

Film history faces destruction again

By India Stoughton
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: On June 20 1962, Baalbeck Studios was born, established by Palestinian bankers and businessmen Yousef Beidas and Badie Bulos. During the 1960s and '70s the studio went on to become one of the region's most-prominent audiovisual production hubs, working with famous writers, actors and directors and collaborating with international studios.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1975 made it impossible for many of the employees to safely commute to the Sin al-Fil offices, forcing the studio to close for some years.

Throughout the years of conflict, Baalbeck Studios continued to produce films sporadically, reopening in the 1990s, only to close for good some years later.

The building was sealed off as it was, with everything inside.

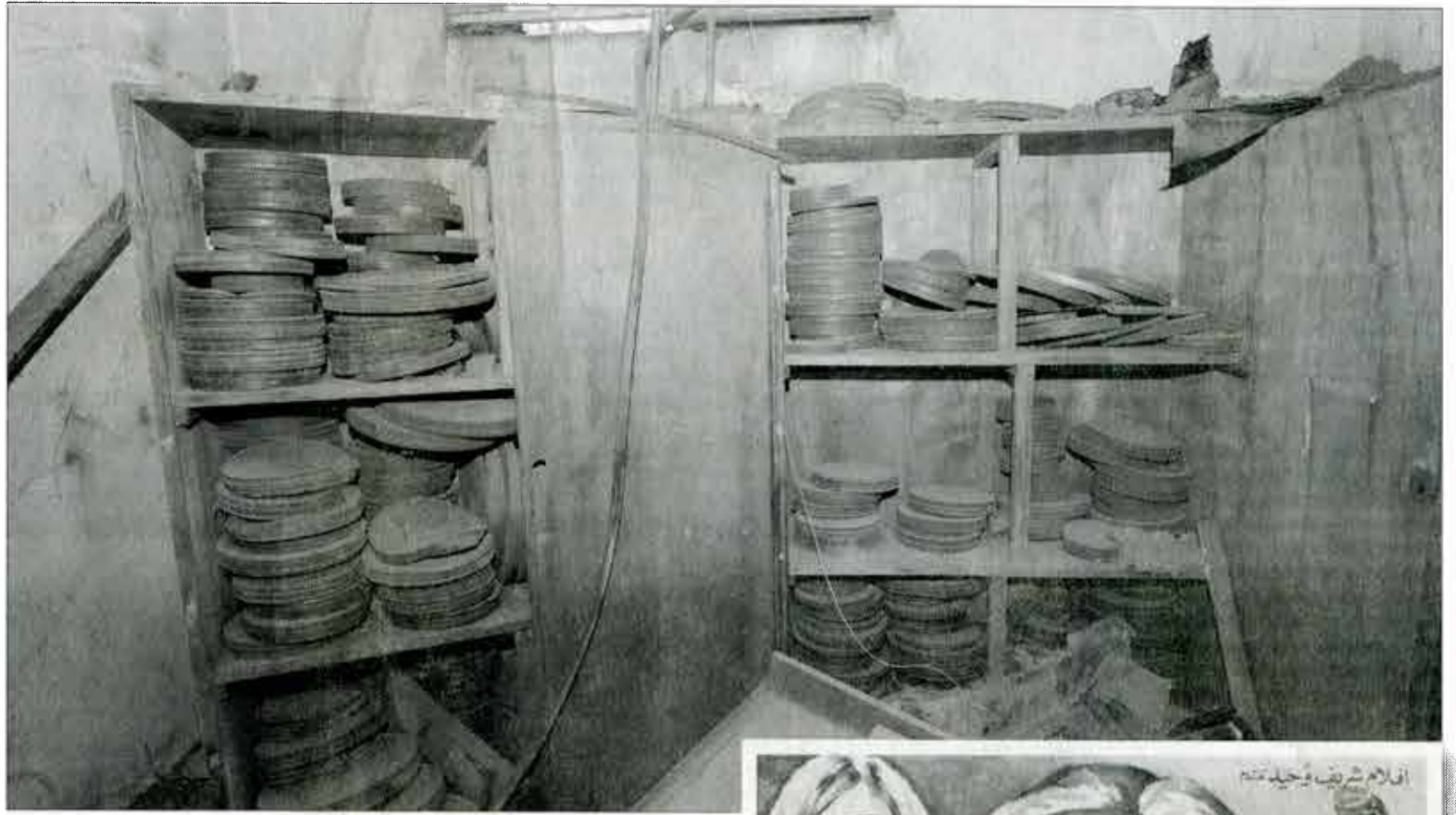
In February 2010, contractors hired to demolish the Baalbeck Studios building contacted UMAM Documentation and Research, a non-profit archival institution dedicated to preserving documents relating to the country's history.

"We got a telephone call from these people," UMAM co-founder and director Monika Borgmann recalls. "They told us, 'We're selling everything ... Are you interested in buying anything?'"

