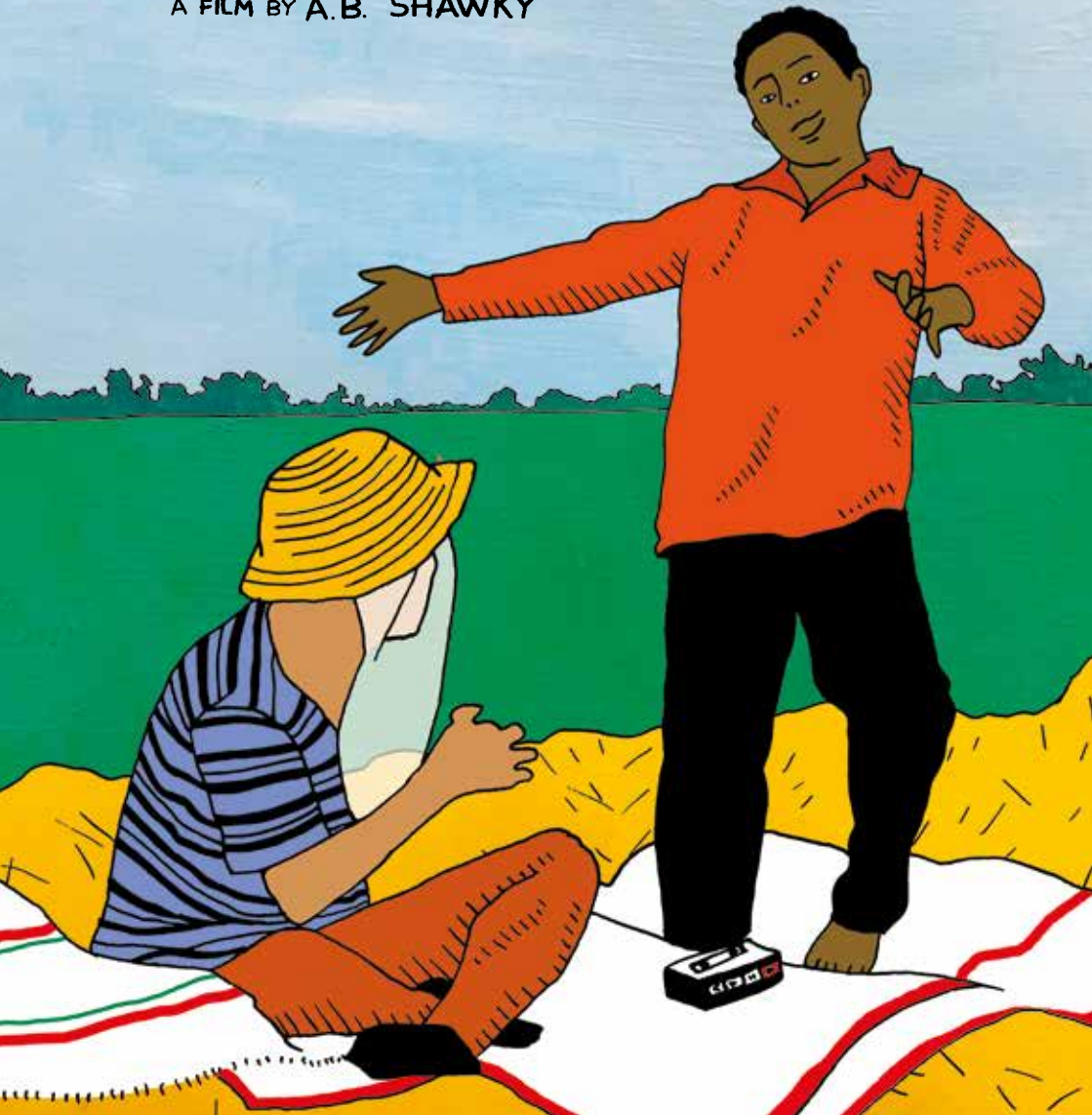




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YOMEDDINE

A FILM BY A.B. SHAWKY





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INTERNATIONAL SALES

wild bunch

5 square MÉRIMÉE • 1st floor

06400 Cannes

Phone : 00 33 (0)4 93 68 73 53

EVA DIEDERIX

ediederix@wildbunch.eu

SILVIA SIMONUTTI

ssimonutti@wildbunch.eu

OLIVIER BARBIER

obarbier@wildbunch.eu

FANNY BEAUVILLE

fbeauville@wildbunch.eu

OLPHA BEN SALAH

obensalah@wildbunch.eu

PRESS RELATIONS

Alibi communications

Brigitta Portier & Gary Walsh

brigittaportier@alibicomunications.be

garywalsh@alibicomunications.be

+32 477 982584

+33 6 28 96 81 65

www.alibicomunications.be

SYNOPSIS

Beshay - a man cured of leprosy - has never left the leper colony in the Egyptian desert where he has lived since childhood. Following the death of his wife, he finally decides to go in search of his roots. With his meagre possessions strapped to a donkey cart, he sets out. Quickly joined by Obama, the Nubian orphan he has taken under his wing, Beshay will cross Egypt and confront the world with all its sorrows, its hardships and moments of grace, in his quest for a family, a place to belong, a little humanity...



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Through YOMEDDINE, I wanted to tell the story of the underdog, the outsider, the labeled “nobody” who grows to understand the workings of a world that refuses to accept him.

The idea for YOMEDDINE came when I was filming a short documentary (THE COLONY), which chronicles the stories of the residents of the Abu Zaabal Leper Colony north of Cairo. I came to realize that leprosy is more a social issue than a medical one, and that their disfigurement had pushed the residents into seclusion from the rest of the world.

