

## Journeys of Assumed Identity

*Seven O'Clock* (1937)

Togo Mizrahi's film *Al-Sa'a 7* (*Seven O'Clock*, 1937) opens with a traveling shot as the credits roll. The camera travels four blocks along Sharif Street, passing through Manshiya Square, the heart of Alexandria's commercial business district. It then takes a right turn on al-Saba' Banat Street, passing the French Gardens. The shot ends as the camera approaches the seawall overlooking the Mediterranean.

In this footage, in addition to the mobility of the camera, the viewer witnesses a city in motion: pedestrians, horse-drawn carriages, cars, a bus, and a tram traverse the city streets. The footage reflects the spontaneity of an actuality: a youthful passerby leaps joyfully into the frame, mugging for the camera (fig. 28). Yet the camera manages to capture a cross section of Alexandrian society. Men and women in Western dress walk alongside laborers in galabiyas carrying sacks and rolling large spindles. The camera also records police officers, carriage drivers, construction workers, and a Sufi cleric.

On the right side, as the camera approaches the seawall, we see a monumental structure under construction. The visible semicircular colonnade would soon house a statue of Khedive Isma'il, Egypt's ruler from 1863 to 1879. Isma'il is known as the builder of the Suez Canal and modern Cairo, as well as the architect of Egypt's late-nineteenth-century debt crisis. In 1938, one year after the film was shot, the monument, a gift from Italy, would be ceremonially unveiled by the Italian community of Alexandria. Both the colonnade and the statue were positioned to face the Mediterranean, symbolizing "Egypt turned toward the West."<sup>1</sup>

By contrast to the symbolic positioning of the monument, the visual narrative of the film does not continue in a straight line northward from the port of Alexandria to the northern shore of the Mediterranean. In *Seven O'Clock*, the seawall serves as a barrier. The traveling shot ends. The film cuts to footage shot from a fixed camera positioned at the seawall, pivoting to display—and mimic—the curved coastline of



FIGURE 28. Manshiyya Square, Alexandria. Screenshot from *Seven O'Clock* (Togo Mizrahi, 1937).

Alexandria's eastern harbor. At the end of the shot, the camera has turned around, orienting itself inward toward Egypt, *ad Aegyptum*. In the diegesis, too, circular urban trajectories give way to a journey along a linear axis. From its position on the Alexandria seaside promenade, the camera points southward, establishing the trajectory of the narrative.

*Seven O'Clock* was the first of three Egyptian comedies to appear in close succession that explore the relationship between travel and fluid Levantine identities. These three films were produced by different studios, were directed by different filmmakers, and starred different comic actors. Mizrahi's *Seven O'Clock*, starring 'Ali al-Kassar, was released in October 1937. Studio Misr's *Salama fi khayr* (*Salama Is Fine*), directed by Niyazi Mustafa, followed a month later. In *Salama Is Fine*, Prince Kandahar (Husayn Riyad), from the fictional country of Bloudestan, arrives in Egypt seeking romance. Tired of being pursued by women who are after his money, he hatches a plan to find true love. In a nod to *The Prince and the Pauper*,<sup>2</sup> Kandahar hires a poor Egyptian named Salama (Naguib al-Rihani) to take his place. Salama, a lowly farrash—a gofer—knows nothing of state etiquette, setting in motion this comedy full of misunderstandings, role play, and plot reversals. Opening in January 1938, Lotus Films' *The Pasha Director's Daughter* (described in chap. 4) features Assia Dagher playing a character who takes refuge in an assumed

identity on a boat sailing from Beirut to Alexandria. In all three films physical displacement sets in motion an exploration of mobile identities.

In this chapter I analyze the journey of mistaken identity in Mizrahi's film *Seven O'Clock*, with reference to Mustafa's *Salama Is Fine*. In *Seven O'Clock*, 'Ali al-Kassar plays 'Usman 'Abd al-Basit, a courier for a bank in Alexandria who delivers cash to local businesses. 'Usman's journey consists of three itineraries: circular movement within Alexandria; travel from Alexandria to Aswan; and travel from Aswan to Cairo. The first movement, following 'Usman's daily deliveries, maps a series of circular trajectories that encompass the city's cosmopolitan, ethnonational diversity. The second movement begins when 'Usman falls asleep and dreams that he is accused of stealing the bank's money. He takes flight, setting in motion a journey that speeds along the rails from Alexandria to Aswan, tracking a spectrum of racial-national identities. The third movement, from Aswan to Cairo, where 'Usman finds employment as a domestic servant, maps a queer Levantine journey of mistaken identity. 'Usman's trajectories, I argue, serve to map the limits of the nation, exploring ethnic and racial diversity within its boundaries.

