



fish

The Blue Caftan
(Morocco/France/Belgium 2022)

Spoiler alert: You may prefer to read this review after the screening

DIRECTOR : Maryam Touzani

RUNNING TIME : 122 mins

RATING :

Synopsis:

An exploration of an enduring relationship that has thrived despite conflicting desires and the pressure of social norms. Set in the medina of a Moroccan town, the film is built around an emotional triangle between a middle-aged couple, who make beautiful traditional caftans, and a younger man.

Review: Jonathan Romney

Hand-stitched with loving care, Maryam Touzani's *The Blue Caftan* is an elegant artisanal film. The Moroccan melodrama is clearly the sort of picture that's likely to chime with people who don't always gravitate towards foreign-language cinema – but saying this, risks obscuring the maturity, complexity and rich simplicity of this superbly acted, emotionally resonant offering from the writer-director of 2019's *Adam*.

Built around an emotional triangle between a middle-aged couple and a younger man, the story is set in the medina of the Moroccan town Salé, where Mina (Lubna Azabal) and her husband Halim (Saleh Bakri) run a small shop selling traditional caftans. Halim is a *maalem*, a master tailor specialising in bespoke cutting and artistic embroidery, which means that the process of preparing garments is slow and expensive – and ever slower, since the art of the *maalem* is falling out of fashion, and a string of apprentices have proved insufficiently dedicated to the craft. Perhaps the couple's latest recruit, a handsome young man named Youssef (Ayoub Missiouï) will prove equal to the task; but perhaps he'll also bring problems.

One reason why he may stir things up is that Halim is gay, a regular habitué of the local *hammam*, where he has discreetly snatched assignations. In fact, Mina is fully aware of his secret life, and the couple enjoy a tender, mutually supportive relationship – and Halim has been a loving, solicitous partner throughout Mina's past and present experience of cancer. But she has reached the point where she can't help noticing just how fond her husband is becoming of Youssef, making her increasingly prickly about the young man's presence in their shop. Cont.

FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC

10.00 am Sunday 15th October 2023

8.15 pm Tuesday 17th October 2023

Review: Cont.

The film is sharply written by Touzani, with script input from the film's producer Nabil Ayouch. Skewed subtly towards Mina's female perspective, but showing deep empathy in exploring Halim's contradictory interiority, *The Blue Caftan* is a keenly tuned, non-judgmental exploration of an enduring relationship that has thrived despite the stresses of conflicting desires and the pressures of social norms.

Azabal and Bakri have a gently crackling chemistry as a couple who have formed an unshakeable closeness through years of riding the storms together, and through the daily mundane routine of working as a keenly-matched business duo: his artisanship, her canny and pugnacious management skills and no-nonsense front-of-house skills with their sometimes difficult (and neatly sketched) customers.

The characterisation emerges very richly through the acting: Belgian actress Azabal, of Moroccan-Spanish descent, who starred in *Adam* as well as films including *Incendies* and *Paradise Now*, gives Mina a mixture of toughness, fatigue and quietly irreducible *joie de vivre*, with a distinct streak of anti-conservative rebelliousness. And Palestinian actor Bakri illuminates a character we don't see that often in cinema: a gentle, introverted artist-intellectual who's also a sensualist and something of an old-school gentleman. Bakri's general demeanour, that of a somewhat lined, soft-spoken matinee idol well into his mature years, works beautifully in the role.

Missiouï is also effective as someone of a different generation, who clearly sees the world differently from his two employers and mentors but may have more in common with them than first appears. The quality of Touzani's direction emerges especially keenly when the three dance together – a scene that other film-makers might have pushed for obvious feelgood potential, but here it's played for genuine release and for the deepening of the emotional dynamics between the three.

There are a couple of moments when Touzani seems to slightly overplay her hand in terms of what needs to be said – one a brief glimpse of how illness has affected Mina's body, the other a shot making it perhaps superfluously obvious what Halim does in the bathhouse. But, in the context of a film from an Islamic country, you can see why Touzani might be doing this: rather than cover up these truths, she's saying, this is how it is, and it doesn't need disguising with false discretion.

