

'The Last Man:' 'becoming a ghost of himself'

Ghassan Salhab gives Beirut its first vampire tale

Jim Quilty
Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: Somewhere in the sea wall separating Beirut from the Mediterranean, sewerage pipes protrude. They disgorge the city's waste into the sea as the wintertime tide washes around them, smashing the invisible filth against the base of the city before disseminating it elsewhere. Passionate, disembodied notes sound from a piano.

It's with this opening shot – unconventional, enigmatic, laden with possible meaning – that Ghassan Salhab commences "The Last Man" ("At-lal," or "Ruins," in Arabic), which had its regional premier at the Ayam Beirut al-Cinema'iyya film festival this week.

"The Last Man" is the first Lebanese vampire movie. The writer-director's third feature after "Beyrouth Fantome" (1998) and "Terra Incognita" (2002), it is Salhab's most successful film to date.

Khalil Chams (Carlos Chahine) is a doctor at a Beirut hospital. Notwithstanding the metaphorical weight of his name, Chams' life echoes that of any single, bourgeois professional. He enjoys scuba-diving in the (astonishingly clean) Mediterranean, and the camera frequently follows him into his submarine solitude. He lives in a spartan flat with a fridge full of meat. He eats lunch and talks politics with friends – "Frankly, I don't see the place getting any better," says a friend. "It's been this way since the war." Chams maintains a passing interest in a secret affair with an attractive – and patient – woman named Zeina while enjoying a dalliance or two with his patients.

However, he finds himself spending more and more time on his own. His change in mood corresponds with the appearance around town of an increasing number of corpses with mysterious neck wounds. Men and women both, the only thing they have in common, as one character observes, is that the murderer has a taste for the young.

Chams was himself attacked recently. Since then, he hasn't been quite himself, feeling less at ease in his own body – loss of appetite, increasingly sensitive to the sun – and becoming grad-

ually alienated from his life.

We notice, too, that Chams takes increasing interest in blood extraction.

In the way of men who find themselves transforming into something that's anathema to what they stand for, Chams struggles with his fate and seeks out the unknown assailant responsible for transforming him. Chams' Lestat-figure is no Tom Cruise, but rather Aouni Kawas. It's a little in-joke for anyone following Salhab's work – Kawas having been the deadpan antihero of Salhab's "Beyrouth Fantome."

"The Last Man" marks Salhab's first foray into the territory of genre film. It has little in common with special effects-laden pictures like Neil Jordan's "Interview with a Vampire" (1994) or Francis Ford Coppola's "Dracula" (1992) but it does obey the broad conventions of the form.

In fact, the film is true to the stylistic and aesthetic concerns that Salhab has addressed in his first two features. Now, as then, his cinematography – always as striking as it is understated – remains committed to reminding his audience that this isn't reality, but cinema. His dialogue is too off-center to be convincingly naturalistic.

|| 'The vampire shrinks from light and thrives in darkness – like cinema'

His plots defy traditional conventions, as they are seeded with puzzling moments of extramural performance. In "Terra Incognita" the proceedings are interrupted by the singing of Rima Khcheich. Here, the early segments of the film are broken by the unaccompanied flamenco of dancer Yalda Younes.

Younes herself speculates that the tension and violence of the form is an appropriate expression of the internal conflict Chams is struggling with before he comes to realize what's happening to him. Salhab agrees.

"I simply asked her to keep her performance within the frame and to challenge the camera," he smiles. "She appears elsewhere in the film as well though a lot of people don't see that."

Salhab intends his film to be an homage to the ur-text of vampire movies, F.W. Murnau's "Nosferatu" (1922), the black-and-white, silent film variant on the Dracula legend.

"As the film proceeds," he says, "Chams' life becomes narrower and narrower, more drained of dialogue, sound and color. He comes closer to Murnau, if you like."

He says he wasn't interested in using special effects in the film because they are as distracting as they are effective.

"People are terrified of the special effects but this prevents them from feeling any sort of internal horror. If you want to update this myth for today, you must give it a human face.

"Otherwise, the audience will be able to distance themselves from it, leave their fear back in the cinema."

Like his previous films, "The Last Man" is "in" Beirut rather than "about" Beirut. It's fitting, he says, to set a story of a man in transformation, mutating, in a city that is itself a mutant. That said, the film is littered with well-known faces from Beirut's cultural community, including video artist and film theorist Jalal Toufic – who makes a cameo as the doctor Chams is consulting about his malaise.

"Jalal's written a very interesting book about vampires," Salhab says.

"So he had to be in this movie, and he has to be a doctor. I'm not interested in the good-versus-evil side of the vampire myth, but in the aspect of a man becoming a ghost of himself. He's leaving his job, his life, daytime, in fact. We're in Beirut, and ghosts are everywhere.

"How can the vampire myth not be an affair of the cinema?" he says. "The vampire shrinks from the light and thrives in the darkness – like cinema. The vampire cannot see his reflection. He has a power over his future victims. He resembles a reality that he is not. He is a ghost. The vampire is the perfect cinema creature."