#### MOVEMENT I: CYCLING IN ALEXANDRIA

Films featuring 'Ali al-Kassar's tend to be episodic—and *Seven O'Clock* is no exception. Viola Shafik refers to this structure as “anecdotal narration,” and identifies this narrative form with a long-standing popular theater practice in Egypt called *fasl mudhik* (comic sketches).<sup>3</sup> As Shafik reads the film, the thrust of the narrative begins when 'Usman falls asleep and is resolved at the end of the film, when he wakes up and realizes it was all a dream. For Shafik, then, the circularity of the first movement, including 'Usman's search for his bicycle, “decompos[es] the whole, rather simple and point-oriented, narration.”<sup>4</sup> Shafik elaborates: “Although these events are supposed to prepare the ground for 'Usman's dream of the burglars' break-in, the context is almost totally subverted because of the internal dynamics of the scene.”<sup>5</sup> Shafik reads *Seven O'Clock* as a narrative driving toward a single point, traveling along a single trajectory. I argue, by contrast, that the film, rather, explores the notion of mobility itself. While some of the trajectories are linear, the film loops through multiple journeys rather than driving toward a single destination.

Shafik notes that the opening scenes involve characters from Alexandria's resident foreign-minority communities: the thief who steals 'Usman's bike wears European dress; and 'Usman's drinking partner, George, is Greek. Each of these characters propels 'Usman's movements. I argue that the circular motion involving these “European” characters serves to draw lines encircling an Alexandrian ethnonational diversity that also encompasses a range of socioeconomic classes. I take these two examples in turn to unpack their significance.

In *Seven O'Clock*, 'Usman delivers cash for payroll—a cyclically recurring event. His regular visits are underscored by his friendly banter with the clients. The points on his trajectory within Alexandria are fixed: the bank, the clients' offices, his home, and the café. He travels within a closed circuit.

'Usman sets out on his bike to his first client of the day, parks his trusty vehicle in front of the client's building, and walks away. In his absence, the bike is stolen. The bicycle thief is represented as a member of one of Alexandria's resident foreign minorities. He wears trousers, a threadbare wool blazer, and a newsboy cap.

After a lengthy search, 'Usman gives up and proceeds on foot. However, later in the day 'Usman emerges from another client's office to find his bike unexpectedly parked outside. A police officer sees 'Usman mount the bike, recognizes that he is not the rider who had dismounted, and accuses him of attempted theft. The honest, hardworking, good-hearted 'Usman in his Nubian dress stands accused, while the thief, in his Western clothes, is mistaken for the rightful owner.

The thief is addressed as "*khawaga*." Egyptian Arabic speakers use this word as a term of address or salutation for resident foreign minorities, as well as for foreigners in general. In contradistinction to the salt-of-the-earth nativeness of law-abiding *awlad al-balad*, as discussed in chapter 3, "*khawaga*" connotes outsider status. Presumably Italian or Greek, the thief reflects a socioeconomic diversity among the foreign populations in Alexandria that is often left out of the nostalgic portrayals of cosmopolitan Alexandria.<sup>6</sup> When the *khawaga* returns, he denies his ownership of the bike and slips away from the scene. 'Usman's ownership of the bike is validated and he rides off, continuing along his trajectory.

The first movement of *Seven O'Clock* metatextually doubles this sense of circularity by including two instances of self-referentiality. At the opening of the clip, when 'Usman looks for his bike in a nearby stand, he is positioned before an advertisement featuring 'Ali al-Kassar (fig. 29). Later, he follows a cyclist carrying a second bike on his shoulder. The cyclist parks both bikes and enters Studio Mizrahi. Just as the character 'Usman is searching for his bike, one is delivered to the studio. Are we to understand that this bike will be used as a prop in filming? Or is it destined for the studio's own courier, who will extradiegetically travel the same streets as the fictional 'Usman? 'Usman throws up his arms and walks past, and then the camera cuts to a scene shot on the soundstage just inside that door.

