

## Document Citation

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## CANNES

**ALEXANDRIA...  
NEW YORK****(ALEXANDRIE ... NEW YORK)****(FRANCE-EGYPT)**

An Ognon/MISR Intl. Films co-production in association with France 2 Cinema/Soread 2M/Gimages Films. (International sales: Flach Pyramide, Paris.) Produced by Humbert Balsan, Marianne Khoury, Gabriel Khoury.

Directed by Youssef Chahine. Screenplay, Chahine, Khaled Youssef. Camera (color), Ramses Marzouk; editor, Rachida Abdel Salam; music, Yehia El Mougy; production designer, Hamed Hemdan; costume designer, Monia Fath El Bab; sound (Dolby SR Digital, DTS), Jerome Ayasse. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard)**, May 20, 2004. Running time: 128 MIN.

Yehia ..... Mahmoud Hemeida  
Ginger ..... Yousra  
Young Yehia/Alexander ..... Ahmed Yehia  
Young Ginger ..... Yousra El Lozy  
Yehia's Wife ..... Lebleba

With: Magda El Khatib, Nelly Karim, Sanaa Younes, Soad Nasr, Yousra Selim.  
(Arabic dialogue)

By DEBORAH YOUNG

**T**he dean of Egyptian cinema, Youssef Chahine, takes an autobiographical look back at his life as a young student in a California drama school and his subsequent international career in the entertaining grab bag "Alexandria ... New York," his 36th feature. Structured as a love story but roomy enough to contain musical numbers, a salute to old Hollywood and actual footage of Chahine receiving a career award at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival, pic should earn a smile from specialized auds and film fans.

Hearing American characters speak Arabic dialogue in a production designer's United States adds an exotic twist as it amusingly reverses the more usual convention of English-speaking foreigners.

More problematic is Chahine's anger against the U.S. he once loved, an emotional conflict the film expresses but leaves frustratingly unresolved. The film's thesis is that every American citizen is to blame for the sorry state of world affairs, whose roots lie in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the U.S.'s support of Israel. Per the main character, in the great American democracy everyone votes and no one is innocent.

The film also gives Chahine a chance to air his resentment over the Hollywood studios' refusal to distribute his pictures in the U.S. Simplistically assessing Hollywood's decline and fall, he compares the divine Fred Astaire with the "American superman" Sylvester Stallone, and considers the case closed. By extension, he implies American civilization has also spun into a dizzy decline.

In more-or-less present-day Cairo, famous Egyptian filmmaker Yehia (Mahmoud Hemeida) decides to attend a retrospective of his work at New York's Lincoln Center. In the audience is a 70-year-old American woman, Ginger (Yousra), who was his first great love. Over drinks, she gracefully reminds him of the last time they met, and bedded, more than 20 years ago.

She reveals that the fruit of that night was a son, Alexander, currently the lead dancer at the New York City Ballet. Yehia is overwhelmed with joy. His wife (Lebleba), who couldn't have children, is nobly understanding, and all three go to watch the boy (Ahmed Yehia) dance. But Alexander's reaction to the news that he has an Arab father is violently negative, even racist. He brushes the old man off brusquely, breaking his heart.

Intercut with this present-day tale is the story of young Yehia's days as a directing student at the Pasadena Playhouse. Back in 1948, the youth (also played by Yehia) is the first Arab student (along with a buddy from his hometown Alexandria) ever accepted at the school.

He soon overcomes the other students' diffidence by his brilliance in class. As a memoirist, Chahine has no use for modesty, and his portrait of the artist as a young man seems to contain quite a lot of fantasy strutting.

Yehia falls for pretty Ginger (Yousra El Lozy), an acting student, and wins a dance contest with her in the first of several joyful production numbers. After he's kicked off the Columbia set for asking too many questions while Rita Hayworth (played by the fiery Nelly Karim, who looks nothing like her) films "The Loves of Carmen," he imagines himself in the role of Carmen's lover dancing the final death scene. Way more spectacular and entertaining than the studio version, this number places the action in a Moorish setting with Oriental decor.

The most amazing of these scenes, however, is at Yehia's graduation ceremony, when the assembly bursts into a rousing "God Bless America" with Arab accents.

Considering the ground it covers, the story is economically told and edited with nary a dull moment. Flashbacks to 1970s' New York recount how Yehia (played by a younger-looking Hemeida) learns of Ginger's slide into poverty and prostitution. By the time he finds her, she has given up the life of a call girl and is unhappily married to a violent, racist man. It's then that they spend their fateful night together.

Ending, far from happy, is uncompromising and underlines the film's earnest plea (the same as in "Destiny") for more love and tolerance in the world; more thinkers and poets, fewer armies and warriors. Chahine's sincerity is touching as well as uncomfortable, forcing viewers to

see the world from another language, sensibility and point of view.

Acting is subtle by Egyptian standards. Hemeida brings a raw vulnerability to the role of Yehia. Yousra, who exudes New York sophistication in her elder incarnation, sparkles as the middle-aged Ginger, a woman who has emerged from a hard life with her joie de vivre intact. In a challenging double role, talented young Ahmed Yehia wins hearts as the driven directing student and coldly repulses as the ballet dancer with a closed mind. El Lozy makes a passable West Virginian and fine dance partner as young Ginger.

Film is ably lensed, with Hamed Hemdan's playfully imaginative production design playing a key role in film's America-with-a-difference look. Footage of New York's Central Park and landmarks like the Statue of Liberty are integrated with obviously reconstructed sets in a winking interchange. Sure to get a laugh is a cut from Hemeida going to Cannes to be honored for 50 years of filming, to the real Chahine onstage.

**'Alexandria' lets  
Chahine air his  
resentment over  
the Hollywood  
studios' refusal  
to distribute his  
pictures in the  
U.S.**