member of the caliph’s court, where she receives further musical training. After a conflict with Habbaba (Rafi’a al-Barudi), another singer in the caliph’s court, Sallama runs away, finding refuge with a Bedouin tribe.<sup>82</sup> ‘Abd al-Rahman locates her and then approaches Ibn Abi Rumana to purchase her freedom. But when he learns that Sallama has since been sold to the caliph, he gives up hope of marrying her and volunteers for the caliph’s army. In the climactic scene, Sallama is called to perform before the caliph (‘Abd al-Qadir al-Masiri) on the same day that ‘Abd al-Rahman is gravely wounded while leading a successful battle. ‘Abd al-Rahman is summoned to the palace, where he dies in Sallama’s embrace. Her voice silenced by her grief, Sallama spends the rest of her days wandering in ‘Abd al-Rahman’s footsteps.

Marlé Hammond posits that the film *Sallama* “argue[s], in no uncertain terms, that woman’s voice is not *‘awra*, and that women should be allowed to perform, and even broadcast, Qur’anic incantation before mixed audiences, just as they should be allowed to sing secular songs without having their virtue questioned.”<sup>83</sup> Hammond glosses “*‘awra*” as “a term that applies to any part of the body of a man or a woman which could incite sexual desire” and, thus, should be covered.<sup>84</sup>

Hammond supports her reading of the film by unpacking the signification of two key scenes: the performance of the film's most famous song, "Ghani li shwayi shwayi" ("Sing to Me Little by Little"); and Umm Kulthum's recitation from the Qur'an. Hammond reads "Sing to Me Little by Little" as a "polemical pro-music manifesto" directed at fellow Muslims who oppose women singing in public, chief among them Sallama's owner Abu al-Wafa'.<sup>85</sup> Hammond further argues that the response to Sallama's song within the film's diegesis supports the right of women to sing in public and derides those who oppose women singing.<sup>86</sup>

Hammond also asserts that "the filmmakers go to great lengths to disassociate Umm Kulthum's Qur'anic recitation with any suggestion of worldly seduction. This they achieve first and foremost by removing the image of Sallama, who elsewhere in the film is portrayed as an object of desire from the camera frame."<sup>87</sup> Engaging in a shot-by-shot analysis of the recitation scene, Hammond notes that Sallama's male listeners assume a pious demeanor, and look up or away from Sallama as she recites. However, when taken in its diegetic context, Sallama's Qur'anic recitation does constitute an act of seduction—albeit one motivated by honorable intentions. Sallama loves 'Abd al-Rahman and wishes to attract his attention. The verses she recites reflect the piety of her intentions.

According to Hammond, the premodern source texts for the story of Sallama and the Priest all cite *aya* ("verse"; pl. *ayat*) 43:67: "On that Day, friends [*akhilla*] will become each other's enemies. Not so, the righteous."<sup>88</sup> Hammond argues that the inclusion of this *aya* "promote[s] a message of sexual abstinence."<sup>89</sup> Ba Kathir incorporates this verse into his novel as the parting words uttered by Sallama and 'Abd al-Rahman before she is sent to the caliph in Damascus. In the film, though, Sallama instead recites *ayat* 38–42 from Surat Ibrahim:

Our Lord, You know well what we conceal and what we reveal: nothing at all is hidden from God, on earth or in heaven. Praise be to God, who has granted me Ishmael and Isaac in my old age: my Lord hears all requests! Lord, grant that I and my offspring may keep up the prayer. Our Lord, accept my request. Our Lord, forgive me, my parents, and the believers on the Day of Reckoning.<sup>90</sup>

In these verses Ibrahim addresses Allah with a supplication and statement of devotion. The passage opens with a declaration of Allah's universal knowledge. It then speaks of lineage: Ibrahim asks for forgiveness for his parents and thanks Allah for his descendants.<sup>91</sup> The choice of text contextualizes Sallama's recitation as seduction, situating her desire in the context of procreation. Reading the *ayat* proscriptively within the diegesis of the film, Sallama expresses her desire for 'Abd al-Rahman as a desire to increase the number of believers, and, through their mutual devotion to Islam, to pass on Allah's teachings. The choice of this *aya*, which names both of Ibrahim's sons, Ishmael and Isaac, also stresses the shared heritage of Muslims and Jews.