Magdy el-Shammaa has pointed out that Mizrahi was an innovator in this sort of filmic self-promotion.<sup>7</sup> As previously discussed, in *Mistreated by Affluence*, an ad for Mizrahi's film *Children of Egypt* (1933) appears pasted on the doors of a closed shop. In *Seven O'Clock*, the self-referentiality, with a nod and a wink to the viewer, mimics 'Usman's own circular motion in the film's first movement.

A brief discussion of the competing film *Salama Is Fine* throws a few elements of my analysis into relief. As already noted, *Salama Is Fine* was released a month after *Seven O'Clock*. Salama, too, carries a large sum of money from his employer to deposit at Bank Misr. In the course of the plot, Salama is also accused of stealing



FIGURE 29. 'Usman ('Ali al-Kassar) searches for his missing bicycle. Screenshot from *Seven O'Clock* (Togo Mizrahi, 1937).

the money he is charged with protecting. Both films are Levantine comedies of assumed identity: Salama is invited to play a prince; 'Usman later disguises himself as a woman. Like *Seven O'Clock*, *Salama Is Fine* engages in a form of self-promotion: Studio Misr, where the film was produced, and Bank Misr, which appears in the film, are part of the same corporate group founded by the Egyptian financier Muhammad Tal'at Harb. Finally, and most importantly for our purposes here, in both films, bicycles are associated with theft.<sup>8</sup>

Like 'Usman, Salama physically travels through a limited geographic area, moving in tight circles within Cairo's central commercial district: department store; bank; upscale hotel. Seeing a purse snatcher escape by bicycle, Salama views bikes as a threat. He tries to avoid bicycles as he picks his way through the crowded city streets, only to find himself standing in the middle of the street as competitors in a bike race rush toward him. Salama takes flight, trying to run ahead of the pack of bicycles. The camera is fairly mobile in this scene, but in a way that preserves a sense of stasis: at one point the dolly tracks to maintain a fixed distance between the camera and Salama, giving the impression that he is running in place. For Salama, bicycles block his progress, hindering his ability to get from the store to the bank. By contrast, for 'Usman, whose moving image travels across the frame of a fixed camera, the bicycle is a means of transportation—and its theft is a hindrance

to his mobility. The loss of his bike does not ground him; 'Usman proceeds along his circular trajectory more slowly on foot.

The second instance of circular motion in the first movement of *Seven O'Clock* involves George ('Ali 'Abd al-'Al), a Greek neighbor. After a fight with his mother-in-law, 'Usman repairs to a local watering hole, where he finds George. Having imbibed a bit too much, 'Usman and George get confused about their destination and end up in one another's apartments. George is confronted by 'Usman's mother-in-law. When 'Usman hears the shouting, he goes to investigate. The stunt ends with the two men safely installed in their own beds. Although the apartments—George's bachelor pad and 'Usman's marital home—are distinct, there is a sense of equivalence or parity. Like 'Usman's regular rounds and his search for his bicycle, this shared circular trajectory of the Nubian urban migrant and the Greek resident maps a route of Alexandrian coexistence.

#### MOVEMENT II: NUBIAN WHITEFACE AND BORSCHT BELT MINSTRELSY

Words uttered by 'Usman's shrewish mother-in-law, Saniya (Zakiya Ibrahim), set into motion the events that propel 'Usman out of the confines of his cyclical mobility and launch his movement along a linear trajectory. In the course of their argument, Saniya repeatedly insults 'Usman by calling him "*Ya, aswad al-wish* [you blackface]" (fig. 30).

In response to her insults, 'Usman goes to the café, where he drinks too much beer (and may have consumed some drugged dragées). Once the confusion over the apartments is resolved, 'Usman falls asleep in his own bed. In a drunken stupor, 'Usman dreams that two thieves, wearing the same costume as the bicycle thief, enter the apartment and steal the bank's money. His dream continues: The following day he goes to his employer to explain the theft, and overhears that the police consider him the prime suspect. Fleeing the police, he boards a train in Alexandria to his ancestral home, Aswan, reversing the trajectory of his migration. In Aswan, he pays a visit to his wealthy uncle and requests a loan to repay the bank.