This is also a film that quietly but effectively rails against increasing conservatism: notably in a scene where Mina and Halim are ID-checked by a policeman, indicating new authoritarian times in the medina, and another where she objects to the too-sober funeral of a singer who deserved a more joyous celebration. Overall, the film is very much a plea for tolerance and a protest against gender-determined boundaries: even Mina's visit with Halim to a male-frequented café is a quiet but forceful snub to the system.

As the film approaches its final act, the emotional charge surges increasingly, but Touzani and her cast keep it tightly controlled, to very satisfying effect. Superb camerawork by Virginie Surdej, returning from *Adam*, maps the actors' facial nuances against the shifts of light in the medina and the play of colours in the shop, with close scrutiny of beautifully textured fabrics and embroidery making for an aesthetic finesse that would make any *maalem* proud.

Some Thoughts on: *A Hero*

My favourite moment in this often puzzling, sometimes intriguing, confusing and repetitive film, was very close to the opening sequence.

Ramin has been released on temporary leave from prison and makes his way to family working on the restoration of a Xerxes palace or temple. With opening titles still rolling, Ramin treads a dusty, flat path in front of the massive ancient treasure, dwarfed by the structure. He then climbs and climbs and then climbs some more on rickety framework to reach his relatives. I was fascinated by this extraordinary visual depiction of insignificance used to introduce us to the character who was to become a 'hero'.

I felt somewhat disappointed with the following two hours and seven minutes though, after such a grand introduction. It probably wasn't helped by the subtitles slowing me down, but after the plot was revealed, and things started to go 'pear shaped' as suspicions arose about Ramon's version of events, the tension that came with him digging a hole for himself and then digging deeper, dissipated very quickly for me.

The events became circular and repetitive. Huge swathes of 'action' could have been edited for a tighter finished film.

Putting aside notions of reputation and honour, which I believe are on a different level of importance in the middle east, compared to many other nations, I did appreciate the way the level of influence the media had on public opinion was dealt with here and how notions of celebrity were examined too. Human behaviour..... even if the circumstances are not as sophisticated.

Overall, I just thought it was way too long, and empathy was lost.

Writing these reviews for our newsletter is a task I enjoy, but it comes with the risk of appearing a self-appointed expert and an over opinionated blow-hard. I would love others out there to share their reactions to our films as well..... please.

The very good film critic, Paul Byrne, who writes for the Sydney Morning Herald, wrote a piece about his job recently. Essentially he said that a critic is not right or wrong ,.....it is just an opinion!

Ross Armfield.

Ps. Following FISH's recent AGM, we learned that after 16 years as Treasurer, James Saville is stepping down. President Sandra Gillespie is stepping down too, but only as far as Vice President!!

Thank you so much both of you.
Job well done!

Message from the President

We hope that we, your new committee, will continue the good work of previous office-bearers, especially that of Sandra Gillespie and James Saville.

We welcome your ideas and reviews, sent please to our admin email address. We know that many of you attend film festivals and we would appreciate any feedback on films suitable for FISH. Of course, these films must have local distributors and we must wait for 6 months after the particular festival.

We are very grateful to the Empire Cinema, to Highlands Creative and to Ace Internet Services for their support.

Roz Garwen

~~

COMING UP

November	<i>Decision to Leave</i> [South Korea]	Sunday 19 th & Tuesday 21 st
December	<i>My Old School</i> [UK]	Sunday 10 th & Tuesday 12 th
February 2024	<i>Alcarras</i> [Spain]	Sunday 11 th & Tuesday 13 th

~~



FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC

President: Sandra Gillespie 4868 2396 & 0424303620
Guest Enquiries: Deborah Blay : 0400411004
TEXT ONLY minimum 24hours notice
Website: www.fish.org.au
Email: fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com
Mail: P.O. Box 1330 Bowral NSW 2576
Membership: Fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com
Membership closed
Enquiries: fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com

**We are grateful to our sponsors : EMPIRE CINEMA
ACE INTERNET SERVICES HIGHLAND CREATIVE**