

Queering the Levantine

IN BED TOGETHER

In the opening shot of Togo Mizrahi's 1937 film *Al-'Izz bahdala* (*Mistreated by Affluence*), the camera pans across the rooftops of a popular district of Alexandria. The image cuts to chickens feeding on one of the rooftops, then fades to the interior of the adjacent one-room apartment. An alarm clock rings, waking Chalom (Leon Angel), a Jewish seller of lottery tickets. He quiets the alarm, leans over, and wakens his bedmate, 'Abdu (Ahmad al-Haddad), a Muslim butcher's assistant (fig. 17).

This image of a Jew and a Muslim in bed together functions as a point of departure for this chapter's analysis of the construction of coexistence in Togo Mizrahi's films produced in his studio in Alexandria. I approach the phrase "in bed together" as not just a metaphor of coexistence, but as a key to unlocking Mizrahi's projection of sameness and difference, self and other, in 1930s Alexandria.

From the outset I should note that the sight of these two impoverished characters sharing a bed need not—and indeed should not—be understood as signaling sexual desire or a romantic affiliation between them. They share a bed because they are poor, not because they are homosexual. However, in this chapter I argue that Togo Mizrahi's Alexandria comedies do queer gender identity in a variety of ways, and that we can't dismiss out of hand the gender and sexuality implications of this opening scene. My contention here is not unlike that made by Steven Cohan about the 1940s Bob Hope and Bing Crosby "*Road to*" movies. Cohan asserts that "the comedic framework of the series plays upon intimations of homoeroticism, and . . . the queer shading of their buddy relation must be taken into account."¹

In this chapter, I argue that Togo Mizrahi's films *Al-Duktur Farhat* (*Doctor Farahat*, 1935) and *Mistreated by Affluence* queer both gender and ethnoreligious identities. *Doctor Farahat* overtly troubles assumptions about gender and sexuality. *Mistreated by Affluence* foregrounds coexistence. By reading these films together,



FIGURE 17. Chalom (Leon Angel, left) and 'Abdu (Ahmad al-Haddad) wake up in bed together. Screenshot from *Mistreated by Affluence* (Togo Mizrahi, 1937).

I aim to demonstrate how these two articulations of the performativity of identity—gender and the Levantine—inform one another in Mizrahi's work.

QUEERNESS AND THE LEVANTINE

My characterization of the performativity of identities—Levantine on the one hand, and gender and sexuality on the other—is indebted to Judith Butler's influential work *Gender Trouble*.² Since her debunking of the myth of compulsory heterosexuality and stable categories of gender, the epistemological questions about identity that Butler raises burst open interrogation of other forms of identity formation. Richard Thompson Ford, for example, models his own critique of racial identity politics on Butler's critique of gender: "Queer theory's anti-identitarianism is the key to its portability. . . . The queer critique of (nominally) gay identity politics would seem to apply to identity politics in general."³ In labeling Mizrahi's Levantine film idiom "queer," I am referring both to the particularities of the performativity of gender and sexuality, and to its broader destabilizing potential, as explored by Ford, for "identity politics in general."⁴

In the introduction to *Outtakes*, a volume of essays on queer theory and film, Ellis Hanson takes a similarly broad view of the term's significance. He defines the term "queer" as

a rejection of the compulsory heterosexual code of masculine men desiring feminine women, and it declares that the vast range of stigmatized sexualities and gender identifications, far from being marginal, are central to the construction of modern

subjectivity; but it is also, as Michael Warner has pointed out, a resistance to normalization as conceived more generally as a sort of divide-and-conquer mentality by which cultural difference—racial, ethnic, sexual, socioeconomic—is pathologized and atomized as disparate forms of deviance.⁵

Hanson acknowledges the broad significance of the term “queer” in destabilizing received categories including but not limited to gender and sexuality. In the second half of the quote, he asserts the power of queer theory to expose the dynamics of other forms of social marginalization.

