

## Document Citation

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## Fiore delle Mille e una Notte, II (Arabian Nights)

Italy/France, 1974

Director: Pier Paolo Pasolini

*Cert—X. dist—United Artists. p.c—PEA (Rome)/Les Productions Artistes Associés (Paris). p—Alberto Grimaldi. p. sup—Giuseppe Banchelli, Alessandro Mattei. p. manager—Mario di Biase. asst. d—Umberto Angelucci, Peter Shepherd. sc—Pier Paolo Pasolini. Based on stories from the Islamic collection Alf Laylah wa-Laylah. ph—Giuseppe Ruzzolini. col—Technicolor. sup. ed—Enzo Ocone. ed—Nino Baragli, Tatiana Casini Morigi. a.d—Dante Ferretti. sp. effects—Rank Film Labs. m—Ennio Morricone. cost—Danilo Donati. sd—Luciano Welisch. sd. re-rec—Fausto Ancillai. synchronisation of original version—N.I.S. Film. collaborator—Dacia Maraini. l.p—Ninetto Davoli (Aziz), Ines Pellegrina (Zumurrud), Franco Citti (Demon), Tessa Bouche, Margaret Clementi, Franco Merli, Francelisa Noel, Ali Abdulla, Christian Alegny, Jeanne Gauffin Mathieu, Francesco Paolo Governale, Salvatore Sapienza, Zeudi Biasolo, Barbara Grandi, Elisabetta Vito Genovese, Gioacchino Castellini, Abadit Ghidei, Salvatore Verdeti, Mohamed Ali Zedi, Jocelyne Munchenbach, Luigina Rocchi, Alberto Argentino, Luigi Antonio Guerra, Franca Sciutto, Mohamed Fara Scebani, Hassan Ali Hamed, Ghenet Aielew, Amanuel Mathewos, Adila Ibrahim, Rino Hamade. 11,520 ft. 128 mins. Original running time—130 mins. Dubbed.*

Brought to auction, the slave-girl Zumurrud selects the inexperienced Nuredin as her new owner and takes delight in initiating him sexually. That night, she tells him the story of a wager between Haroun-al-Rachid and Queen Zobeide, who paired off a boy and girl in an experiment to see which would fall in love with the other first and thus prove his or her sex the weaker; but the contest was a tie. Next morning, the infidel Bassum drugs Nuredin and kidnaps Zumurrud to return her to her former owner. A friendly woman arranges for the distraught Nuredin to retrieve his beloved, but he falls asleep at the rendezvous and Zumurrud is carried off by one of the Forty Thieves. Exercising her charms, she overcomes the leader of the Thieves and rides off in his clothes, arriving at a great city where her appearance fulfils a prophecy: taken for a man, she is enthroned as king and 'married' to Hiyat, daughter of the high priest. She confides her identity to the delighted Hiyat, and tries to devise a way of luring Nuredin to the city. Elsewhere, the huntsman Taji encounters the nomadic Aziz at an oasis and asks to hear his story. Aziz recalls how he was attracted to the mysterious Badur on the day that he should have married Aziza; how he began a long series of secret assignations with Badur, following Aziza's selfless guidance; how Aziza eventually committed suicide and how he found himself pressed into marriage with Ertay and how Badur, learning of the marriage, castrated him. Bewitched by the story, Taji demands to be taken to Badur's house, now in a derelict state; he hires two passing holy men to restore it and enquires how they came to adopt their way of life. The elder tells how an encounter with a beautiful slave and her possessive owner, a demon, led to his being changed into a monkey; how he was found by seamen, who took him to their ruler; and how the ruler's daughter restored his natural form by a spell, at the cost of her own life. Jonaan, the younger, tells how he was shipwrecked and cast ashore on a rocky island, shrine of a tyrant god; how he toppled the god's idol, causing the island to sink; how he awoke on another island, where a merchant was concealing his son to protect him from a prophecy of murder; how he befriended the boy but (acting under a compulsion) killed him during the night; and how he began a life of wandering as soon as he reached the mainland. The two men resume their travels; when the man-hating Princess Dunia chances to pass the house later, she recognises the restored mosaics as images from her dreams. Nuredin has meanwhile been 'captured' by three nubile girls, who bathe and pamper him, but he tires of their pleasures and runs off. In the desert he meets a lion, who leads him to the city ruled by Zumurrud. She immediately spots her lost love, and presses him into her service. After teasing and humiliating him, she reveals her true identity, and the blissfully happy couple are reunited at last.