To viewers not steeped in the conventions of Egyptian theater and cinema, Saniya's racial slur appears misplaced. 'Ali al-Kassar had a successful stage career stretching back twenty-one years prior to the release of *Seven O'Clock*. Since 1916 al-Kassar had headlined a Cairo-based traveling troupe that performed comic musical reviews. Al-Kassar regularly appeared onstage as the character 'Usman Abd al-Basit, a good-hearted, uneducated Nubian; in the early plays in which he appeared, he was, he insisted, "half-Nubian, half-Sudanese, and all Egyptian."<sup>9</sup> Al-Kassar performed 'Usman onstage in blackface. In the early plays, both British and Egyptian authorities regularly uttered racial slurs at 'Usman—particularly the same words Saniya uses in the film: "*Ya, aswad al-wish*."



FIGURE 30. Saniya (Zakiya Ibrahim, center) berates ʿUsman (ʿAli al-Kassar), calling him “you blackface,” as his wife, Bahiga (Bahiga al-Mahdi), looks on. Screenshot from *Seven O’Clock* (Togo Mizrahi, 1937).

Eve Troutt Powell argues that in these plays, ʿUsman’s Nubian identity “becomes a conduit through which Egyptians could express anger at British racism” and “serves as a criticism of indigenous racial attitudes.”<sup>10</sup> The character embodied an Egyptian nationalism “that reinforced the idea of unity of the Nile Valley.”<sup>11</sup> Powell reads al-Kassar’s appropriation of Sudanese identity as an appropriation of territory. She also sees the character ʿUsman denouncing both “English racial discrimination” and “the hypocritical and self-hating mannerisms of wealthy Egyptians.”<sup>12</sup> Powell concludes that one must read Egyptian blackface as a site of ambivalence: “Perhaps what ʿUsman really does is wipe away all racial difference, rendering it a distraction from true Egyptian national identity. Whether he succeeded in this depends, I think, on who his audience was, and what color they chose to be. I have come to consider the character of Osman the embodiment of a double colonialism, a perspective of both colonizer and the colonized.”<sup>13</sup> There is a lot in al-Kassar’s act to make a culturally sensitive critic uncomfortable: he is called “barbarian”; he dons blackface; his scripts portray blackness as demeaning. Powell both provides historical context for the development of this discourse in al-Kassar’s performance, and unpacks its inherent dualities: colonizer/colonized; demeaning/empowering; racism / critique of racism.



From its founding in June 1934, the weekly magazine *Al-Ithnayn* closely followed—and promoted—the careers of the two popular, rival comic actors: ‘Ali al-Kassar and Naguib al-Rihani. Early in its publication, the magazine placed a caricature of al-Kassar in blackface inside the front cover with the caption “‘Ali al-Kassar—I chose the role of the barbarian because we are in a time that blackens the face” (fig. 31). This statement confirms that al-Kassar’s practice of donning blackface continued to function as a form of protest against British control in Egypt into the 1930s. In al-Kassar’s rhetoric, blackface functions as a metaphor of colonial subjecthood—a visual sign of how colonial rule demeans subject peoples.

Al-Kassar billed his character ‘Usman as “*al-barbari al-misri al-wahid* [the only Egyptian barbarian].” Another comic actor, Fawzi Munib, who, incidentally, appeared in the 1923 film *In the Land of Tutankhamun* (discussed in chap. 1), billed himself as “*al-barbari al-‘asri* [the modern barbarian].” Munib flaunted his “barbarian” credentials in the ads for a film called *Al-Abyad wa-l-aswad* (*The White and the Black*, Fu‘ad al-Gazayirli), released New Year’s Eve 1937.<sup>14</sup>

‘Ali al-Kassar ushered in the year 1937 differently. The same week that Munib’s film *The White and The Black* was released, al-Kassar debuted a new character onstage, appearing without his usual blackface makeup.<sup>15</sup> In response, *Al-Ithnayn* staged a satirical debate in its pages between the black al-Kassar and the white al-Kassar.<sup>16</sup> Calling the newcomer a thief, the black al-Kassar claims authenticity, originality, and a popularity that confirms the territorial integrity of the Nile Valley: “[M]y light eclipses the stars—from here all the way to Khartoum.” The white al-Kassar prefers the shape-shifting potential of a blank (racially unmarked) slate, arguing: “One day I can be a sheik, one day a pasha, and one day an effendi, or any character. But you are a barbarian and nothing else.” Each character brags and boasts and hurls insults in colloquial rhymed prose.

