

VARIETY

Viewers may ask why Youssef Chahine, the grand man of Egyptian art cinema, chose to make "Chaos" in a style akin to the populist films his fans usually rail against. The answer surely lies in the message: Why make a movie about police brutality and corruption when the people who need to see it are filling the local multiplexes? Visually flat and pitched like a soap opera, "Chaos" is subversive precisely because of its style.

The ailing Chahine had longtime collaborator Khaled Youssef (whose solo credits include "The Storm") take the helm toward the end of shooting; hence the co-director credit. At the Venice press conference, Youssef said he deliberately kept the style as close to Chahine's dictates as possible, a point the master himself seemed to support. Though attention has focused on pic's condemnation of a corrupt police force, Chahine and scripter Nasser Abdel Rahman (Yousry Nasrallah's "El Medina") cast their net much wider, implicating contempo Egyptian society -- and the whole autocratic Arab world -- in fomenting the chaos of the title. Pic opens with a demonstration in the lower-middle-class Cairo neighborhood of Shubra, where students are greeted by sadistic, baton-wielding cops.

Young D.A. Cherif (Youssef El Sherif) throws the cases out, but police kingpin Hatem (Khaled Saleh) tosses the students into a secret cell within the crumbling former palace now housing the precinct. Hatem is a character out of an Egyptian opera buffa, larger than life and with a cruel streak bigger than the pyramids. He's in love with his neighbor Nour (Mena Shalaby), a young teacher with an unrequited crush on Sherif. The D.A.'s mother, Headmistress Wedad (Hala Sedky), encourages Nour, anxious for her son to ditch his trashy, dope-smoking g.f. Sylvia (Dorra Zarrouk). But Hatem has other plans and creates his own laws, culminating in Nour's abduction.

Not since his prescient warnings against fundamentalism in "Destiny" has Chahine made such a forceful statement about Egypt's catastrophic path. "Whoever is ungrateful to Hatem is ungrateful to Egypt" is the policeman's mantra, reinforcing the film's point that such figures as Hatem aren't isolated bad eggs, but products of system-wide failure. Through Nour he also critiques the Egyptian education system, her lack of English a further blow to any pretense at self-congratulation.

Only by discussing these myriad asides does the full extent of Chahine's damning critique become clear. He skewers political parties and Islamists, all uninterested in aiding their constituents unless it leads to more power. He condemns a police force that's run like an independent militia, meting out punishment by whim and denying any recourse. Most of all, he levels devastating charges against the past half-century of autocratic rule, whose regimes have destroyed civil society and made the average citizen either apathetic or afraid to protest.

It won't be foreign auds who get all these points, but rather viewers in the Arab world. Chahine has pitched the entire film at the level of melodrama; nothing feels real, from the back projection during car rides to the over-the-top torture sequences. But he's getting at larger truths, so that abortion, perversion and rape become so much dress-up to the grander opera at hand. Although visuals tend toward the one-dimensional, complete with overly bright lighting reducing everything to uncomplicated planes, there are still moments of sweep, especially toward the end as the outraged residents of Choubra take to the streets in a stirring finale. Music borders on schmaltzy, but stays in keeping with overall tone.