In many ways, a film based on Ba Kathir's novel is a curious choice for Togo Mizrahi to take on. Even at this early stage in his career, Ba Kathir's writings evidenced his "Arab-Islamic nationalist thinking."<sup>92</sup> Ba Kathir, a Yemeni diaspora writer, was never fully embraced by the Egyptian literary establishment—a factor critics have variously attributed to his pan-Arab and pan-Islamic sympathies at a time of nationalist, anticolonial fervor; his interest in depicting Islamic narratives and exploring morality in Islamic terms, at a time when secularism and socialism were ascendant; and his foreign origins.<sup>93</sup>

*Sallama* reflects Mizrahi's vision as director and producer, but not as a writer. In signing on to direct *Sallama*, Mizrahi agreed to all of Umm Kulthum's conditions, including matters of character, scenario, cast, songs, and music.<sup>94</sup> The screenplay for *Sallama* was composed by poet Bayram al-Tunsi, based on Ba Kathir's novel.<sup>95</sup> The shot composition and editing choices, however, reflect Mizrahi's vision. My reading of *Sallama* seeks to tease out how Mizrahi's distinct film idiom addresses some of the issues presented in Umm Kulthum's other *qayna* films.

As already discussed, while Umm Kulthum was drawn to the character of the *qayna*, the films needed to address the shifting notions of marriage, as well as the contemporary discomfort with slave ownership and the *qayna*'s sexual availability to her owners. *Widad*, I have argued, includes an implied rape that is intended to be read in the context of national allegory. In *Dananir*, the eponymous character has only one owner, and the film depicts their relationship as one of mutual attraction and admiration, despite the obvious power difference between them. In *Sallama*, the screenplay demands that the *qayna* be sold multiple times—each time for a significantly increased price—making her sexually available to multiple men. But it is crucial to Umm Kulthum's image that her character maintain honor as her 1940s audience would understand the term. I argue that to diffuse the threat to *Sallama*'s virginity posed by her male owners, Mizrahi adopts the queer Levantine performance of masculinity evident in his comedies (chap. 4).

Of Umm Kulthum's three *qayna* films, only *Sallama* makes an explicit issue of the protagonist's virginity. Near the beginning of the film, 'Abd al-Rahman articulates his concerns to Abu al-Wafa', *Sallama*'s and Shawq's prior owner: "I would have bought them instead of someone who will beat them, harm them [*yu'adhahun*], and get them drunk. They are innocent, tender youths [*fatatan sad-hajatan raqiqatan*]." In the first sentence, 'Abd al-Rahman's fears about the slaves' safety is not explicitly gendered: he articulates concern about physical abuse and exposure to prohibited alcoholic beverages. But the second sentence lays bare his specific concern—for the preservation of the girls' "innocence." In this context, his use of the verb *yu'adhahun* articulates his fear that they are at risk of sexual molestation specifically. As a point of contrast, consider the opening scene of *Widad*, in which the slave and owner, alone in a bedroom, share an affectionate embrace. In *Dananir*, the slave's sole owner purchases her directly from her father; *Dananir*'s

innocence is implied, but the film doesn't make an issue of it. By contrast, I contend that the preservation of the protagonist's virginity is a central concern in *Sallama*. A *qayna*'s value is pegged to her virtuosity as a singer—not her virtue. But *Sallama*, both narratively and visually, takes pains to protect the protagonist from men's sexual desires. This concern is imposed on the diegesis to satisfy modern sensibilities about marriage and generic expectations of melodramatic cinema.<sup>96</sup>