Much as it speaks to Salhab's previous work, "The Last Man" is successful because his use of the vampire myth makes the film more accessible than his first two features. For all his insistence on making a film "in" Beirut rather than "about" Beirut, his decision

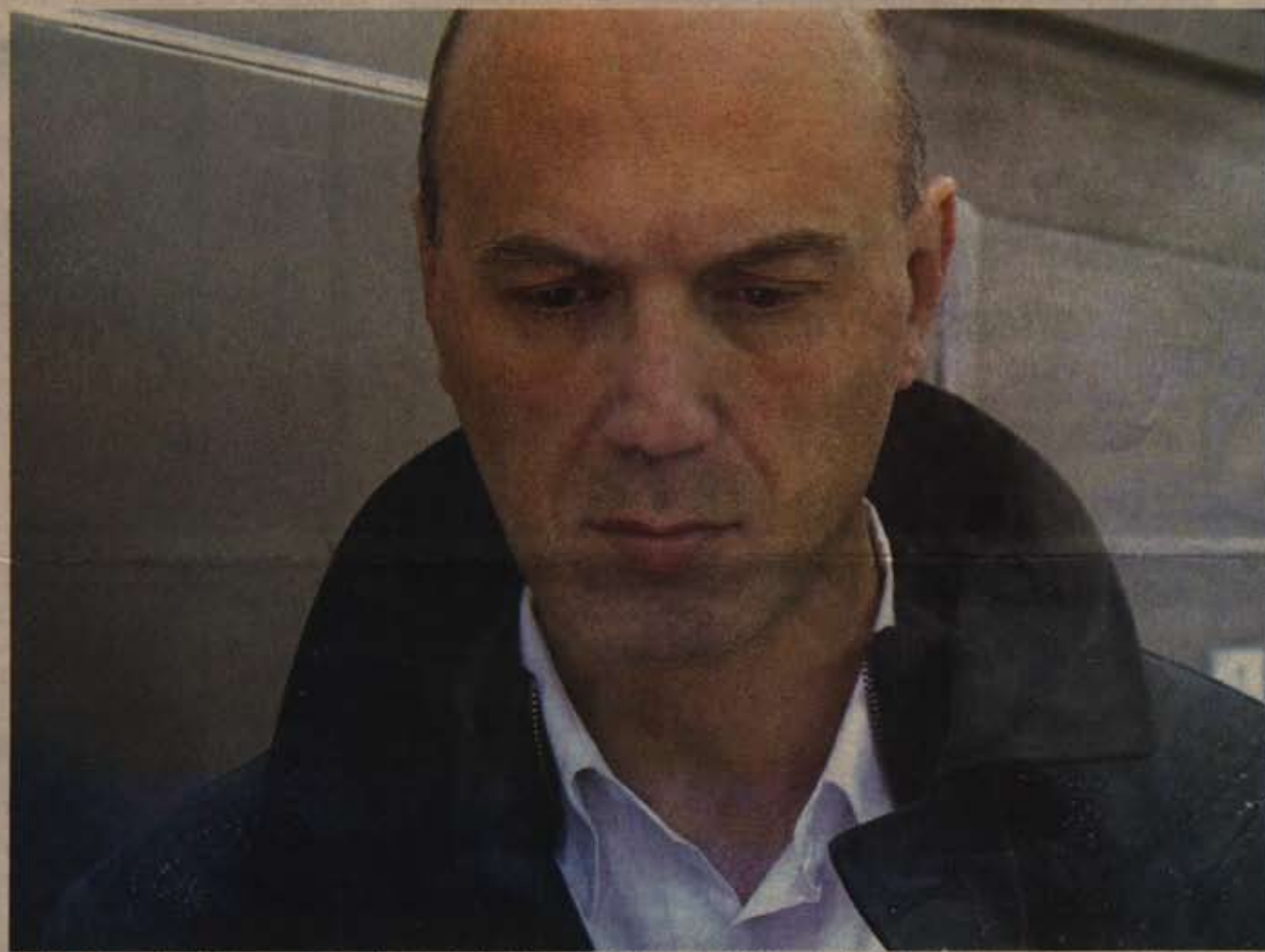
to explore the myth in the context of this city provides a range of local interpretations.

There are two strong leitmotifs used to provide context for Chams' transformation. One is periodic radio and television references to violence in the region – in Iraq, Palestine, Shebaa Farms. Another is the image of jet airliners constantly flying over the city. One is a metaphor for war. The other, in the local dialect at least, is a metaphor for emigration.

The audience might be forgiven for thinking that the most deadly menace to afflict the lives of Lebanese, the vampire that drains the life blood of the country, is none other than these two – war and emigration.

Ghassan Salhab's "The Last Man" screens in October at the Metropolis Cinema in Hamra. For more information, please call +961 3 760 906 or check out www.metropoliscinema.net

Salhab: "People are terrified of special effects but this prevents them from feeling internal horror."



Chahine plays Khalil Chams, a Beirut doctor who begins to feel less at ease in his own body.