FESTIVALS

Forbidden images

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie
previews a festival of films by women from the Middle East and North Africa

In Tunisian director Moufida Tlatli's *The Silences of the Palace* a feisty young woman recalls a painful adolescence, punctuated by scenes of her mother's sexual enslavement. In *The Song of the Women of Mount Chenoua* Algerian novelist Assia Djebar relates the history of her country's war for independence through the memories of women whose accounts structure the film. In Hala Abdallah Yacoub's experimental documentary *I Am the One Who Brings Flowers to Her Grave* four women and a man look back at their experiences of Syrian prisons. What binds these films together – aside from geography, the gender of their directors and the fact that they are all screening in London's forthcoming 'Women's Cinema from Tangiers to Tehran' festival – is the dexterity with which they explore complex political histories through personal experience.

In these and many of the other 37 films in the festival female stereotypes are overturned in a series of powerful artistic responses to traumas far greater than those dictated by gender alone. Cinematic histories vary across the Middle East and North Africa, but film culture in the region has often been tied to independence movements, with national organisations set up to fund homegrown productions in post-colonial or post-revolutionary eras. Several of the films in the 'Women's Cinema' festival are now vintage material: *The Song of the Women of Mount Chenoua* dates back to 1979, Tunisian Nejia Ben Mabrouk's *The Trace* to 1982 and Lebanese Heiny Srour's *Leila and the Wolves* to 1984.

According to Lebanon's Joana Hadjithomas, whose documentary *The Lost Film* (made with her partner Khalil Joreige) is also screening at the festival, the greatest obstacle for Arab and Iranian women film-makers has been the difficulty of claiming the right to pursue a profession outside the home, a struggle that cuts across all areas of work. "I don't have the feeling that I suffer as a film-maker because I'm a woman," she says. "The pressure is more that there are no expectations of me as someone with a professional life. The fight is to prove that I can do something other than have a family."

Rather than dealing with 'women's issues', *The Lost Film* tracks the film-makers' search for a missing reel of 35mm celluloid, in the process highlighting the faltering power of art in a region rife with socio-economic problems where images are used most often for political propaganda. "I'm interested in both women's and men's issues," says Hadjithomas. "The real question for our generation is, how can we live as individuals in a society that's communitarian, religious and familial? How can an individual conduct his or her life without being shadowed by the ghost of a father or a mother and cowed by their expectations? It's about how people can have more choice without breaking totally with society."

The notion that women are oppressed by tradition and the politics of the past is particularly strong in Abdallah Yacoub's documentary *I Am the One Who Brings Flowers to Her Grave*. A beguiling collage of poems, conversations and fragmented landscapes, the film isn't a straightforward indictment of the Syrian regime and its treatment of political dissidents but rather brings alive the experiences of youthful political rebellion and middle-aged disillusionment. "The production took only 12 months," says Abdallah Yacoub, "but these stories have been in my imagination for 50 years."



Pleasure and principles: 'Dunia (Kiss Me Not on the Eyes)'

By contrast, Lebanese director Nadine Labaki's popular *Caramel*, centred on a group of women in a Beirut beauty salon, undercuts western preconceptions about Middle Eastern femininity and about life in the region as dominated by political violence. Layale runs around town

Where distributors fear to tread

Catherine Wheatley *previews Birds Eye View, a London-based celebration of cutting-edge art by women*

The UK film industry is not renowned for nurturing female talent. While the recent cinematic renaissances in France, Germany and Austria have been in no small part fuelled by women, it's a sad truth that one struggles to think of a British equivalent to, say, Catherine Breillat or Barbara Albert. Once Lynne Ramsay might have sprung to mind – but she hasn't made a film since 2001's 'Morvern Callar'. And while Amma Asante and Andrea Arnold have made exciting debuts, the future for both remains uncertain.

