



Humbert Balsan used cinema to build bridges between cultures

The Rainbow Producer - One man's quest for a multicultural cinema

“Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for?” The famous quote by English poet and playwright Robert Browning might have been written as a motto for the late French film producer Humbert Balsan. A former actor, Balsan became one of the most prolific and eclectic European producers of films of his generation. Ultimately, his very dedication, which led to stress and exhaustion, is what may have killed him; on 10 February 2005, he committed suicide in his office at Ognon Pictures in Paris, the company he had founded and steered to a leadership position in the market for quality films from throughout the world.

Before this tragedy, Humbert had achieved special status amongst his European peers. Not only was he one of the most dynamic producers of quality European co-productions, but he had a particular dedication to making new voices heard. As a Frenchman who was passionate about recording the changes of the society he grew up in, this meant using his film making skills to help bridge the yawning culture gap between contemporary France and the Arab world, from which much of the country's immigrant population now came.

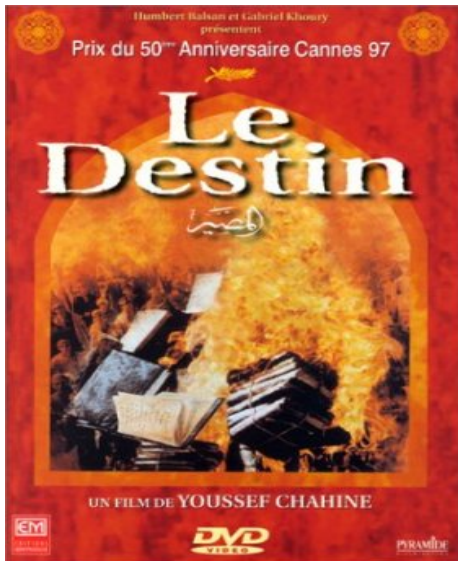
The last years of his life vindicated his patient cultivation of Arab *auteurs*. Ismael Ferroukhi's bittersweet *Le Grand Voyage (The Big Journey)*, in which an urban and secularised young Arab-French is reluctantly persuaded by his father to drive him on a pilgrimage to Mecca, won prestigious awards and found an enthusiastic audience in cinemas; Youri Nasarallah's *La Porte du Soleil (Gates of the Sun)*, a sprawling epic of Palestinian history, was a critical success and did much to promote new perspectives on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

One of the mourners at Humbert's funeral was Berlinale President Dieter Kosslick. The two men had been friends since 1994. At that time, Dieter was heading the German

regional Nordrhein Westfalen Film Stiftung. He helped Humbert co-produce *La Lumière des Etoiles (Star Light)*, a World War II drama about the tenuous friendship that develops between a French boy and a young German soldier. “As I got to know him, I realised the project was typical of Humbert,” says Dieter. “Most European World War II dramas reduce German soldiers to rank caricatures. But this script was all about the common humanity behind the tragedy of war. It epitomised what Humbert has been interested in all his life: to use cinema as a means of showing that what we have in common is far more powerful than what opposes us.”

The Humbert/Dieter friendship was cemented by a common passion for good cinema from the entire world. Dieter loved Humbert’s generosity and his propensity to be permanently surrounded by a host of friends and colleagues. “It’s no wonder he was so in love with the Arab world,” muses Dieter. “He shared their passion for hospitality, their sense of family connectedness, the art of conversation. All these things, these human values, he used as a kind of cultural passport, which made him feel at ease with anyone, anywhere in the world.”

Youssef Chahine’ *Destiny*, co-produced by Humbert Balsan



Dieter also points out that – through his body of work – Humbert displayed a compulsive interest for “the politics of reconciliation”. But this was not a soft-focussed commitment: Humbert seemed to understand uniquely how any journey towards reconciliation had to go through confrontation with unpalatable realities. This led him to champion filmmakers such as Youssef Chahine, Egypt’s most celebrated Egyptian dissident filmmaker, whose films courageously denounced the political corruption and hypocrisies of Arab hierarchs. The 1992 Chahine film *Al Massir (Destiny)*, was nominated for the coveted Palme D’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and triggered a vicious backlash from Islamist fundamentalists in Egypt. Since then, Humbert had remained a stalwart supporter of Chahine, through the filmmaker’s Cairo-based producer Gaby Khoury.

“I’d like to think that the Berlinale embodies the spirit of producers like Humbert,” says Dieter. “I believe in cinema as a mind opener and try to reflect this in the manner in which we programme Berlin. What people like Humbert remind us is that this medium

can make a difference sometimes. It can say to us that if we don't have the ability to look over our borders and show curiosity and respect for other cultures, we're condemning ourselves collectively to repeating the conflicts of the past." One of the world's most influential film festivals, which has helped launch the career of many courageous films, the Berlinale runs on the same philosophy and vision that inspired Humbert Balsam's tragically short life.