Mizrahi’s Alexandrian bedroom farces destabilize prevailing gender categories in 1930s Egypt. The films poke fun at emerging middle-class assumptions about modernity and the nation. Wilson Jacob has mapped what he terms “effendi masculinity”—a subject position reflecting middle-class aspirations toward and performance of modernity that began emerging in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This “effendi masculinity” was commonly recognizable by the 1930s. Jacob reads as performance these new forms of gendered, national subjectivity that emerged in British colonial Egypt.⁶

Mizrahi’s 1930s comedies feature lower-class characters ill at ease with middle-class expectations. The bumbling characters portrayed by Chalom, ‘Ali al-Kassar, and Fawzi al-Gazayirli simultaneously confront modernity and emerging gender norms to which they do not conform. Class mobility is linked in these films with the performance of normativized gender expectations that look a lot like the “effendi masculinity” Jacob identifies. The lens provided by Jacob permits us to see the ways in which, by extension, Mizrahi’s films reflect upon and subtly critique emerging normativizing discourses and Egyptian articulations of modernity.⁷

According to Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, the new *effendiyya* were also the driving force behind a shift in the conception of the nation that Egypt underwent in the 1930s—a shift that ran counter to Mizrahi’s Levantine construction of identity and threatened the coexistence of Jews and Muslims portrayed in his films. As articulations of a queer Levantine urban localism, Mizrahi’s farces—including *Doctor Farahat* and *Mistreated by Affluence*—offer an alternative to parochial, homosocial, and heteronormative national imaginaries.⁸

SUITORS IN SWIMSUITS: *DOCTOR FARAHAT* (1935)

Like Mizrahi’s other films from this era, *Doctor Farahat* is fundamentally a comedy of assumed identity. Hilmy, a successful surgeon who has been living in England for fifteen years, returns to his native Alexandria to get married. In addition to his wealth, he is considered a minor celebrity for his medical discoveries. A match has been arranged to Nona (Amina Muhammad), a woman he has not yet met. Concerned that she is a gold digger, he seeks an opportunity to court her without her knowing his identity. So he arranges to meet her twice, once in disguise as the stuffy, bearded and bespectacled Doctor Hilmy (fig. 18), and once looking and acting naturally, but under the assumed name Mustafa.



FIGURE 18. Hilmy in disguise as Doctor Hilmy. Screenshot from *Doctor Farahat* (Togo Mizrahi, 1935).

To add to the confusion, upon Hilmy's arrival, he dodges reporters by asking an employee of the hotel, Farahat (Fawzi al-Gazayirli), to assume his identity. The impoverished and uneducated Farahat has been employed as a translator by the hotel under false (and humorous) pretenses. Nevertheless, the ruse succeeds: the reporters snap Farahat's picture, convinced they have taken the photo of Hilmy, setting in motion this additional plotline of mistaken identity.

Nona's family, eager to meet the young suitor, sends for Hilmy but instead gets his geriatric pretender, Farahat. As the title suggests, it is Farahat's humorous misadventures as "Dr. Hilmy" that dominate the plot. Farahat and his sidekick 'Ali (Ahmad al-Haddad), in the role of the doctor's secretary, pay a visit to Nona's house. Nona and her friend Tahiya (Tahiya Carioca) privately mock the suitor, and set out to humiliate him in the hopes of calling off the engagement.

It is within this multilayered charade of mistaken identity that one encounters gender play. In what follows, I unpack two articulations of the queering of gender identity in *Doctor Farahat*. First, I examine instances when same-sex pairs share the same bed. Then I discuss moments in the film that individually and collectively can be read as highlighting a performative construction of gender identity.



FIGURE 19. ‘Ali (Ahmad al-Haddad) climbs over Farahat (Fawzi al-Gazayirli) to answer the telephone. Screenshot from *Doctor Farahat* (Togo Mizrahi, 1935).

Much of the plot of *Doctor Farahat* revolves around Nona’s efforts to exhaust “Dr. Hilmy” (Farahat) and drive him away. The women first keep the men walking until midnight along the Corniche, the promenade along the seawall overlooking the Mediterranean; then Nona calls at five o’clock the following morning to invite them for a swim. Nona has also arranged for notable doctors to attend a lecture later the same morning to be given by “Dr. Hilmy,” and in the afternoon she entices “Dr. Hilmy” and ‘Ali to join her for a party on a boat that lasts until late in the evening.