Since the final segment of Pasolini's 'trilogy of life' is nothing if not mysterious, it's perhaps as well to open discussion of it by clearing up the 'mystery' of its present running time. As premiered at Cannes last year, it ran for 155 minutes; following the initial screenings, Pasolini acceded to the producer's request that the film be somewhat shortened and himself reduced it to 130 minutes by dropping two complete stories; and from that, in an adequately if none the less needlessly dubbed version, the British censor has snipped away a further two minutes for reasons of his own. That said, it's possible to broach the film's greater mysteries, the qualities that make it Pasolini's most beautiful film, and a triumphant vindication of the entire trilogy. Pasolini has said that he turned to the great story-cycles of the Middle Ages as a means of evading what he sees as the impasse of 'committed' film-making today; he found in Boccaccio, Chaucer and *The Thousand and One Nights* something akin to storytelling in its 'raw' state, tales of the basic human passions without ideological axes to grind, and set himself the challenge of

realising the stories in the spirit that informed their original telling. His task was essentially to preserve the autonomous identity and significance of the people, places and objects that he chose to film, without interposing any interpretative analysis of his own; his aim was a fresh kind of 'realist' cinema, free of ideological dogma of all kinds, dedicated to the celebration of pre-industrial society in all its energy and spontaneity. These pictures of the past—part history, part memory, part myth—are, of course, designed as a critique of the present. As the trilogy has proceeded, Pasolini has progressively phased out his own role as narrator, preserving his careful stylistic neutrality while shifting from *The Decameron's* painter selecting faces and figures from the street for his mural, inventing nothing, to the portrayal of Chaucer as an impulsive (compulsive?) chronicler of gossip—the latter helping to emphasise the large number of random factors in the choice and in the telling. *Arabian Nights* has not one narrator but many: the film is prefaced with the motto "The complete truth does not lay in one dream but in several dreams". And, indeed, the structure is a web of dreams, its several stories giving way to each other without pause or distinction, sometimes intersecting (as when Dunia recognises the ceiling mosaic in Taji's story as an image from her dreams), often echoing or mocking one another, always complementing each other. The spectrum here is perhaps broader than in the preceding films, with the separated lovers Zumurrud and Nuredin providing an overall framing story that encompasses the variously joyful and fraught couplings of the other tales, and the function of the visions of heaven and hell that closed *The Decameron* and *Canterbury Tales* taken over in 'fabulous' tales of the two holy men. If the trilogy's basic constants are religion, sexuality and magic, then the three films have tended to illuminate one of the themes each, respectively; in *Arabian Nights*, magic comes into its own. In the first place, Pasolini has ranged widely for his locations, from Yemen to Nepal, to conjure an endlessly varied and cosmopolitan world: inconceivable palaces with jewelled and mirrored sanctums, bazaars, deserts, tortuously winding alleys, the high seas. But also, in keeping with the exoticism of his source, he has chosen this time to admit tales with a strong element of the fantastic: prophecies fulfilled, mysterious kinesic languages, intuitions and premonitions, levitations, transmogrifications. (The latter, incidentally, are executed with the same overt visual trickery that Pasolini used to show the 'miracles' in his *Gospel* and *Theorem*, and staged very much in the spirit of the Korda *Thief of Bagdad*.) What is really remarkable, both here and in the preceding films, is that this unforced sense of wonder, and the films' sensate pleasures generally, can lie so happily with Pasolini's undiminished critical intelligence. It's not hard, for example, to see what drew an artist as self-consciously Oedipal as Pasolini to the tale of Zumurrud, where elements of fantasy merge with the notion of switching sexual roles (not to mention assuming kingship) in a delicious mixture of magical and sexual motifs; or to see why he chose a Haroun-al-Rachid tale that illustrates the equality of the sexes (this being anyway a variation of the May/January story that launches *The Canterbury Tales*, with its garden gods intervening in the affairs of the human characters) to be the film's first interjection. But intellectual reasoning cannot account for the stories' consuming delight, at once relaxed and euphoric, in the act of love, or the enthralled but irreverent appreciation of the human body. And this, finally, is the trilogy's greatest achievement: it has managed to show the broadest range of human passions, with sexuality rightfully prominent, in a form that expresses boundless affection but not a trace of prurience. Even without its extraordinary visual beauties, and the innovative aesthetic position that it represents, *Arabian Nights* would go down in film history as the first movie whose scenes of carnality were smothered in the sounds of laughter.

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