*Al-Ithnayn*’s lighthearted response treats al-Kassar’s decision as purely artistic—a decision that liberated an actor from his signature character, giving him freedom to explore new roles. But I would also like to suggest that, just as al-Kassar’s donning of blackface holds political significance, so does its removal. On 22 December 1936, the Anglo-Egyptian treaty was ratified. The following week, al-Kassar appeared onstage without his blackface makeup. The Anglo-Egyptian treaty redefined the relationship between the two parties, diplomatically ending the occupation, and limiting the number of British troops on Egyptian soil during peacetime. Extraterritorial rights for British citizens were eliminated, and the treaty stipulated that the countries would work to abolish both the Capitulations and the Mixed Courts. The terms for dismantling the Mixed Courts, which had adjudicated civil and commercial disputes between foreigners and locals, and between foreigners of different nationalities, were laid out by the Montreux Convention, signed a few months later, in May 1937. As the loopholes for sustained British influence and the return of British troops became apparent over time, Egyptian opposition to the terms of the treaty grew. However, in 1936 the Wafd Party, the liberal nationalist political party, hailed the treaty as a major step





FIGURE 31. Caricature of 'Ali al-Kassar in blackface. The caption reads: "'Ali al-Kassar—I chose the role of the barbarian because we are in a time that blackens the face." *Al-Ithnayn*, 13 August 1934.

toward Egyptian independence. Negotiations concluded in August 1936, four months before ratification, so the terms of the treaty were discussed and debated in the press.<sup>17</sup> In October 1936, less than two weeks before the release of al-Kassar's film *The Neighborhood Watchman*, Togo Mizrahi hosted a party celebrating "the

signature of the treaty of Egyptian independence.” In this celebratory atmosphere, al-Kassar appears to have decided that with the end of the British occupation, the times no longer blackened the faces of Egyptians.<sup>18</sup>

Al-Kassar did not abandon his creation ‘Usman ‘Abd al-Basit. The beloved character remained relevant, and continued to entertain Egyptian audiences from the stage and screen. The film *Seven O’Clock* premiered in October 1937—al-Kassar’s first film since *Al-Ithnayn* announced his removal of blackface onstage. ‘Usman ‘Abd al-Basit is the same good-natured character—and subject to the same racial insults he always incurred—even without the blackface makeup. In other words, Saniya’s words are not as misplaced as they first appeared: the journey of racial exploration is not a journey of mistaken identity. That is yet to come. In the discussion that follows, I unpack the signification of the white-faced al-Kassar’s performance of a Nubian character under a pretense of implied or vestigial blackface.

The traveling scene to Aswan opens to the nondiegetic sound of drumming. ‘Usman boards a train in Alexandria, and as the engine speeds along the track, the musical rhythms stand in for the sounds of a train in motion. ‘Usman alights from the train and walks through the dusty streets. The scene cuts to a wedding celebration, the source of the music. As a vocal track enters the rhythmic drumming, the camera shows an official registering the marriage. Only then does the camera pan the room, showing celebrants clapping and swaying to the music and, finally, the band accompanying two male dancers, each wearing a *manjur*.<sup>19</sup> This music is kinetic. The swaying of the dancers’ hips produces the rhythm (fig. 32).

This “Nubian” wedding scene carries ‘Usman’s performance of virtual racial marking over to the entire wedding party. In contrast to the “Africanness” of the performers and their performance, the majority of the wedding guests—‘Usman’s cousins and the groom’s family—are fair skinned. In the room where the female guests are gathered, a few African-looking guests in traditional Nubian dress ring the room, but their presence only highlights racial, cultural, and class distinction: the women belonging to this affluent family are fair skinned and wear Western dress.

The musical performance parallels ‘Usman’s whitewashed appropriation of Nubian identity and culture: the music performed in this scene is not exactly Nubian, but neither is it wedding music. This type of ensemble, known as *fann al-tanbura*, typically performs this sort of music at a *zar*, a ritual to exorcise spirit possession. The *zar*, thus performed, is a tradition that originated in the Horn of Africa and spread to Sudan and the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>20</sup> Its inclusion in this film is a form of exoticization that fails to recognize Saharan and sub-Saharan cultural specificity: Nubians? Sudanese? They’re all the same. Wedding? Exorcism? What difference does it make?

