

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON



THE BLUE CAFTAN
(Language: Arabic)

Director: Maryam Touzani, 2022. Running time: 122 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 22 November 2023.

“At one point in *The Blue Caftan*, a master tailor instructs his young apprentice in cutting fabric. They stand with their bodies pressed close together, their hands intertwined, clutching a pair of large shears. The scene is suffused with eroticism and as the tailor speaks, the symbolic implication of what they are about to do becomes clear. He tells the young man to be certain before making the cut because there is no going back.

Maryam Touzani’s second feature, which won the Fipresci award at Cannes last year, is an overwhelmingly tender, dignified drama. It offers a powerful vision of love and bravery, suggesting that the two are inseparable.

Halim (Saleh Bakri) and his wife Mina (Lubna Azabal) own a caftan shop in one of Morocco’s oldest medinas. A stoic master of his craft, Halim sews and embroiders his dazzling handmade caftans in a disappearing tradition inherited from his father, while Mina runs the business side of things – dealing with demanding customers and fabric dealers, and shielding her husband from an impatient world. The couple take on a shy young man named Youssef (Ayoub Missioui) to assist Halim, and together, the two men work on what promises to be Halim’s masterpiece: a glorious blue caftan lined with an intricate gold-patterned trim.

Youssef’s arrival arouses a longing in Halim previously expressed only in fleeting rendezvous with strangers at a local bathhouse. The obvious attraction between the two men stirs hostility between Youssef and Mina, and after she accuses him of stealing fabric, he leaves. Mina soon begins to succumb to a serious illness and Halim neglects the shop in order to care for her. Youssef returns, assisting Halim with his work and helping him care for Mina; a unique bond forms between the three, while the romantic desire between Halim and Youssef intensifies.

Appropriately enough, *The Blue Caftan* is full of elegantly woven narrative and emotional threads, giving the work a delicately rendered cumulative impact. The film’s deliberately paced dramatic revelations, rather than existing primarily to further the plot, are in the service of something greater: what at first appears to be a story of secret lives and betrayal destined for a tragic end

becomes a nuanced portrait of unconditional love and acceptance at its most radical.

Touzani, who worked as a screenwriter and documentarian before moving into features, has an affinity for stories about compassionate, unconventional relationships; her debut, *Adam* (2019), follows an unwed mother (illegal in Morocco at the time) taken in by a widowed baker. *The Blue Caftan* is reminiscent of Iranian director Asghar Farhadi's humanistic puzzles, in which the closer we get to characters and their situation, the more unexpectedly complex things become. A critical mass of dramatic and psychological details is built up through an impressive marriage of script and performance. The subtleties of Touzani's actors – their glances, gestures and silences – bring to life the mysteries of the human heart with deft restraint, and at the centre of it all is the sincere connection, sensitively and memorably realised, between Halim and Mina.

At first, their marriage seems a complacent, loveless affair. Mina, however, is fiercely protective of Halim, challenging customers who fail to show his care and talents the proper deference. Slowly, the contours of the fortress they have built against the world become clear: theirs is a love of mutual respect, admiration and safety. Azabal's portrayal of Mina is rich and expressive; she is brusque when we first meet her, but as the film goes on, her delight and thirst for life emerge.

Bakri's gentle portrayal of Halim gives the film its quiet dignity. Caught between tradition and a still taboo sexual orientation, Bakri allows emotions to surface only at the most critical moments. The film's photography supplements this intense interiority with a lush depth of colour and an attention to the work of needle and thread. The fine details of Halim's work are lovingly lingered upon, showing in his hands and fingertips the site of the tailor's repressed and relocated passion.

The Blue Caftan is a film that venerates the tradition of craft while arguing that true freedom also requires a break with an oppressive status quo. It ends with a perfect poetic expression of this idea, with a deeply touching gesture from Mina and a tribute from Halim that combine defiance, devotion and transcendent love.”

Chris Shields, *Sight and Sound*, 10 May 2023.

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“The central character in the second feature from the Moroccan writer-director Maryam Touzani is a maalem, a master tailor who painstakingly embroiders the traditional ceremonial gowns of the title. “It’s a dying art,” Halim (Salem Bakri) explains to his young apprentice, Youssef (Ayoub Missiouï), expressing a sentiment that chimes with several impatient customers. The embroidery dictates the pace of this slow-burning drama – a premiere at Un Certain Regard in Cannes last year – as it probes love in many guises.

