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Friday September 15th, 2023

The Blue Caftan (12)

Dir: Maryam Touzani

with: Lubna Azabal, Saleh Bakri, Ayoub Missioui

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Synopsis: Halim (Saleh Bakri) and Mina (Lubna Azabal) run a caftan shop in the historic Salé medina, producing exquisitely finished hand-sewn garments. Married for some time, their union nevertheless contains a secret which must be kept quiet in a strictly conservative country like Morocco, and when new circumstances (including the arrival of a young apprentice) arise, so too do new emotional challenges that threaten to upset the careful calibration of their lives.

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

Credits

Mina	Lubna Azabal
Halim	Saleh Bakri
Youssef	Ayoub Missioui
Blue caftan client	Mounia Lamkimel
Doctor	Abdelhamid Zoughi
Bachir	Zakaria Atifi
Boutique customer	Fatima Hilal
Boutique customer	Maryam Lalouaz
Boutique customer	Kholoud El Ouehabi
Boutique customer	Amira Tiouli
Fatna	Fouzia Ejjawi
Bathroom employee	Mohamed Naimane
Police officer	Mohamed Tahri Joutey
Director	Maryam Touzani
Screenplay	Maryam Touzani, Nabil Ayouch
Cinematographer	Virginie Surdej
Music	Kristian Eidnes Andersen
Editor	Nicolas Rumpl
Sound	Nassim El Mounabbih

Morocco 2022. 122mins

Another view

Salim (Saleh Bakri) is more than a tailor. At the traditional shop in a Moroccan medina that he runs with his ailing wife Mina (Lubna Azabal), he works lovingly and painstakingly, hand-embroidering silks so exquisitely fine they are like wearing air. And in a way, this delicate, precise, time-consuming approach is mirrored in director Maryam Touzani's film-making, with its focus on tiny details, the fleeting glance, an almost imperceptible brush of skin against skin. It's a gentle piece of Arabic-language storytelling, one that softly, slowly enfolds the audience rather than propels them on a journey.

Halim, with his sad eyes and melodic, minor-key voice, loves his wife deeply, but the couple live with the secret of his homosexuality – something Mina has come to accept but that still generates an occasional stab of jealousy in her. When a new apprentice, Youssef (Ayoub Missioui), joins them, she is aware of the attraction between the two men; there is a sharp edge to her manner when she talks to Youssef. But the dynamic between the three subtly shifts over time. As Mina's health fails, she weaves Youssef into the fabric of her own present and her husband's future life.

Wendy Ide, The Observer

Our next screening

Friday, September 29th, 7.30pm

1976 (Chile 2022, Cert 15)

Set in the Pinochet era, 1976, Manuela Martelli's slow-burn thriller is the story of Carmen, a former nurse and the well-to-do wife of a doctor. While she is involved in renovating the family summer house, she is approached by a priest who asks for her help in looking after a young man, clearly on the run from the authorities. At first reluctantly, she finds herself drawn into caring for him, hiding her activities from her family as she does so. But as time goes on, she becomes aware that she no longer shares the same values as her government and that those closest to her suspect her of disloyalty to the country's new order.

Black History Month at The Venue

On Friday 6th October (5pm for 5.30pm start) there is a screening of **Queen of Glory** for Black History month. Film Society members will be very welcome. Entry is free but the audience is asked to make a voluntary contribution to cover operational costs. Any surplus on the night will be gifted to The Centre for Reconciliation. Tickets may be obtained from Bishop Grosseteste University. Please go to <https://www.bgu.ac.uk/bhm>, where the full details are available.