To be clear, no one expects realism from 1930s comedies either from Hollywood or from Egypt. I concede that since the character of ‘Usman refers to his earlier,



FIGURE 32. Performers at a wedding celebration in Aswan. Screenshot from *Seven O'Clock* (Togo Mizrahi, 1937).

blackface stage persona, he may here, too, implicitly lay claim to Sudanese ancestry. But we also can't ignore the way this footage exoticizes Nubia for the urban Lower Egyptian viewer, and fails to distinguish between distinct Afro-Muslim cultures.

In keeping with Powell's reading of al-Kassar's blackface, I view this musical scene as a site of ambivalence: cultural appropriation on the one hand, and inclusion on the other. The only black characters in other Egyptian films of this era were servants.<sup>21</sup> Despite its problematic portrayal of Nubian culture, I maintain that this scene represents an effort by the writer, 'Ali al-Kassar, and director, Togo Mizrahi, toward inclusion, toward an expansive view of the Egyptian nation. For al-Kassar, as Eve Troutt Powell writes, 'Usman "taught his audiences an important geographic lesson, in which the Sudan and Nubia must always be considered part and parcel of the Egyptian nation."<sup>22</sup> For Mizrahi, the inclusion of Nubian characters is an articulation of a pluralist vision of Egyptianness. This scene is shot on a soundstage in Alexandria featuring Saharan musicians who are part of the cultural fabric of the city.

But I would like to complicate this picture a bit more. As I have already noted, Egyptian nationalist film critics dismiss 1930s Egyptian cinema as derivative of Hollywood. The most apparent Hollywood intertexts for Mizrahi's oeuvre are films featuring Jewish vaudevillians. Drawing from the work of Michael Rogin, I would like to sketch out an additional aspect of how al-Kassar's vestigial blackface

performance of the “Nubian” ‘Usman participates in a wider cinematic project of normativizing liminal characters and projecting a pluralist vision of Egypt.

In his book *Blackface, White Noise*, Rogin argues that minstrel acts in which Jewish vaudevillians performed in blackface contributed to the process of Jewish immigrants integrating into America, and of Jews becoming white.<sup>23</sup> Mizrahi makes several clear nods in his work to the Marx Brothers, as noted in chapter 3. I also see the influence of Eddie Cantor, who was enormously popular among critics and moviegoers in 1930s Egypt. In December 1933 an ad for *Palmy Days* (Edward Sutherland, 1931) appeared in a short-lived but high-minded journal, *Fann al-sinema*, published by the Cinema Critic’s Association; the journal also ran a translation of an interview with Cantor, who starred in the film, and featured the film as pick of the week. In 1936 the premier cinema in Cairo, Cinema Royal, kicked off its season with *Strike Me Pink* (Norman Taurog, 1936), starring Cantor and Ethel Merman.

The influence of Eddie Cantor—who included a blackface minstrel number in each film—is perhaps most evident in Mizrahi’s collaborations with ‘Ali al-Kassar. Many of Cantor’s films involve journeys of mistaken identity, like *The Kid from Spain* (Leo McCarey, 1932) and *Ali Baba Goes to Town* (David Butler, 1937), an Orientalist fantasy coincidentally released the same week as *Seven O’Clock*. The journey in *Roman Scandals* (Frank Tuttle, 1933)<sup>24</sup> turns out to be a dream sequence, like the framing device of *Seven O’Clock*.

Mizrahi’s films utilize liminal characters, like al-Kassar’s ‘Usman, to define the boundaries of the nation racially, culturally, and geographically. Read against the Hollywood intertexts, *Seven O’Clock* reflects a complicated construction of native-ness—one that projects to its audiences images of al-Kassar’s trans-Nile Valley native authenticity while simultaneously echoing the same Jewish minstrel acts that, Michael Rogin argues, were performing whiteness and American national belonging by donning blackface.