"We said immediately: 'We'll buy everything inside that is paper and film,'" Borgmann says.

The UMAM team rushed to the site, where they began to collect documents and film reels. They took extensive photographs of the interior of the studios, in which 35mm film rolls lay discarded on the floor, abandoned in silent machinery and heaped haphazardly on shelves.

In the end, they were able to salvage some of the smaller pieces of



When it was found, Studio Baalbeck's archives was badly in need of restoration.

equipment, such as cameras and lights. UMAM became custodian of some 600 film reels, as well as several tons of documents relating to all aspects of the studio's history, from financing to cinema projects, both completed and speculative.

Among them is a fascinating chain of correspondence between Bulos and Egyptian film director Youssef Chahine, discussing the latter's proposal for a never-realized film entitled "Kingdom of Heaven," based on an adaptation of Lebanese author Andr e Chedid's novel "Le Survivant."

The influence the studio exerted over public imagination can be seen

in a letter dating from 1966, in which then 13-year-old Fouad Monsef expresses his dreams of working for the company.

"I am ready to do everything you require so I can become an actor," he writes in a handwritten note addressed to the manager. "I like this acting stuff. I have asked my father about this and he approved. May God protect you and thanks in advance!"

These letters are among a broad selection of items relating to the history of Baalbeck Studios currently on display at The Hangar in Haret Hreik, in the first public exhibition held at the venue since July 2012.

Also on show is looped footage from some of the recovered film reels, salvaged equipment, and a wonderful selection of old film posters and brochures, donated to UMAM D&R by Aboudi Abou Jaudeh.

Due to a spate of car bomb attacks carried out in the southern suburbs over the past two years, Borgmann explained, which dramatically affected people's willingness to visit The Hangar, they have refrained from holding exhibitions on site.

The importance of Baalbeck Studios collection and the urgent need to safeguard it, she says, convinced them to launch the exhibition last month, to coincide with International Archives Day.

It's a collection full of long-forgotten treasures, one that contains a valuable slice of Lebanon's cultural history, but in spite of their efforts to preserve the archive, over the past three years Borgmann and her team have watched the film footage disintegrate before their eyes.

When UMAM D&R took possession of the film reels in early 2010, she says, the first thing they did was to fly in German film expert Harald Brandes to examine them and create an inventory. Most, they discovered, were rushes from popular films that didn't make the final cut, revealing a fascinating insight into the filmmakers' working processes.

Brandes found that some of the reels were in such an advanced state of deterioration that they had to be destroyed to protect the remainder of the archive. The rest, he stressed, should be digitized immediately.



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The film reels represent a significant part of the country's audiovisual patrimony.

The problem, Borgmann explains three years on, is that the machinery needed to digitize the damaged film doesn't exist in Lebanon, and state support and funding for cultural projects is almost nonexistent.

"Buying a machine would require something like \$200,000," she says, "which no one is giving us until now. So we're at the point where we are just running against time."

When [Lebanese-French director] Philippe Aractingi worked on his last film he took five film rolls from the Studio Baalbeck collection with him to Paris and digitized them for us. From the five bobbins they could only save three."

There are two possible solutions for saving the film, Borgmann adds. One is to send the film abroad to be digitized, a costly and logistically

complicated process. The other is to attempt to raise enough money to cover the cost of purchasing the machinery needed to digitize the films in Lebanon.

The advantage of this approach, she says, is that the machine could then be used to digitize other collections. She cites the extensive film footage currently held by state-run institutions such as Tele Liban, the culture and tourism ministries and the Lebanese Army, as well as private collections, explaining that these archives are also at risk due to adverse storage conditions.

If enough money could be raised to purchase the necessary equipment and train technicians, she speculates, it could even become a pan-Arab resource, used by archival institutions facing similar crises in countries such as Jordan and Egypt.

"We are working now two tracks," she concludes. "We are working on a fundraising event, which we would like to have in November, and we are working on a possible partnership with European countries. We're in touch with [organizations in] France, Switzerland and Germany to see if we can send it out, but we need to do something."

"We have been in touch with [French archival institution] Institut National de l'Audiovisuel," she continues, "but they are very strict with ownership. We never said we are the owners of these film rolls. We are saying we are the guardians ... but by the time we've solved all the problems of ownership the material will be totally damaged."

Borgmann says that plans are afoot to augment the archive with oral testimonies from old Baalbeck Studios employees. The priority, however, must be to preserve the existing materials.

"What would be wonderful one day in the future would be to create a nonprofit civil company," Borgmann says, "which would give low cost access to this material to artists and filmmakers, and all the profit would go into the company to digitize more ... But this is a long- or middle-term project. The priority is to digitize."

An exhibition of the **Baalbeck Studios** archive is on display at The Hangar in Haret Hreik until the end of August. For more information or to arrange a visit, please call 01-273-881.