By contrast with the other *qayna* films, *Sallama* never appears in a scene alone with a man; even her encounters with the upstanding 'Abd al-Rahman are chaperoned by Shawq.<sup>97</sup> But the film goes further in constructing an impregnable space to protect *Sallama*. Within Ibn Suhayl's palace, *Sallama* is granted a private chamber that is characterized as a place of refuge, shielding *Sallama* from the risks and temptations of court life. From the time *Sallama* enters Ibn Suhayl's palace, the camera is privy to communal space within the harem. The first mention of a private room occurs in the context of *Sallama*'s encounter with drunk, lascivious, and belligerent guests. One guest (Stefan Rosti) tries to force *Sallama* to take a drink, and she slaps him repeatedly in the face. In response, Ibn Suhayl politely suggests that she take leave to rest in her private quarters. Following her departure, the debauchery resumes, and scantily clad dancers once again take the stage. The scene then cuts to *Sallama* indignantly storming into her room accompanied by Shawq. *Sallama* angrily removes her hat and her earrings, and then sits on a bench to remove her shoes. The modesty of *Sallama*'s undressing scene, even in this private space, stands in stark contrast to the exhibitionism of the scantily clad dancers that immediately precedes it.

Shawq rebukes *Sallama* for fraternizing with the guests, and sagely advises her to seek shelter in her room: "If you sing another time, after you perform, return to your room like a sensible person." Upon her next encounter with 'Abd al-Rahman, *Sallama* assures him that he need not worry about her exposure to corrupting influences. Echoing Shawq's advice, she tells him: "If I sing again, I will return to my room after my performance."

*Sallama* is not shown performing for Ibn Suhayl again, but she can't avoid the drunken crowd. One night, after she sings of her love for 'Abd al-Rahman on the balcony, while she is returning to her room, she is confronted by the guest she had slapped. Grabbing *Sallama*, he menacingly threatens her, telling her that this time she can't escape. Shawq helps her get away, and they seek refuge in the harem, where they hide behind a curtain in a locked room. The drunken guest and a sidekick chase *Sallama* and Shawq. Banging on the door, he threatens, "Even if this door were made of iron, I would break it down." His sidekick grabs a spear, and the two men, grunting, ram the door with the large phallic object. But they fail to penetrate the women's private space. Ibn Suhayl, informed of the guests' breach into the restricted space of the harem, arrives in time to disarm the men.

The guests' wolfish behavior serves to highlight Ibn Suhayl's inefficacy and effeminacy. Throughout the film Ibn Suhayl commands little respect from the



FIGURE 44. Fu'ad Shafiq (left) as the merchant Ibn Suhayl. Screenshot from *Sallama* (Togo Mizrahi, 1945).

members of his court. His profligacy on lavish entertainment drives him into bankruptcy; he is forced to sell everything to pay off his debts. The character's folly is also communicated by the campy performance of effeminacy given by veteran character actor Fu'ad Shafiq (fig. 44). Take, for example, the scene in which Ibn Suhayl is introduced. The camera enters Ibn Suhayl's palace with a traveling shot following a *jariya* carrying an inlaid wooden box; we hear, but do not yet see, a female singer (Su'ad Zaki) accompanied by an orchestra. As the *jariya* moves from entryway to reception hall, we see an architecture of opulence—columns, soaring archways, spacious rooms. The camera pauses when she joins a cluster of domestic slaves waiting on a jovial Ibn Suhayl, who is in the process of applying perfume to himself. Another *jariya* shakes the bottle into his hands, whereupon he applies the scent by touching his face lightly with only his fingertips in an effeminate gesture. Then he purses his lips twice. This facial tic—a sort of pantomime of the act of chewing—is a campy affectation he exhibits throughout the film. He then turns his back to the camera and unwraps one end of his sash, swishing it with his hand as he walks away.

Ibn Abi Rumana, *Sallama*'s third owner, has a much smaller role, but like Ibn Suhayl, he, too, is depicted as inept: he provokes discord among the *qiyān*; and *Sallama* manages to escape from his harem. 'Abd al-'Aziz Khalil, outfitted in an extravagant costume, gives a campy performance as Ibn Abi Rumana (fig. 45).



FIGURE 45. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Khalil as the caliph’s courtier Ibn Abi Rumana. Screenshot from *Sallama* (Togo Mizrahi, 1945).

When facing ‘Abd al-Rahman, the poor holy man, both wealthy slave owners are reduced to stuttering. Ibn Suhayl, embarrassed, stammers out a string of lies as he tries to cover up his impious ways. Ibn Abi Rumana stammers his surprise that ‘Abd al-Rahman has located his fugitive slave. This behavior, in combination with their dress and demeanor, emasculates Sallama’s owners, diffusing the sexual threat they pose.