### MOVEMENT III: QUEER LEVANTINE MOBILITY

The third journey ‘Usman undertakes in *Seven O’Clock* enacts a different sort of masquerade—the performance of gender. Just as ‘Usman’s first journey shared some affinities with *Salama Is Fine*, his third journey similarly parallels Hikmat’s experiences trying to pass as a man in *The Pasha Director’s Daughter*. In *Seven O’Clock* the Aswan police, in pursuit of ‘Usman, search his uncle’s home. ‘Usman takes refuge in the bridal chamber. When the police come knocking, ‘Usman is dressed as the bride. The uncle sends ‘Usman away, and he takes flight dressed as a woman. Aboard a Cairo-bound train, ‘Usman introduces himself to fellow passengers as “Farida.” In my discussion of this final movement of the film, I examine the intersection of this journey of assumed identity and the notion of the “queer Levantine” explored in the previous chapter.



FIGURE 33. On the train, a male passenger (Hasan Rashid) buys “Farida” (‘Ali al-Kassar) a drink. Screenshot from *Seven O’Clock* (Togo Mizrahi, 1937).

This is not al-Kassar’s first role in a dress, nor, for that matter, is it his first appearance cross-dressing on film. ‘Ali al-Kassar made his first foray from stage to screen in 1920, with a silent short called *Al-Khala al-amrikiyya* (*The American Aunt*, Bonvilli). The film was an adaptation of a popular British farce, Brandon Thomas’s *Charley’s Aunt* (1892). In the play, when Charley’s aunt is delayed, his friend dresses in drag and assumes her identity. Little is known about al-Kassar’s film adaptation, now lost, except that he plays the title role in drag.<sup>25</sup>

In *Seven O’Clock*, from the outset ‘Usman intends to change out of his costume on the train. But his plans are thwarted when a pair of chic young women join him in the cabin. The scenes in the train car are intercut with footage of a train steaming along the tracks. With each cut, as the train charges toward Cairo, ‘Usman becomes more deeply committed to continuing the masquerade. His first innocent foray into the women’s realm permits him to witness the young ladies adjusting their belts and stockings. When the women alight, ‘Usman, as “Farida,” is joined in the cabin by a widower (Hasan Rashid), who buys her (as I will refer to “Farida”) a cold drink and offers her cigarettes (fig. 33). By the final cut, “Farida” has agreed to go home with the widower and serve as part of his domestic staff—committed to perpetuating the masquerade until she has saved up enough money to repay the bank.



The widower's interest in "Farida" is sexualized from the outset. When she leans out the window to purchase a cold drink from a vendor at the station, he leers at her backside. In case we missed his expression on the first occasion, he does it a second time. When he strikes up a conversation with her, the first question regards her marital status. She obligingly responds that she is a widow.

In addition to cross-dressing, in becoming "Farida," 'Usman also undergoes a class shift. As 'Usman he was a trusted (if low-level) employee of the bank; as "Farida," he has been demoted to domestic labor. By entering the home of a single man, even one with an adult daughter at home, "Farida" exposes herself to abuse. If this were a post-1950s melodrama, we would expect the lonely widower to attempt to seduce her.<sup>26</sup> Instead, since this is a 1930s comedy, once in the domestic space, the widower vows to marry "Farida."

Nevertheless, "Farida"'s queer body is subject to physical abuse from other quarters. A male servant (Ibrahim 'Arafa) in the widower's home is mute; he communicates through gesture and nonsense sounds. He made an appearance earlier in the film as an acquaintance of 'Usman's and a customer of the bank. He recognizes "Farida"'s resemblance to 'Usman. In a violent gesture, to ascertain the new domestic's identity, he cops a feel of her breast. She beats him back, but in the scuffle he notices not only that she is wearing pants under her dress, but that 'Usman's signature keychain dangles from her belt.

Once he establishes 'Usman's identity and gender, the fellow servant becomes his ally. He tries to help 'Usman escape and restore his gender identity (even if it would not solve the underlying financial and legal problems). "Farida" starts to transition back to 'Usman—wearing 'Usman's headgear and "Farida"'s clothes, she/he looks in the mirror and proclaims, "I am 'Usman on top, and Farida on the bottom." 'Usman's performance as "Farida" is restored when the two realize that there is a police officer stationed by the door. 'Usman is believed to be an outlaw, while the Levantine, shape-shifting, queer "Farida" can avert capture through her continued masquerade.

Farida's queer body is subject to further violence at the climax of the film. The widower's daughter invites her seamstresses, Saniya and Bahiga (Bahiga al-Mahdi)—'Usman's mother-in-law and wife, respectively—to make a dress for Farida. They immediately notice the striking resemblance between their client and their missing son-in-law and husband. Saniya reaches around Farida's torso to measure her and ends up unraveling the stockings stuffing her bra. The queer body of 'Usman/Farida is chased, beaten, and stripped by the angry throng. Her dress is ripped off, revealing the male body beneath.