This year's Birds Eye View festival may go some way to remedying the situation. Now in its third year, the self-styled "celebration of cutting-edge creative women from around the world" provides a platform not only for foreign film-makers but for homegrown directors, screenwriters and other technicians. This year's programme features films from Iran, Japan, Argentina, Pakistan and the UK including an eclectic mix of debut shorts, a programme of comedy from the beginning of cinema to the coming of sound and the latest work from documentary-maker Kim Longinotto.

Perhaps the most intriguing of the British films is National Film School graduate Joanna Hogg's first feature 'Unrelated'. Until now Hogg was most familiar to industry insiders as a soap director (she was the first woman to helm an episode of 'London's Burning'). But 'Unrelated' is no kitchen-sink melodrama. Eschewing the working-class realism of Ramsay and Asante, Hogg has crafted a finely tuned study of bourgeois manners that has more in common with the pared-down narratives and painterly compositions of rural idylls found in the films of Ozon or Rohmer. Lead actress Kathrine Worth bears a striking resemblance to Rohmer regular Marie Rivière and offers a similarly understated performance, working with sparse dialogue to create a character who is as irritating as she is affecting.

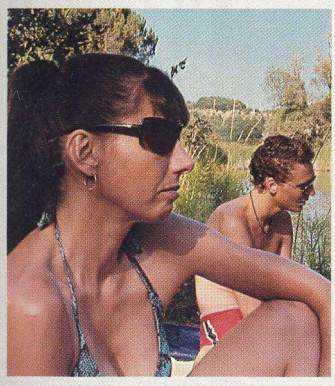
Childless and in a deteriorating marriage, Anna finds herself in the grip of a mid-life crisis that she deals with by trying to recapture her lost adolescence, immersing herself in the company of the children of her former schoolfriend Verena while on holiday in Siena. There is little action to speak of; instead the film centres on Anna's inner trajectory as she gradually realises the impossibility of this flight into youth and comes to terms with the isolation of age. Yet the psychodrama that unfolds is gripping, with Hogg's sensitive screenplay (co-written with script supervisor Sarah Doughty) emphasising the devastation a careless word or misinterpreted gesture can wreak.

If the film's style and aesthetic offer little to suggest its Anglo-Saxon provenance, its depiction of the British chattering classes is perfectly pitched. The supporting cast of professionals and non-professionals provide a painfully accurate backdrop of aspiration and awkwardness, in particular Tom Hiddlestone, Henry Lloyd-Hughes and Harry Kershaw as a trio of public schoolboys who swing between bumbling teens and burgeoning lotharios as they hurry towards adulthood. Campari is sipped on lawns, parlour games are played in candlelit villas and the 'young ones' smoke in front of the liberal 'olds'. It's the modern-day

trying to find a hotel in which to spend a night with her married lover; Rima struggles with her attraction to women; Nisrine opts for a surgical procedure to restore her 'virginity' for her wedding night. "This movie is a result of questions I was asking myself about who we are as Lebanese women," Labaki said in a recent television interview. "We are lost between east and west and haven't yet found ourselves."

For Jocelyne Saab, who is screening her taboo-busting *Dunia (Kiss Me Not on the Eyes)*, about a young woman seeking pleasure in contemporary Cairo, to be a film-maker in the Middle East "has always been difficult" – whether you're a man or a woman. "There is something in the culture in which the image itself is forbidden. So when you charge the image, people are shocked."

■ *'Women's Cinema from Tangiers to Tehran' runs at the Ciné Lumière and various venues across London from 22 February to 1 March and at the Cambridge Film Festival from 20 February to 2 March*



Bored and abroad: 'Unrelated'

take on E.M. Forster that Stephen Poliakoff and Woody Allen have tried – and failed – to capture.

Hogg's film won the FIPRESCI International Critics Prize at the 2007 London Film Festival yet has still to find a UK distributor. In the meantime, she is at work on the script for her next feature 'The Eternal Daughter', to be filmed later this year. If she can make good on the promise of her outstanding debut – and find the public she deserves – the future of female film-making in Britain may not be so bleak after all.

■ **Birds Eye View is at various London venues from 6-8 March, see www.birds-eye-view.co.uk**