The closeted Halim is dedicated to his bossy, show-running wife, Mina (Lubna Azabal), despite his visits to the local hammam for anonymous sexual encounters with other men. Mina is concerned by Halim’s relationship with Youssef, an unspoken, delicate romance that blossoms just as Mina herself is fading. She has, we soon learn, given up her fight against breast cancer, and her final days are punctuated by dancing, laughter and acceptance.

She remains a formidable presence and businesswoman. On a night out with her husband, she smokes and leaps to her feet when a goal is scored on television. When the couple are later accosted by a policeman, he’s given quite an earful.

The love triangle is a little too convenient, unruffled and pretty. Halim and Youssef’s romance is tasteful, sensual and a tad unrealistic. Save for a scolding over a piece of pink silk, Mina’s blessing is assured. The garment that Halim works on throughout the film – the caftan is arguably the real star of the picture – is a heavy metaphor for all its delicate needlework.

A triumvirate of superb performances and the warmth of Maryam Touzani and Nabil Ayouch’s screenplay offset the clumsier tropes. Virginie Surdej’s cinematography bathes daylight scenes in golden light to match the thread Halim uses on his petroleum-blue creation.”

Tara Brady, *The Irish Times*, May 5, 2023.

“Halim (Saleh Bakhri of *The Band’s Visit*) and his wife Mina (Lubna Azabal) run a shop that specializes in traditional khaftans—he does the sewing while she handles the business end. They inherited the shop from Halim’s father, a maalem (master) of his work, and take great pride in the skill and effort that goes into the hand-stitched, ornately embroidered garments they sell. They’re fast becoming dinosaurs, however: while some customers in their small Moroccan town value the fact that Halim makes caftans the old-fashioned way, others wonder why they don’t join the modern world and use a sewing machine.

As one points out, their purist approach is likely to go unappreciated because these days ‘no one can tell the difference between hand-made and machine-made.’

Making things by hand takes a lot of time, and the shop is overwhelmed with orders. Fortunately, Halim and Mina find a young man eager to apprentice with them: Youssef (Ayoub Missiouï), who seems to appreciate the hand-made details of the caftans as much as they do. Halim praises the young man, saying he’s genuinely interested in learning their craft, but Mina is more suspicious, saying he’ll soon quit and take a job as a delivery driver or sell vegetables in the market. That she makes these comparisons is a good indication of the low regard in which hand-tailoring work is held by the general public, however skilful that work may be. Still, this is the life they chose, and they need the help, so they take a chance of Youssef.

It turns out Mina was right to be suspicious, although for the wrong reason. If her husband’s glance seems to linger a bit too long on the handsome young man, it’s not just avuncular affection at work—Halim has also been spending time in the backrooms of the local steam bath. Meanwhile, Mina is suffering from an illness which seems to be getting worse, yet she refuses medical care, saying “It’s in God’s hands now.”

Maryam Touzani’s *The Blue Caftan* is slow-moving but intense, gradually revealing the complexities of the main characters’ relationships. If they can’t always say exactly what they’re thinking or feeling, the difference is made up by actions that really do speak louder than words. For all their reticence, however, the intensity of their relationships comes across loud and clear. It’s easy to see why Morocco chose this as their entry for the 2023 Best International Film Oscar, and also easy to see why it didn’t win—it’s a beautifully made film that is essentially one long slow burn without enough easy payoffs to charm impatient voters.

Virginie Surdej’s cinematography is one of the most appealing aspects of *The Blue Caftan*, which was shot in Salé, a town in northwestern Morocco whose roots date back to the 11th century. Surdej, whose previous films include *In Syria*, *By the Name of Tania*, and *Our Mothers*, captures the quiet rhythms of Halim and Mina’s lives and the sensuality of the fabrics and braiding and golden thread that is the stock of their trade. Her work also places the story firmly in context, from the warmly lit interior scenes to the many exterior shots of the winding streets and small shops of the medina (traditional area) where Halim, Mina, and Youssef live and work.”

Sarah Boslaugh, *ArtsStl*, May 4, 2023.