The police are called. The ringing of the doorbell merges with 'Usman's seven o'clock alarm. 'Usman wakes up in his bedroom in his apartment in Alexandria. He is once again dressed as a man. The money is in the drawer where he left it, and he realizes it was all just a dream. 'Usman's name and identity are restored, as is his reputation as an honest, hardworking, law-abiding man.

With hindsight, the viewer can enumerate how as the plot's plausibility declines, the evidence that it was a dream increases. For example, on the northbound train from Aswan, Farida repeatedly tells her travel companions that she is headed to "Misr"—that is, Cairo. But characters from Alexandria keep showing up in the widower's apartment—a clue to the viewer that something is amiss.

At the end of the film, 'Usman's wife, Bahiga, comes to wake him up so he can prepare for another day at work. We have returned to the circular narrative of the first movement. But just as 'Usman is shaken by the dream, the residue of the linear narratives to Aswan, Cairo, and back continues to shake the foundations of identity. The film concludes with a heteronormative embrace, but the queer Levantine narrative that precedes it has served to trouble the lines of identity.

#### CODA: JOURNEY OF THE LIVING DEAD

For his last film of the 1937–38 season, Togo Mizrahi produced and directed another comedy of mistaken identity that revisits the travel motif. In *Ana tab'i kidda* (*It's My Nature*, 1938), Ahmad al-Kabriti (Fu'ad Shafiq) informs his wife (Zuzu Shakib) and his colleagues that he is leaving Cairo for a business trip to Sudan. But his true intended destination is a guesthouse in Alexandria. He returns to this pension each year to resume a romance with the proprietor, Bahiga (Bahiga al-Mahdi). When he arrives, he discovers that Bahiga has married a doctor, and they have turned the welcoming guesthouse into an austere sanitarium.<sup>27</sup> Ahmad, trapped as a patient in the clinic, fears that the sadistic and jealous doctor will learn of his relationship with Bahiga.

Not only does the film defamiliarize the destination—a pension turned into a sanitarium; it also defamiliarizes home: when Ahmad returns to Cairo, he finds that his power-hungry assistant (Stefan Rosti) has feigned his death. The train aboard which Ahmad was supposedly traveling to Khartoum had derailed. Instead of revealing the truth of Ahmad's whereabouts, the assistant spreads the word that his boss perished in the fiery crash. When Ahmad confronts his assistant, he maliciously retorts: "In the eyes of the law and the people you are no longer among the living." In an inversion of the masquerade plot, Ahmad must convince his bereaved wife that he is still alive.

*It's My Nature* presages some coming transitions in Togo Mizrahi's productions. In Mizrahi's previous films, Alexandria was the primary setting or the point of departure. By contrast, in *It's My Nature*, Ahmad's home is in Cairo. Although Ahmad's destination is located in Alexandria, the camera, like the protagonist, gets stuck behind the walls of the sanitarium. Unlike the opening traveling shot in *Seven O'Clock*, or the Shamm al-nasim montage from *Mistreated by Affluence*, *It's My Nature* features no footage identifiably shot on location in Alexandria. Togo Mizrahi, too, was beginning to turn his sights to the capital city, which had, since the founding of Studio Misr in 1934, become the center of the Egyptian cinema



industry. After producing films in Alexandria for almost a decade, within six months of wrapping production on *It's My Nature*, Togo Mizrahi began producing films in Cairo.

Also, although *It's My Nature* is a comedy, the darker plot anticipates Mizrahi's turn toward melodrama in his Cairo productions. In the following chapter, I analyze the trope of travel in two of Togo Mizrahi's musical melodramas produced in Cairo. While al-Kassar's character claims Nubian and Sudanese origins, and *It's My Nature* feigns a trip to Omdurman, Mizrahi's next film, *Layla mumtira* (*A Rainy Night*, 1939) takes the viewer across the border into colonial Sudan. My analyses of *A Rainy Night* and *Al-Tariq al-mustaqim* (*The Straight Road*, 1943), a film that traverses the Levant, examine the ethnonational and geographic boundaries of Egyptian national identity.