In *Sallama*, Mizrahi elicits comic performances by Sallama’s male owners that echo the performativity of identity and the gender instability central to the contemporaneous costume comedies starring ‘Ali al-Kassar. In the 1940s, Mizrahi directed three al-Kassar films based loosely on the tales of the Thousand and One Nights: *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*One Thousand and One Nights*, 1941), *‘Ali Baba wa-l-arba‘in harami* (*‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, 1942), and *Nur al-Din wa-l-bahhara al-thalatha* (*Nur al-Din and the Three Sailors*, 1944). The films feature princes and princesses in elaborate costumes, as well as lavishly constructed palace sets. Like the earlier collaborations between Mizrahi and al-Kassar, these films also feature plots of mistaken identity. In *‘Ali Baba*, al-Kassar’s character dresses like a member of a band of thieves to help save a captured princess who does not know her true identity. *Nur al-din* features al-Kassar playing two roles: an evil prince; and his double, a poor baker. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, a convoluted

narrative involving multiple cases of mistaken identity, al-Kassar, playing his signature character 'Usman, carries on the cross-dressing antics from his earlier films (chaps. 3 and 5). *One Thousand and One Nights* establishes clear, gendered spatial boundaries: the entry to the women's spaces—the princess's chamber, and the harem occupied by the female slaves—are policed. 'Usman gains access to the princess's chamber in the guise of a doctor; but two guards with swords stand outside the entrance to the harem, threatening to slit the throat of any man who dares enter. Dressed as a woman, 'Usman's sidekick ('Ali 'Abd al-'Al) is sold as a *jariya* to dance before the prince. 'Usman sneaks into the palace, ending up, inadvertently, in the harem. To escape the angry guards, he, too, dresses as a woman—donning a white face veil to cover his beard; and then he is also called upon to perform. Al-Kassar's slippage between pauper and prince, good-hearted 'Usman and his evil twin, male and female, is fundamental to the films' plots and their characterization of the folkloric past. I argue that Mizrahi employs this idiom of Levantine exchange in *Sallama*, too.

In *Sallama*, in addition to the effeminate representation of the slave owners, the presence of a male servant (Muhammad Kamil) in the women's quarters—presumably a eunuch—also indexes queer gender identities.<sup>98</sup> Neither of Umm Kulthum's other *qayna* films' plots and their includes a eunuch. The figure of the eunuch in *Sallama* reflects popular conceptions of the Islamic harem created and reinforced by cinema—particularly the Orientalist imagery of Hollywood.

In keeping with the performances of the effeminate slave owners, the eunuch in *Sallama* is presented as a comic figure. Sallama hatches a plot to escape from Ibn Abi Rumana's palace. At night the eunuch sleeps by the door to guard the harem. To escape, Sallama and Shawq must remove the key from under his arm. In their efforts they accidentally tickle him, and he giggles in his sleep. After two attempts, Shawq tickles his nose. Giggling again, he reflexively lifts his hand to his face, and Shawq grabs the key. After unlocking the door, Sallama places the key upright in his left hand. Instead of retreating immediately, she reaches for his staff, placing it erect in his right hand. The scene draws attention to the eunuch's condition—only in his dreams can he experience jouissance.

While the characters of the eunuch and Sallama's two wealthy owners could fit right into one of 'Ali al-Kassar's *One Thousand and One Nights* comedies, Yahya Shahin, by contrast, presents his pious, honest character, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Qass, with the (humorless) dignity the role demands. Shahin has the dashing good looks of a leading man. He represents a version of masculinity legible to the modern audience. Unlike the elaborate costumes of the wealthy slave owners, 'Abd al-Rahman wears the timeless dress of the fellahin (fig. 46). Romantic notions of the immutability of the fellahin abound—both in Egyptian culture and in Orientalist representations of the Egyptian countryside. In this case, 'Abd al-Rahman's costume promotes the identification of the modern audience with the character.



