

Life sucks

A Lebanese vampire makes his mark at the Arab Film Fest

BY ROBERT AVILA
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By now it's natural to expect a lot from the Arab Film Festival, which is opening its 11th annual survey of cinema from the Arab world and diaspora with veteran Tunisian filmmaker Nouri Bouzid's excellent feature *Making Of*, then presenting more than 80 features, docs, and shorts from 13 countries in screenings around the Bay and, for the first time, in Los Angeles. Ghassan Salhab's *The Last Man* (2006), on the other hand, delivers something probably less expected: the first Lebanese vampire movie. As it turns out, a Lebanese vampire movie not only makes perfect sense but is also the best thing to happen to the genre in a long time.

That's because Salhab (whose fine *Terra Incognita* screened at the fest in 2005) opens the field to new resonance with a deft artistry that recapitulates the vampire film's enduring tropes while making nearly every shot a fresh, unexpected surprise. Like *Terra Incognita* (whose hip, desultory, and existential multicharacter drama remains a kind of companion piece), *The Last Man* unfolds in the limbo that is present-day Beirut.

Here a handsome fortysomething bachelor doctor (a haunted, quietly mesmerizing Carlos Chahine) becomes involved in a rash of bizarre murders. Meanwhile, his personality appears to be undergoing a profound transformation, which leaves him progressively alienated from his surroundings.

The narrative unfolds masterfully, punctuated by a visual and aural economy and style that are immediately riveting, like those of a subtle hallucination or waking dream that takes hold of you on a lethargic and very bright summer day. As daylight slowly bleeds from the screen and night takes over, familiar themes at the heart of the vampire film — the centrality of vision and the gaze, for instance, and the collision of scientific modernity with some premodern, even timeless mystery of nature — return, ingeniously wedded to a specific social and political context.

Beautifully painted, *The Last Man's* context is the half-ignored backdrop of Beirut and the background of war, invasion, civil strife, political crisis, and looming uncertainty (aggravated by TV chatter about US-occupied Iraq) that constitutes what one passing remark calls "the situation" — which has brought an existential malaise in its wake, a sense of heightened expectation that is also a socially paralyzing numbness. In this agonized slumber, this halfway world between life and death, is the last man the one who, alone and haunted, wakes fully to the visceral nightmare of being? *

ARAB FILM FESTIVAL

Oct. 18–28, most shows \$10

Call or see Web site for program info

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www.aff.org

THE LAST MAN

Sat/20, 7 p.m., \$10

Roxie Film Center

3117 and 3125 16th St., SF

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