

Culture

Egyptian-born actor Omar Sharif dies

Cairo

Omar Sharif, the Egyptian-born actor with dark, soulful eyes who soared to international stardom in movie epics *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*, has died at age 83.

Sharif died July 10th of a heart attack in a Cairo hospital, his long-time agent, London-based Steve Kenis, and the head of Egypt's Theatrical Arts Guild, Ashraf Zaki, told the Associated Press. The actor had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Sharif was Egypt's biggest box-office star when director David Lean cast him in 1962's *Lawrence of Arabia*. But he was not the director's first choice to play Sherif Ali, the tribal leader with whom the enigmatic T.E. Lawrence teams up with to help lead the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire.

Lean had hired another actor but dropped him because his eyes weren't the right colour. The film's producer, Sam Spiegel, went to Cairo to search for a replacement and found Sharif. After passing a screen test that proved he was fluent in English, he got the job.

His entrance in the movie is stunning: He is seen in the distance, a speck in swirling desert sand. As he draws closer, he emerges first as a black figure on a galloping camel, slowly transforming into a handsome, dark-eyed figure with a gap-tooth smile.

The film brought him a supporting-actor Academy Award nomination and international stardom.

Three years later, Sharif demonstrated his versatility, playing the leading role of a doctor-poet who endures decades of Russian history, including World War I and the Bolshevik revolution, surviving on his art and his love for his beloved Lara in *Doctor Zhivago*.

Lean's adaptation of the Boris Pasternak novel had a rocky beginning in its first US release. Attendance was sparse and reviews were negative. After MGM removed it from

theatres and Lean re-edited the sprawling tale, it was re-released and became a box-office hit. Still, Sharif never thought it was as good as it could have been.

"It's sentimental. Too much of that music," he once said, referring to Maurice Jarre's luscious Oscar-winning score.

Although Sharif never achieved that level of success again, he remained a sought-after actor for many years, partly because of his proficiency at playing different nationalities.

He was Argentine-born revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara in *Che!*, Italian Marco Polo in *Marco the Magnificent* and Mongol leader Genghis Khan in *Genghis Khan*. He was a German officer in *The Night of the Generals*, an Austrian prince in *Mayerling* and a Mexican outlaw in *Mackenna's Gold*.

He was also the Jewish gambler Nick Arnstein opposite Barbra Streisand's Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*. The 1968 film was banned in his native Egypt because he was cast as a Jew.

In his middle years Sharif appeared in such films as *The Pink Panther Strikes Again*, *Oh Heavenly Dog!*, *The Baltimore Bullet* and others he dismissed as "rubbish".

In 2003 he accepted a role in the French film *Monsieur Ibrahim*, portraying a Muslim shopkeeper in Paris who adopts a Jewish boy. The role won him the Cesar, the French equivalent of the Oscar, and he followed with *Hidalgo*, a lively western starring Viggo Mortensen. In that one he was a desert sheik who duels 11 assailants with a sword. His career was back on track.

Born Michael Chalhoub on April 10, 1932 in Egypt's Mediterranean coastal city of Alexandria, Sharif was the son of Christian Syrian-Lebanese parents.

After working three years at his father's lumber company, he fulfilled his long-time ambition to become a movie actor, appearing in nearly two dozen Egyptian films under the name Omar el-Sharif.

His fame increased when he married Faten Hamama, Egypt's reign-

ing movie queen and screen beauty, in 1955. Some of Egypt's most iconic film posters are of Hamama and Sharif. Sharif converted to Islam to marry her and they had a son, Tarek. They divorced in 1974 and Sharif never remarried. Hamama died in January.

"He was a phenomena; a one of a kind. Everyone had a dream to be like Omar Sharif. No one will be like him," Yousra, Egypt's most well-known actress for much of the past 30 years and a close friend of Sharif, told the AP after his death was announced.

"I don't think we are going to ever have someone like him," she said, describing him as "classy" and comparing him to a diamond that is "clean-cut".

Sharif's son Tarek revealed in May that his father had Alzheimer's disease. Zaki said Sharif had stopped eating and drinking in the last three days before his death.

Sharif was romantically linked with a number of Hollywood co-stars over the years. In 2004, he acknowledged that he also had another son, who was born after a one-night stand with an interviewer.

Away from the movies, Sharif was a world-class bridge player who for many years wrote a newspaper column on the game. He quit bridge in later years, however, when he gave up gambling.

Sharif spent much of his later years in Cairo and at the Royal Moncean Hotel in Paris.

"When you live alone and you're not young, it's good to live in a hotel," he told a reporter in 2005. "If you feel lonely, you can go down to the bar. I know all the people who work here and who come here regularly. The room is done for you and you don't have to worry about anything," he said. "If you feel anything, health-wise, you can call the concierge and tell them to bring all the ambulances in Paris."

(The Associated Press)

Omar Sharif, an Egyptian superstar

Amr Emam

Cairo

Egyptian-born actor Omar Sharif will most likely be remembered outside his country for his good looks and roles in epic films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*. But in Egypt he is remembered for his personality and the values he personified in unforgettable films over many decades.

The handsome actor with a charming smile and sparkling eyes died July 9th at a hospital in Cairo at the age of 83.

He was, above all, an icon of love

and romance. Together with fellows actors Ahmed Ramzy, Faten Hamama and Abdel Halim Hafez, Sharif was for many in Egypt a reminder of the "good old days" and for "pure and honest love".

His Egyptian fans remember the patriotism he stood for in his role in the classic film *Stranger in My House*, in which he played a revolutionary activist fighting the corruption of the ruling elite in Egypt before the 1952 revolution. Other fans will not forget the values he represented in *Ayyamna al-Holwa* (*Our Best Days*), which co-starred his lifelong love Hamama and Ramzy, his close friend.

Sharif, who made his screen debut in the 1954 Egyptian film *Siraa Fil-*

Wadi (*The Blazing Sun*), will be most remembered as the Prince Charming of generations of Egyptian women.

"I think his very Egyptian looks and the romantic roles he played in his films contributed a lot to this," cinema critic Sami Helmi told The Arab Weekly. "He was loved until the last minute of his life."

As a star, Sharif's brightness never dimmed. Among his later roles was one with Egyptian comedian Adel Emam in *Hassan wa Morcus* (*Hassan and Morcus*), a 2008 comedy about the troubled ties between Egypt's Christians and Muslims. His last film — *1001 Inventions and the World of Ibn Al-Haytham* — is in post-production.

The last time Sharif spoke to the media was late in 2014 when he returned to Egypt. He told an Egyptian newspaper then that he returned home to spend his remaining days. "I came back to live, die and be buried here," he said.

Amr Emam is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.



Omar Sharif with Egyptian actress and wife Faten Hamama in a 1966 photo.