FIGURE 46. Collage: ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Qass (Yahya Shahin) in peasant dress (left, center); Umm Kulthum as Sallama (lower right). Pressbook for *Sallama* (Togo Mizrahi, 1945). Courtesy of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library, The American University in Cairo.

‘Abd al-Rahman elevates his desire by expressing himself in verse. The poem “Qalu: Uhibb al-Qass Sallama” (“They Say al-Qass Loves Sallama”), composed by Ba Kathir for the novel, adheres to traditional poetic form.<sup>99</sup> The short poem is modified for the film. The first line (in both versions) reads: “They say al-Qass loves Sallama / He is the pure, pious ascetic.” In the film, *al-nasik*, the world for “pious,” is changed to *al-wara’*—a term that also implies timidity or cautiousness. In the original poem, the second line reads: “As if only the brazen, lethal seducer could already know desire.” By contrast, the version in the film eliminates the direct reference to seduction and changes the gender of the subject, replacing the line with the words: “As if only a brazen girl could know the taste of desire and love.” The poem is then set to music and sung by Umm Kulthum in Sallama’s voice. The power of the characters’ longing in the novel is reduced to the tepid, commonly accepted tropes of love and desire acceptable in popular song.

‘Abd al-Rahman makes clear that he wishes to purchase Sallama to remove her from the system that makes women sexually available to multiple men. In articulating his love for Sallama, ‘Abd al-Rahman expresses his desire to buy her so he can free her, and marry her “according to the law of Allah.” Of course, Islamic law also sanctions relations between free Muslim men and concubines. In this turn of phrase, we see how the love match between a ‘Abd al-Rahman and Sallama—free man and enslaved woman—is transformed into companionate marriage.

## A SUCCESS RUMORED TO BE A FAILURE

News that Egypt's greatest singing star had agreed to appear in a film by the director of popular and successful musicals was warmly received in the Egyptian press. Mizrahi and Umm Kulthum publicly expressed their mutual admiration, and their pleasure at having the opportunity to work together. In the pages of the film's pressbook, Mizrahi and Umm Kulthum lavish praise on one another. Umm Kulthum also published a letter in *Al-Sabah* the week after *Sallama*'s premiere, describing Mizrahi as "the only director who truly knows the cinema."<sup>100</sup> One can only imagine that this assessment did not sit well with Ahmad Badr Khan, who had directed three of her four previous movies—or with other Egyptian directors who aspired to work with her.<sup>101</sup>

The collaboration between Umm Kulthum and Mizrahi sparked the jealousy of competing studios, who appear to have launched a campaign to undermine its success. In the same issue of *Al-Sabah*, a second letter about the film was printed just to the right of Umm Kulthum's letter to Mizrahi, where its gossipy content would be read first. The letter, signed by an anonymous cinema producer, asserts that "Umm Kulthum's appearance in a film directed and produced by a creative genius like Togo Mizrahi would destroy all other musicals, and wouldn't leave them a market or revenues."<sup>102</sup> The letter accuses producers who had musical films in the pipeline of attempting to dampen public enthusiasm for *Sallama* by calling the film a failure and by denigrating both Umm Kulthum's performance and Mizrahi's directing. One particularly juicy rumor suggested that *Sallama* had failed because Umm Kulthum took charge of directing some scenes. The letter ends by challenging the Cinema Producer's Union to respond.<sup>103</sup> The following week, another article by the anonymous cinema producer appeared, entitled "How the Plot against *Sallama* and Umm Kulthum by Directors of Cinema Companies Was Discovered . . . and How It Failed." Without naming names, the producer accuses his peers—including the director of a large Egyptian film company—of sending representatives to shout out disapproving comments during the film, and to loudly voice critical opinions after screenings.<sup>104</sup>

