



DOCUMENTARY

OIL AND SAND

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Mahmoud Sabit sits beneath a painting of Mohamed Cherif Pasha, four-time Prime Minister of Egypt and four-time Regent of Egypt in the absence of the Viceroy. Cherif Pasha authored Egypt's first Liberal Constitution (1878) and presided over the changing of Shariah Law into Code Napoleon (1876-7). He sat for this portrait when he was Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1871. Cherif Pasha was the grandfather of Fatimah Hanem Chahin, Mahmoud's Sabit's grandmother. The smaller portrait on the wall is of Lt. General Chahin Pasha, also Sabit's ancestor and Minister of Defence for the Khedive Ismail. The Lt. Gen. went into exile in Naples with the Khedive in 1878.



Adel Sabit inspecting his camera in the desert during the shooting of *Oil and Sand*.

On the steps of Zohreya Palace (left to right) Bob Simpson (foreground), Fayed Sabit (paternal cousin Adel Sabit and maternal cousin of Princess Faiza). In the background Prince Hassan Hassan and an unknown relative of Bulent Rauf with Princess Faiza (far right).



A film within a film, *In Search Of Oil & Sand*, directed by Wael Omar and Philippe Dib, won the “Best Arab Directors” award at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival for successfully merging two historical timelines and creating synthesis between past, present, fact and fiction. Produced by Mid West Production and Sarakene Ltd.

Yet to be screened in Egypt, the film is guided by historian Mahmoud Sabit, an old world soul with a modern twist of savoir faire and political savvy, as he delivers both a historical detective story and political analysis of the late Egyptian Royal Family. Starring the Royals themselves, *Oil and Sand* (the film within) was shot just weeks before the 1952 coup d’etat that ushered in a new era for Egypt.

Egyptian aristocrat and royal relation Mahmoud Sabit has unearthed never-before-seen footage and glimpses into Egypt’s second revolution, that of 1952. Sabit hopes to activate Egyptian historical memory and provide Egyptians with public ownership of their own history, as told by Egyptians, rather than foreigners.

Sabit is uniquely qualified to do this. The son of Adel Sabit, the cousin of Egypt's King Farouk, and Frances Ramsden, an American Hollywood actress of the 1940s, Sabit Junior grew up in European exile after his father was unjustly accused of spying on Egypt for the French in 1961. Until that time Adel Sabit was the publisher of the Egyptian Economic and Political Review. The first article published in the review was written by President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Adel Sabit's life was full of adventure, not unlike that portrayed in the fictional film he co-wrote. While young Mahmoud and his mother were able to leave Egypt in 1963 with their American passports, Adel Sabit had to escape persecution from the Egyptian regime in the trunk of a car that drove him across the Libyan border. The family reunited in Europe. Mahmoud Sabit returned to Egypt in the 1990s and now resides in the 1923 Garden City mansion of his grandmother, Fatimah Hanem Chahin, the first cousin of Queen Nazly.

Within the glamorous remnants of the mansion Sabit discovered more than 15,000 photographs which document Egypt's Belle Epoque from 1850 to 1956. Even more phenomenal, Sabit lo-



Fayed Sabit holding an ID card (1953).

cated the 8mm black and white rushes of the amateur film shot by Princess Faiza and her entourage, the Zohreya Set, an elite group of royals, aristocrats and diplomats.

Mahmoud Sabit's parents socialized often with Princess Faiza and her debonair Ottoman husband Mohammed Ali Bulent Rauf (1911-1987). Rauf was the great-grandson of Ismail Pasha, khedive of Egypt from 1863 until 1879. Born into the Ottoman elite of Istanbul, Rauf was competent in French, English, Arabic and Ottoman Turkish. He had studied English literature at Cornell and



Salah Oraby in Paris. He played the trusted 1st Lt. to the modern dictator (1951).

Hittite archaeology at Yale. In 1945 he married his second cousin Princess Faiza and they had settled into a privileged life together in Egypt.

This was an Egyptian milieu characterized by a cosmopolitan openness to other cultures and a tolerance of different faiths. They encapsulated privileged tastes and the refinement and sophistication of both the Egyptian and Ottoman cultures.

This was also a time when Egyptian studios was producing more films than Hollywood. The Zohreya Set very much enjoyed watching films together and it was only natural that the group should decide to entertain themselves by making their own film. Influenced by the politics of the times, Adel Sabit, Frances Ramsden and Bulent Rauf wrote their script.

More than a premonition of things to come, the film told the story of a fictitious Arab monarchy who is caught up in a coup d'etat and forced into exile and tries to regain control. Replete with a love story, Western spies and oil men and a lovely ball, filmed at Zohreya Palace, within which the real elite of Egypt are featured, the finished film was burned by the director Rauf immediately following the real coup of 23rd of July 1952.

Adel Sabit served as Director of Photography. Princess Faiza is seen in the film, however she did not play a large role at the request of her brother King Farouk. Princess Nevine Abbas Halim played a kidnapped American woman. British and American embassy staff played oil men and spies, while local Bedouins played the rebels. A British diplomat in Cairo played the role of an official of his country which supported the ousted monarch. Befriended by Princess Faiza and her husband, tall handsome American Bob Simpson was a regular member of the Zohreya Set who played the role of a US diplomat backing the fictitious coup.

During Sabit's search for the film footage, the working title became clear; In Search of Oil and Sand. A passionate researcher, Sabit went looking for anyone from the 1952 film that might still be living. He found the last living cast member, Princess Nevyne Abbas Halim residing in a well-worn villa in Alexandria, Egypt.

In the documentary, she recounts with passion and humor the making of the film, the opulent times and the trauma of the ensuing coup. The documentary ends with images of the Royal family and friends taking a night fishing trip in Alexandria harbor on the eve of July the 22nd, 1952. When they return to shore at dawn they are struck by the knowledge that army officers, including future President Gamal Abdel Nasser, have toppled King Farouk and they are no longer welcome in Egypt.



Frances Ramsden applies makeup to her husband and director of the film Bulent Rauf just before his entrance for the Ball Scene in Oil and Sand (1952).



The Zohreya Set often organized desert outings with their friends. This is one such outing (1949-52).



Preparing to shoot, from left to right, Bulent Rauf (Director), Adel Sabit (DOP) in tent, Prince Nazim Ziya el Din (Ottoman Prince, played the 1st Naib to the Desert Sheikh and was also Assistant DOP). Far right, Halima (Lima) Abu el Huda (wife of Prince Nazim who played 1st wife and the enforcer of his Harem).

Sabit's film *In Search of Oil & Sand* is aesthetically pleasing to the eye while it arouses curiosity and reminds us of the Belle Epoque when Egypt was the ruby of the Mediterranean; cosmopolitan, sophisticated and royal.

In Search of Oil & Sand deserves to be screened throughout the world as it weaves together history, politics and the creative human energy that makes for great story-telling, the cache of all human experience. As Egyptians embark on yet another new beginning, they and the world should activate their understanding of what has shaped Egypt today. *In Search of Oil & Sand* is a sumptuous and compelling place to begin. Ω



Portrait of Princess Nevine Abbas Halim (1951/2)



Mahmoud Sabit parents, Adel Sabit and Frances Ramsden (Hollywood film star who appeared with Preston Sturges among others).

Historian Mahmoud Sabit receiving the "Best Director of the Arab World" Award at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival (2013). The film was co-directed by Wael Omar and Philippe Dib.

