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Frames from Imraa Fi Dawama before and after restoration.

Restoring Lost Classics

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Rotana is picking up where Founoon left off to save classic films before they are damaged beyond repair

By Sherif Awad

Some claim that the Ancient Egyptians were the first to invent cinema, because their hieroglyphic writing and images on temples resembled contemporary storyboards and comic strips. Some film historians, however, would say that Egyptian cinema began in 1896 when the first film was projected inside Alexandria's Toson Stock Exchange and Cairo's Hammam Schneide. Still others claim the birth of Egyptian cinema came in 1907 with the first documentary film about Khedive Abbas Hilmi II's visit to the Institute of Mursi Abul-Abbas in Alexandria.



Whenever the true beginning was, Egypt has long been a leader in Arab film production, starting with silent film production through the black and white "talkies" to color film to the high-definition digital age of today. The nation's rich film heritage, though, was in danger of being lost forever. Neglecting films in storage rooms without adequate air-conditioning and preservation efforts could easily cause the prints to degrade

and fall apart.

In 2004, the Founoon Film Distribution Company launched the first initiative to save Egypt's classic films by buying up the negatives of movies for its library. After restoring the prints, these films were released on DVD under the Founoon label. It was the first time for film specialists and movie buffs to rediscover their favorite classics like Gharam wa intiqam (Love and Revenge, 1944), Ayyam wa layali (Days and Night, 1955) and Thartharah fawq al-Nil (Adrift on the Nile, 1971) in high quality sound and vision with at least two language subtitles, French and English.

But the high cost of mastering the prints and duplicating them in the Greece-based company Digital Press Hellas, accompanied by low DVD sales across Egypt, put the project on hold until Founoon was sold to Rotana a few years later.

In June, Rotana revived Founoon's restoration project. In a video message to an event attended by more than 400 Arab and Egyptian film and TV stars, Saudi prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, founder of Rotana Group, announced that he would allocate funds from his Kingdom Holding Company to restore 1,650 Egyptian films. Involved in the restoration project are Al-Sayed Al-Turkey Shabana, the current head of Rotana Channels, and Tarek Al-Gabali, the head of Rotana Film Library and its technical director.





Rotana's Al-Sayed al-Turki with his Indian counterpart from Prasad signing the restoration agreement

Al-Gabali, who joined the company in 2004, says these types of projects are important in light of the media market's demand for HD films for broadcast, digital discs and internet streaming. He explains that after Rotana started acquiring positive and negative 35mm prints of 20th-century Egyptian films for its library, "we had to act very quickly to restore those that were stored in unsuitable conditions. Our target now is to restore more than 1,000 feature films."

According to Al-Gabali, the project will take place in phases, with the first phase restoring 600 titles over three years. Rotana signed an agreement with the Indian company Prasad to bring restoration equipment and experts to Rotana's facilities at Egyptian Media Production City. "It is the procedure followed across the world," he says. "The film prints don't leave the country; restoration takes place in-house."

Among the decayed prints was the 1962 production *Imraa Fi Dawama* (A Woman in a Spiral), directed by Mahmoud Zolfakar and starring Shadia, Ahmed Ramzi, Layla Taher and Fouad al-Mohandes.



Courtesy of Rotana (4)

"The print [was in] a state that restoration experts call vinegar syndrome," explains Al-Gabali, referring to how the film material starts to release acetic acid, making the film smell like vinegar. The acid turns the film red and causes it to shrink, also making it very fragile. The team could not run the print through traditional telecine equipment to transfer it to video, because the film's sprocket holes would immediately break.

Prasad's equipment handles the print without using the sprocket holes, scanning the film frame by frame and adjusting for focus problems in places where the physical print has warped. "After the restoration process, we were able to create a 4K [resolution] scanned copy that can allow us to create a new negative of the film and also create a digital copy for HD broadcast and Blu-ray market."

Al-Gabali says the National Film Center and other broadcasters are interested in joining the project to have their own content restored using Rotana expertise.

The changing market has pushed Rotana to rethink how the renovated films will be distributed. Between the restoration, mastering and promotion costs and the poor DVD sales in the limited number of venues like Virgin megastores and Diwan Bookshops, it wasn't profitable to release more movies on DVDs. "There is a possibility that sales of restored Egyptian classics will be re-awakened through the Blu-ray disks," notes al-Gabali. "We will try to test the market with a few titles and if the results are promising, we will release restored films across Egypt on Blu-ray."

But with the spread of high-speed internet services, even film buffs and DVD collectors are starting to download movies, legally or illegally, on their PC and tablets. "We will consider launching a streaming service through iTunes, which already has a regional MENA office in the UAE," Al-Gabali says. "There are also possibilities of making a deal with Netflix or similar companies."