On four occasions, during the brief intervals between these engagements, Farahat and ‘Ali flop onto the plush double bed in their shared hotel room. These comic scenes are rife with sight gags and tame verbal innuendo. On the first occasion, ‘Ali removes his jacket on Farahat’s side of the bed and starts to climb over Farahat. Farahat exclaims, “Hey, brother, why not enter from the door of your house?” ‘Ali responds, “But it’s a long way from here. Let me pass through your roof.” The root of the verb *kharama*, here used in its form that signifies “pass through” or “take a shortcut,” can also signify “pierce”—adding to the suggestive double entendre of the exchange. Later in the scene, when the phone rings, ‘Ali, in his role as the esteemed doctor’s secretary, again climbs over Farahat, this time to answer the call (fig. 19).



FIGURE 20. Farahat (Fawzi al-Gazayirli) and Umm Ahmad (Ihsan al-Gazayirli) in bed. Screenshot from *Doctor Farahat* (Togo Mizrahi, 1935).

Although the men remain fully clothed, physical contact between them in bed—like the sight of ‘Ali climbing over Farahat—elicits laughs.⁹ By contrast with this scene, while the opening sequence of *Mistreated by Affluence* leaves no question that we are viewing a comedy, the *fact* that the two men share a bed is not played for laughs. Farahat and ‘Ali would, like their counterparts in that film, think nothing of sharing a bed with a male friend in their own cramped domestic quarters. The luxurious bed in the hotel is large and inviting, and despite the presence of a couch in the suite, neither character seems to question that they would share the bed. Farahat objects to the way ‘Ali enters the bed, but not to his presence.

The scenes with Farahat and ‘Ali confirm heteronormative sexuality within homosocial Egyptian norms. Any ambiguity of these bedroom scenes is resolved in the final iteration of this repeating pattern (fig. 20). Throughout the film, Umm Ahmad (Ihsan al-Gazayirli), Farahat’s wife, chases after him. After failing in her attempt to follow him to the party on the boat, she lies in wait. After the party, Farahat falls drunk into bed and starts to brag about kissing Nona. Umm Ahmad indignantly reveals herself and demands an explanation. We are restored to the standard heteronormative extramarital love triangle of the bedroom farce.¹⁰

Just prior to the first scene of Farahat and ‘Ali in bed together, Nona and Tahiya are also shown sharing a bed. After the long walk on the Corniche, Nona sits on the bed in a negligee, stretches, proclaims that she is tired, and then lies down



FIGURE 21. Nona (Amina Muhammad, left) and Tahiya (Tahiya Carioca) in bed. Screenshot from *Doctor Farahat* (Togo Mizrahi, 1935).

under the covers. Tahiya, sitting on the edge of the bed undressing, concurs, adding, “If you think you’re tired, what about them?” This scene reads as a (male) voyeuristic view into the women’s boudoir.

Later, at the conclusion of the party scene, Nona and Hilmy, as “Mustafa,” embrace in the moonlight. The scene cuts abruptly to Nona’s bedroom—the second scene showing the women in bed together. In this short scene, Nona lies awake repeating Mustafa’s proclamation of love to her, while Tahiya drifts off to sleep beside her (fig. 21). The film then cuts to Umm Ahmad hiding under the covers awaiting Farahat’s return from the party. As with the scene between Farahat and Umm Ahmad that follows, Nona’s wakeful reflection appears to restore heteronormative desire. But Nona muses on Mustafa’s words—“I love you, Nona”—rather than giving voice to her own emotions. Unlike the conclusion of the scene between Farahat and Umm Ahmad, the self-reflexivity of Nona’s utterance simultaneously troubles the predominant narrative axis of heterosexual desire that it appears to assert. The ambivalence of Nona’s assertion also fails to completely displace the titillating queerness of two scantily clad women in bed together.

As my reading of these bedroom scenes implies, Nona’s role as an object of desire and as a desiring subject bears closer examination. Nona believes she has three male suitors in the film: Farahat, in the guise of “Dr. Hilmy”; Hilmy acting

the part of the stuffy Doctor Hilmy; and Mustafa, who is really Hilmy acting naturally but using a pseudonym. Male desire is focalized through the main character, Farahat. Viewers recognize that Farahat is a buffoon. His age and his coarse, uneducated, lower-class manner make him appear an inappropriate suitor for the wealthy, modern, Westernized Nona. We also know that Farahat is already married.¹¹ While he inadvertently falls into the role of suitor, he persists in the charade for the promise of access to Nona's body. Each time Farahat considers walking away, Nona draws him back in, first by feigning affection and then, after the appearance of Mustafa, by fomenting jealousy.