Studio Misr—at whose cinema *Sallama* premiered—was also accused of depressing ticket sales.<sup>105</sup> Most of Mizrahi's films throughout his career had opened at Cinema Cosmo. During the 1944–45 season, when *Sallama* appeared, Cinema Cosmo was monopolized by films produced by Mizrahi's Egyptian Films Company.<sup>106</sup> However, Mizrahi opted to premiere *Sallama* at Cinema Studio Misr. The cinema was the site of a lavish opening party, as well as a special screening for King Farouk.<sup>107</sup> Although Cinema Studio Misr denied undermining the film, ticket sales for *Sallama* during its opening run were surprisingly low. One source attributes the low turnout to poor timing: the film was released amid school exams.<sup>108</sup> A contemporaneous investigation by *Al-Sabah* cast doubt on Studio Misr's involvement in the affair,<sup>109</sup> but accusations of Studio Misr's complicity continued to circulate

for months.<sup>110</sup> Mizrahi and Studio Misr publicly made amends. Mizrahi published a letter to the editors of *Al-Sabah* objecting to the accusations levied against Studio Misr.<sup>111</sup> Cinema Studio Misr, in turn, offered to project any of Mizrahi's films on its screen for a three-week run.<sup>112</sup> When members of the Cinema Producer's Union issued a statement of unity a month after *Sallama's* premiere, Mizrahi was among the signatories.<sup>113</sup>

*Sallama* ultimately moved to Cinema Cosmo for its second run during the month of Ramadan and the feast of Eid al-fitr.<sup>114</sup> After its opening run, *Sallama's* domestic and international ticket sales soared. Hasan 'Amr, at the time of the film's release a film student and aspiring filmmaker, recalls that it was during the sluggish first two weeks that Mizrahi negotiated the terms for foreign distribution. *Sallama*, according to 'Amr, was the most expensive film production of its day, with a budget five times that of any other Egyptian film. Concerned about recuperating the costs associated with producing the film, Mizrahi sold the film reels to the Iraqi distributor for a fixed fee of 5,000 dinars rather than taking a percentage of ticket sales. The film went on to be a smash success in Egypt and other Arab countries. According to 'Amr's recollection, ticket revenues from Iraq alone amounted to 100,000 dinars. Despite the success of the film, 'Amr reports that Mizrahi suffered a breakdown over the lost revenue, and spent three months recuperating at the Behman Psychiatric Hospital in Cairo.<sup>115</sup> Mizrahi's family denies this rumor.

*Sallama* represents both the pinnacle of Mizrahi's career as a filmmaker and a turning point. *Sallama* is the final film Togo Mizrahi directed in its entirety. The plots and subterfuge of his peers may have contributed, at least in part, to Mizrahi's decision to quit directing. Following *Sallama*, Mizrahi turned his attention exclusively to film production.

Even before filming *Sallama*, Mizrahi had begun producing films by other directors. During the 1945–46 season, Mizrahi's Egyptian Films Company produced five films. Mizrahi's collaboration with director Yusuf Wahbi continued with the production of *Al-Fanan al-'azim* (*The Great Artist*, 1945) and *Yad Allah* (*The Hand of God*, 1946). Two projects Mizrahi produced ran into unanticipated complications. On 2 April 1945, director Kamal Salim died, leaving unfinished his final project, *Qissat gharam* (*Love Story*, 1945). Mizrahi invited director Muhammad 'Abd al-Gawad to complete the film, although the press reported that Mizrahi had taken a turn at directing some scenes.<sup>116</sup> During the filming of *Malikat al-gamal* (*The Beauty Queen*, 1946), director Niyazi Mustafa is said to have walked off the set. Mizrahi stepped in as director to complete the film. *The Beauty Queen*, released on 25 April 1946 without directorial credit, was the last film Mizrahi directed. Husayn Fawzi's *Akspris al-hubb* (*Love Express*, 1946) was the last film produced by the Egyptian Films Company.

In December 1946 Mizrahi was accused of supporting the production of a Zionist film. Following these rumors, as discussed in chapter 2, it appears that Mizrahi was blackballed by the Egyptian film industry. Despite his efforts to make

a comeback in 1949, Togo Mizrahi never directed or produced another film in Egypt. In 1952, he transferred the directorship of Studio Mizrahi and the Egyptian Films Company to his brother, Alfred. In 1961 the Egyptian Films Company was sequestered, and Togo Mizrahi lost the rights to his films. Yet, seventy-five years after he wrapped production on *Sallama*, Togo Mizrahi's films remain popular, and continue to influence the work of other artists. The concluding chapter assesses Togo Mizrahi's enduring legacy.