Nona embraces her performance of femininity to deceive Farahat. Take, for example, the early-morning swim. In the cabana with 'Ali, Farahat decides that it is too cold to swim. He steps outside to inform Nona. Borrowing a visual idiom already established by Hollywood cinema, the camera reproduces Farahat's desirous gaze of Nona's body by tilting from toe to head. The sight of Nona in her bathing costume changes Farahat's mind.

But the bathing scene that follows troubles these very same gendered assumptions about agency and desire. As she is changing into her bathing suit, an exasperated Nona proclaims that perhaps the women should "drown [the men] and be done with them." Tahiya, it appears, takes Nona's suggestion seriously. A lengthy silent montage (accompanied by upbeat music) intercuts Tahiya wrestling with 'Ali, and Nona attempting to coax Farahat into the water. As the scene progresses, Tahiya's malicious intent becomes more apparent with each subsequent dunking. What is striking about this scene is its violence—violence perpetrated by the female characters.¹² Tahiya's physical contact with 'Ali in the water is simultaneously ludic and menacing, playful dunking that verges on attempted drowning. In the final image of the scene, Nona is shown dragging Farahat screaming into the cold water. This is torture, not play. Thanatos, not Eros.

In the swimming scene the male characters are emasculated by an aggressive, predatory, violent femininity. And over the course of the film, Nona's cruel tricks become increasingly more emasculating. The final indignity involves Nona piloting a small plane with Farahat as a passenger. Nona's aerial acrobatics frighten Farahat, causing him first to wet his pants and then pass out. As in *The Neighborhood Watchman* (discussed in chap. 3), the use of scatological humor suggests inversion of power. Everything is topsy-turvy. In the airplane scene in *Dr. Farahat*, the act of flying upside down catalyzes the final (corrective) inversion of high and low. It is worth recalling that this violence and cruelty is committed in the service of repelling a prospective suitor, deferring marriage.

Tahiya encourages Nona in her sadistic yo-yo of attraction and repulsion toward Farahat. Her motives begin to emerge in the cabana as the two women change into their swim suits. As Nona begins to unbutton her shirt, Tahiya casts her own desirous gaze at her friend's body (fig. 22). Farahat, it seems, is not the only one to leer at Nona's body. Not only is Nona the object of the male gaze within



FIGURE 22. Tahiya (Tahiya Carioca) watches Nona (Amina Muhammad) undress. Screenshot from *Doctor Farahat* (Togo Mizrahi, 1935).

the film (and for that matter, the object of the masculine gaze of the audience); she is also the object of a desirous female gaze.¹³ Tahiya's desire for Nona poses a complication for (but not a replacement of) the heteronormative reading of the women's bedroom scenes.

Nona appears oblivious to Tahiya's affections. And, as the plots of mistaken identity unravel, we encounter a final (but not complete) restoration of heteronormativity. After Farahat passes out on the plane, the real Dr. Hilmy revives him. Hilmy and Farahat reveal their true identities. Hilmy requests Nona's hand in marriage from her puzzled parents. Nona's parents agree, although they admit they don't understand what has happened. When Tahiya bows out, she, too, expresses her confusion. After dodging marriage for the whole film, Nona agrees to wed. Nona and Hilmy embrace, as do the happily reunited Farahat and Umm Ahmad. Tahiya, however, is not paired off at the end of the film, despite the presence of a suitable male mate—a friend of Hilmy's who appears in several scenes. Tahiya's designs on Nona are thwarted; however, her same-sex desire is not normativized.

Though I grant that even for a farce this film narrates an unusually convoluted plot, it is unusual for the characters in Mizrahi's films to remain confused once all has been revealed. The boundaries of identity—and gender—have been troubled.



FIGURE 23. Nona (Amina Muhammad) and Hilmy (Togo Mizrahi credited as ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Mashriqi). Screenshot from *Doctor Farahat* (Togo Mizrahi, 1935).

The characters’ confusion at the end of the film reflects the residue of the disturbances wrought by masquerade. We may end up with two male–female pairs, but the film does not conclusively or universally restore heteronormativity.

So far, I have focused my attention on masquerade as an articulation of gender instability in *Doctor Farahat*. I would also like to point to the way this film also marks fluidity of identity as Levantine. Hilmy first appears on-screen in a disguise, insisting on embracing the fluid possibilities afforded by Levantine subjectivity. He counts on names as a signifier of an ethnoreligious affiliation just as he relies upon the physical (and linguistic) undifferentiability of Levantines.

Hilmy makes his first appearance as “Dr. Hilmy” as he enters the hotel. In the first words he utters, “Dr. Hilmy” confirms with his secretary, ‘Ali, that a room has been booked. He continues: “Under what name?”

“‘Doctor Hilmy,’” replies ‘Ali.

“You idiot,” exclaims “Dr. Hilmy,” “Didn’t we agree that you shouldn’t register under the name ‘Doctor Hilmy?’”

“What should I have written?” retorts ‘Ali.

“Write any name you want. Write ‘Boutros.’ Write ‘Mikha’il.”

In this originary moment—this masquerade that sets into motion the multiple layers of role play in the film—lies the (nominally) Muslim character’s desire to hide behind a Christian name.

There is yet another layer to this Levantine passing. The credits identify the actor playing Hilmy as 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Mashriqi. This is a pseudonym. The actor playing Hilmy is none other than Togo Mizrahi (fig. 23). In other words, a Jewish actor performing under a pseudonym plays a Muslim character who seeks cover under a Christian name. Like in the films discussed in the previous chapter, Hilmy's masquerade represents the subversive potential of the Levantine.

A PARTING KISS: *MISTREATED BY AFFLUENCE* (1937)

In *Doctor Farahat* the Levantine idiom is articulated primarily through gender play as masquerade, with limited, but notable, articulations of an ethics of coexistence. *Mistreated by Affluence* inverts this formula, emphasizing coexistence over masquerade. As noted earlier, at the start of *Mistreated by Affluence*, the protagonists, Chalom and 'Abdu, live together in a cramped room on the roof of an apartment building.¹⁴ The families of their respective fiancées, Esther (Esther Angel, credited as 'Adalat) and Amina (Amina Fardus), reside side by side in modest middle-class apartments on the floor below. Although the families sleep in their separate quarters, they are frequently shown socializing in one another's apartments. This construction of domestic space, and the characters' actual or virtual cohabitation, serve as a microcosm for coexistence in the society at large.

Mistreated by Affluence is not *about* coexistence, though. The film neither interrogates nor problematizes difference. Nor does *Mistreated by Affluence* rely upon ethnoreligious stereotypes as a source of comedy.¹⁵ The narrative takes for granted that Jews and Muslims could be long-standing friends and neighbors in 1930s Egypt. This domiciled, or perhaps domesticated, coexistence serves as the solid foundation against which the film's contrived, farcical plot unfurls. Uncertainty lies beyond the confines of the domestic space and the quarter.

Buffeted along by chance, Chalom and 'Abdu bumble into (comical) situations beyond their control. 'Abdu is mistrusted, berated, and beaten by Hasan, the butcher for whom he works. But when Hasan dies, he bequeaths the shop to his assistant. 'Abdu shares his newfound wealth with Chalom, enabling his friend to open a small shop from which to sell lottery tickets and exchange currency. The money also enables the men to get married after lengthy engagements. Following the weddings, Chalom purchases a bundle of paper on behalf of his friend to use for wrapping meat. He discovers that what he thought was scrap paper is instead a bundle of stock certificates worth over 650,000 Egyptian pounds. Chalom insists on splitting the newfound wealth evenly with 'Abdu. They decide to purchase a bank, and settle into neighboring villas with their wives and in-laws. But money sows discord, and the friends have an altercation. In the end, chance again prevails: the bank fails, and Chalom and 'Abdu lose their wealth. Chalom and 'Abdu reconcile, and they rejoice along with their families in the return to their homely coexistence.

The sharing of food and a shared food culture underpin the film's construction of coexistence between Jews and Muslims. The representation of meals as an example of commensality, according to Rebecca Bryant, points to their exceptionality, and to the preexistence of notions of difference overcome by the shared practice.¹⁶ In *Mistreated by Affluence*, the families are regularly depicted eating together in a series of scenes that intertwine the film's Levantine ethics and aesthetics.

As described in chapter 1, near the beginning of *Mistreated by Affluence*, the two families prepare a picnic for Shamm al-nasim—the popular spring festival that is celebrated by Egyptians of all religious affiliations. The day of the festival is heralded by the lively montage of documentary footage of Alexandria. Following the montage, the scene cuts to a long shot in which we see the Jewish and Muslim families crowded around covered crates, picnicking together in front of a bank of cabanas.

The picnic scene is shot to give the impression of a busy beach during a popular festival. The wide-angle establishing shot of the group picnic offers an inclusive vision of cosmopolitan Alexandria, like the montage that precedes it. Several figures from a range of classes cross between the seated picnickers and the camera: a male bather; a police officer; a woman in bourgeois, Western attire holding a parasol; a fisherman carrying his gear. Two barefoot children sit cross-legged in the foreground, eating, and in the background another man in a bathing suit engages in calisthenics. Even as the camera zooms in to a tighter group shot of the picnic, the scene retains its inclusiveness as the camera pans to show all eight characters eating and conversing.

This vision of coexistence is disrupted only when Vittoria (Vittoria Farhi) verbally abuses Chalom, her future son-in-law. The continuous take is broken by a cut to a close-up of Chalom asking about a dish not included in the feast. Vittoria berates him for having spoiled the dish by clumsily knocking it over. Chalom, chastened, gathers up loaves of bread, excuses himself, and prepares to retreat, inviting Esther to join him. But even in this moment of familial discord, a Levantine aesthetic persists. The camera pans from Chalom to Vittoria and back. Rather than shooting the argument in a shot-reverse-shot sequence of the two characters, the interaction is shot panning from one character to the other, with other members of the group in view. This continuous, inclusive camerawork mirrors the content of this scene, in which Jews and Muslims break bread together in celebration of a shared festival.¹⁷

Vittoria's condemnation of Chalom turns to praise after the families relocate to posh estates. The Jewish and Muslim families remain neighbors, residing in adjacent villas. The families continue to gather in their new homes and take meals together. But the pleasures of eating are denied to them just as they can finally afford expensive delicacies. In a comic subplot, two nurses, pretending to be doctors, insinuate themselves into the families. They diagnose imaginary diseases so they can be paid for providing ongoing care. In the meantime, they sidle up to



FIGURE 24. Chalom (Leon Angel, left) and ‘Abdu (Ahmad al-Haddad), in their roles as bank executives, dress as members of the *effendiyya*. Pressbook for *Mistreated by Affluence* (Togo Mizrahi, 1937). Courtesy of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library, The American University in Cairo.

the young brides, hoping to woo them away from their husbands. Their “medical advice” consists primarily of manipulating access to food.

In one scene, when Chalom and ‘Abdu are delayed at the bank, the families begin dining in their absence under the doctors’ vigilant eyes. The older generation is ordered to abstain from anything but milk and boiled vegetables. The young women, by contrast, are plied with wine and rich foods. Like the picnic, the scene opens with a long establishing shot showing the families gathered around a formal dining table. A servant enters carrying food to the table. But the camerawork then mirrors the rupture between this dining experience and the former communal preparation and consumption of food: the dining-room scene is constructed with a discontinuous series of two-shots rather than the inclusive zoom and pan of the picnic scene.

In *Mistreated by Affluence* the masquerade is one of passing, involving Chalom and ‘Abdu’s (failed) efforts to act like members of the elite following their chance windfall (fig. 24). Their behavior is a comic exaggeration of the boorishness and ostentation of the *nouveau riche*. When they host a cocktail party for business associates, Chalom and ‘Abdu wear engraved name badges on their lapels listing their titles. A bank manager charged with introducing the guests to the receiving line disdainfully flicks Chalom’s pin and asks in a scornful voice, “What are you wearing? What is that? Take that thing off!” Chalom, puzzled, responds, “Why? Shouldn’t people know that I am the director of the bank?” Gesturing

toward 'Abdu, he adds, "And him too?" The exasperated manager exclaims, "Director of the bank? Take it off! That is something janitors wear!" This misjudgment reflects the myriad missed codes and social cues of their adopted titles and assumed identities.

Chalom and 'Abdu take advantage of their newfound wealth and position of power to chase women. In the dalliance that renders *Mistreated by Affluence* a bedroom farce, Chalom and 'Abdu pursue the affections of a singer, Zuzu (Zuzu Labib), and a dancer, Ruhiya (Ruhiya Fawzi), respectively. In contrast to *Doctor Farahat*, the heterosexual love triangle itself is the site of gender instability in *Mistreated by Affluence*.

Following their introduction at the nightclub where the women perform, Chalom and 'Abdu agree to a date at the women's apartment. Chalom and 'Abdu are cowed by the women's overt sexuality and forwardness. The viewer understands that these "artists [*artistat*]" are to be understood as loose women, if not downright prostitutes.¹⁸ Ruhiya beckons 'Abdu to enter her dressing room as she disrobes behind a shoulder-high barrier. While in this state of undress, she beckons 'Abdu to give her a kiss. Meanwhile, Chalom is instructed to enter the adjoining room, where he finds Zuzu soaking in a tub. Covering his eyes as he approaches, Chalom hands Zuzu a bouquet of flowers. He crouches next to the tub and presents her with a bracelet, which he accidentally drops in the water. He pushes up his sleeve and reaches into the tub. Realizing what he has done, he runs out of the room, only to find that 'Abdu has also retreated. Chalom is rendered speechless, and resorts to gesturing and whistling to describe his interaction with Zuzu.¹⁹ The women's overt expression of sexual desire and, as in *Doctor Farahat*, predatory female sexuality poses an affront to the men's masculinity.

Chalom and 'Abdu regroup, and resolve to reassert their masculinity. 'Abdu steels himself to return to Ruhiya, saying: "Listen, Chalom, *we need to be men* [my emphasis]. Ruhiya! I must speak to her. I must tell her that I love her. I must hold her. I must kill her with my kisses. Yes, I must!" Pushing Chalom out of the way, 'Abdu warns, "Watch out!" and marches back toward Ruhiya's door. Thumping his chest, Chalom concurs, "Yes! Men!" He attempts to repeat 'Abdu's rousing speech, but gives up when he can't remember the exact words. Instead, Chalom tips his tarboosh forward, puffs up his chest, and, as he dramatically prepares to march himself toward Zuzu's quarters, says, "Men! I will go! Watch out!"

The men, however, remain passive recipients of the women's affections. When Chalom enters Zuzu's boudoir, she is toweling her thighs, wearing only a bathrobe. She invites a nervous Chalom to kiss her, and he hesitantly responds with a chaste kiss on the top of her head. With further prompting, he kisses her on the cheek. Zuzu finally takes charge, throws herself into Chalom's arms, and passionately embraces him. Likewise, after his second encounter with Ruhiya, a grinning 'Abdu is shown with lipstick marks all over his face—but not on his lips. Although the camera does not follow this encounter, the visible evidence also places him in a passive role.

Zuzu's and Ruhiya's emasculating rhetoric sets into motion a sequence of events that devolve into a fight between Chalom and 'Abdu as they seek to reassert their masculinity. In the climactic party scene, Chalom and 'Abdu hide behind a curtain, planning to surprise Zuzu and Ruhiya with bouquets of flowers. Instead, they overhear the women disparaging them. Ruhiya calls 'Abdu an oaf, but admits she likes the contents of his wallet. Zuzu casts aspersions on Chalom's virility, calling him a grasshopper, and likening his floppy mustache to a shrimp. She concludes with the kicker "That half-pint [*nus al-rub' da*], you call that a man?"

From their hiding place, Chalom and 'Abdu also overhear the nurses professing their love to Esther and Amina. Impotent to respond to the women's insults on their own, Chalom and 'Abdu call for their in-laws to intervene. Following a chaotic shouting match, the nurses are escorted out of the party, but the protagonists are still smarting from the insults and spoiling for a fight. When Chalom overhears a guest claiming that he would be nothing without 'Abdu, it is the last straw. Chalom pours out his wrath upon 'Abdu, and his friend reciprocates. In the heat of the argument, each claims to have made "a man" out of the other. Destabilized gender identity threatens to upset the narrative of coexistence. Esther's and Amina's families appeal to Chalom and 'Abdu to reconcile, urging the men not to let their fight undermine a thirty-year friendship between the families.

The emasculation of the bourgeois lifestyle and the threats it poses to coexistence are reversed only after Chalom and 'Abdu lose their wealth and the characters all return to their old residences. Likewise, at the end of the film, the equal access to communal food—along with the inclusive Levantine aesthetic—is restored. In the penultimate scene, the Jewish and Muslim families once again crowd around a table to share their favorite foods. As with the picnic, this scene comprises a single shot that includes all of the characters in the frame. The closing shot of the film also serves to reassert Chalom's virility. Chalom is shown returning to the street in the old neighborhood, hawking lottery tickets—but this time he is carrying infant twins.

By way of conclusion, I would like return to a brief scene that depicts the intersection of the two idioms of Levantine fluidity I have traced: communal or ethno-religious identity on one hand; gender and sexuality on the other. On their way to their first encounter with their prospective mistresses, Chalom assuages 'Abdu's performance anxiety by offering him a tutorial on kissing. Holding up a bouquet of flowers, Chalom advises: "Say to her, 'Take this present.' Say to her also, 'Come here, my love.'²⁰ And just like in the movies . . ." Chalom then leans over and plants a kiss on 'Abdu's lips (fig. 25).

For Mizrahi, it was not sufficient to draw laughs by depicting the two men kissing. The camera cuts to a second angle showing the driver observing the embrace in the rearview mirror and then turning his gaze to the back seat (fig. 26). The presence of a witness, an audience, signals the film's self-awareness of the act as a performance. The narratives of coexistence and the queering of identity evidenced in Mizrahi's films meet with the touch of Chalom and 'Abdu's lips.



FIGURE 25. Chalom (Leon Angel, left) and ‘Abdu (Ahmad al-Haddad) kiss. Screenshot from *Mistreated by Affluence* (Togo Mizrahi, 1937).



FIGURE 26. A driver watches Chalom (Leon Angel, left) and ‘Abdu (Ahmad al-Haddad) kiss. Screenshot from *Mistreated by Affluence* (Togo Mizrahi, 1937).

CODA: “THE STORY OF A WOMAN WHO WAS
TRANSFORMED INTO A MAN”

In early 1938, the same team that produced *Wife by Proxy* (discussed in chap. 3) released another queer Levantine comedy of mistaken identity, *Bint al-basha*



FIGURE 27. Hikmat (Assia Dagher), disguised as a man, sits on a bed beside her love interest, Tawfiq (Ahmad Galal). Screenshot from *The Pasha Director's Daughter* (Ahmad Galal, 1938).

al-mudir (*The Pasha Director's Daughter*, Ahmad Galal).²¹ An educated young man who had fallen on hard times is hired as a live-in tutor for a wealthy family in the countryside. When he is seriously injured in a car accident, his sister, Hikmat (Assia Dagher), takes the post in his name. Her dislocation, as well as her journey from woman to man, set the stage for a queer love triangle. As a teaser ad for the film proclaims:

Who is Hikmat Effendi? Is that shadowy figure wrapped in secrets a man or a woman? By day he is a man who enthralls women, and by night he is a woman who enthralls men. He descended upon the al-Qubrusli estate and spread his enormous charm. Badriya, the pasha's daughter, sees him and falls madly in love with him, and wishes with all her might that she will succeed in marrying him. Tawfiq, the Pasha's son, sees an enchanting woman and falls madly in love with her, and wishes with all his might that he will succeed in marrying her. But Hikmat Effendi is also Mademoiselle Hikmat.²²

Living as a man, Hikmat is privy to the men's world. But she still seeks the company of women. At a wedding, Hikmat dresses as a woman and joins the celebrations of the bride. Tawfiq (Ahmad Galal) and Hikmat meet, and it's love at first sight. Meanwhile, Badriya (Mary Queeny) falls in love with the tutor—Hikmat in her male guise. Hikmat toggles between these identities until the masquerade inevitably catches up with her. The head of the household gets wind of his daughter's budding romance and betroths her to the tutor. Hikmat prepares to flee.

Like in Mizrahi's films *Doctor Farahat* and *Mistreated by Affluence*, two apparently same-sex characters wind up in bed together. The night before the wedding, Tawfiq pays a late-night visit to Hikmat's room (fig. 27). Tawfiq implores Hikmat to change into pajamas and join him in bed for a late-night heart-to-heart. As the two lie side by side, Tawfiq admits that he is hopelessly in love with the mystery woman. Little does he know that she is lying next to him in bed, disguised as a man. Even as all is revealed in the end and two heteronormative couples wed, *The Pasha Director's Daughter* explores Levantine fluidity of gender identities. Hikmat's physical mobility parallels her gender fluidity. Hikmat's displacement facilitates her masquerade and the ensuing misunderstandings. The next chapter unpacks significance of the trope of mobility in a queer Levantine film of masquerade and coexistence, Togo Mizrahi's *Al-Sa'a 7* (*Seven O'Clock*, 1937).