The choice to have Beshay be played by a non-actor leper came with the intention to give both the character and the man the chance to be defined by his humanity, not his disease. The idea is to not look away from the outcasts we encounter in the film, but to see past their appearances and focus on their character. Despite the seemingly heavy content, YOMEDDINE is treated in a light-hearted manner, highlighting Beshay's spirit in the face of misery.

A.B. Shawky



INTERVIEW WITH A.B. SHAWKY, DIRECTOR

Can you tell us about your journey before this film?

I'm 32, my father is Egyptian and my mother is Austrian. She's a film buff and helped me discover cinema: when I was younger she used to take me to see lots of films, and particularly independent films. Thanks to her I saw everything the new Iranian cinema had to offer! I studied film in Egypt, and later was accepted into N.Y.U. Tisch School of the Arts in New York to continue my studies. I started to write this film while I was there. I'd had the idea ever since I made a short documentary film ten years earlier about the Abu Zaabal Leper Colony, two hours north of Cairo. The film was a 15-minute sequence of portraits of the people living there.

Why this place?

I'd heard about this leper colony and was really struck by it: leprosy is an ancient disease that has only been successfully treated in the last thirty years. It's both a physical and a social affliction: those who had it used to be chased from their villages and confined in leper colonies. Even those who are cured end up staying in the colonies, afraid of being rejected again on account of their scarred faces. I was told of children who were sent there and never heard from their families again. This seemed to me the starting point of a fascinating story for a film. It has always been my desire to film the oppressed, the excluded, the journey of someone who pulls through, against all odds...

How did you go about writing the screenplay?

I wanted YOMEDDINE to be my first film: I had the right contacts and I had the story in my head. Many elements come directly from what I had heard while making my short: it was focused on a woman who earns a living by selling objects she finds in a landfill. For a long time I thought she'd be the lead character for YOMEDDINE, but in the meantime she fell ill and could no longer move about. While shooting the short, I had also met a Nubian orphan who hung around our little crew and observed us. He was the inspiration for Obama: he has no family and when something interesting happens, he worms his way in!

I wrote the screenplay between 2013 and 2014, then went back to Egypt to try and find the financing. It wasn't easy: I was a beginner

trying to make a film with a potentially disturbing subject and with no known actor. We found a few partners and put in a fair amount of our own money. Finally we started shooting in September 2015 and finished in 2016. We had no money left for post-production. People we approached told us: "Finish the film, then we'll decide if we want to invest." It was often the same people who had told us at the origin of the project: "Shoot the film first and then we'll see..." And of course, they told us later: "Organise public screenings and according to the audience reaction, we'll help you or not!"

Last year, in 2017, I worked as a consultant on the series THE LOOMING TOWER; they were looking for someone who spoke Arabic, who could advise them on the language, the culture, etc. This allowed me to get some money together, and helped me to continue working on the project. We were extremely lucky to find Mohamed Hefzy and Daniel Ziskind at Film-Clinic to complete the film. My wife and I made this film together; she produced it, I directed it. We are unknown in the Egyptian film world, everyone was very surprised when we were selected for Cannes!

Does the leper colony in the film resemble the one at Abu Zaabal?

We didn't shoot there, but we did our best to reproduce it as well as we could. Abu Zaabal is bigger: more than 1,500 people live there. It's an interesting place since most of the inhabitants have been cured; I suppose that by the time they die, there will be no more lepers, since the disease will soon be eradicated. This idea is present in the film: Beshay is one of the last victims of leprosy who is deformed, and there won't be a new generation after him.

Abu Zaabal is a microcosm: there's a psychiatric hospital, an orphanage, a landfill from which many of the colony's inhabitants can make a modest living. And not everyone is a leper: Abu Zaabal is a town in its own right, families have settled there. The film strives to give a symbolic representation of Egyptian society. I wanted to show a different side of Egypt to the one we are accustomed to seeing: most films are set in Cairo, whereas here, we are never in the city. This is an Egypt that people never see, even the pyramid in the film is abandoned in the desert, and no tourist will ever see it. I wanted to show the Egyptian people, neither good nor bad, but fully engaged in a daily fight to survive.



The film owes a lot to the remarkable charisma of Rady Gamal who plays the lead role. How did you find him? Who is he?

I was very lucky. In the leper colony I had asked to meet people who would be interested in acting in the film and Rady was the first one I met. I knew it was very risky to cast the first person I auditioned, I was told absolutely to not do it, but frankly, he was impressive! He embodied precisely the right energy for the film. I still met the other candidates, but I always thought that he'd be the one: he really understood the story, and he had a very particular kind of magnetism.

In the colony Rady manages a small cafeteria, he serves coffee, tea, sells cigarettes. His own story is slightly different to his character's: he was left there as a child, and almost died for lack of treatment. In the end, the nuns who run Abu Zaabal saved him. He still has some relatives, whom he gets along well with: his father is dead, but his mother and sisters live in the south of the country and he visits them regularly. He told me he decided not to live with them because he wouldn't have been able to bear the way people would look at him. He doesn't want to be treated like a disabled person.

How did you work with him?

The challenge was to turn him into an actor. We spent four months together, it was a slow process, I wanted him to meet the rest of the crew, so he wouldn't be shocked, or overwhelmed. He came to my house in Cairo several times and we talked about our lives, our childhoods... Then I read him the script: Rady can't read. Little by little I had him do some acting exercises. Rady is someone who never feels sorry for himself, and I wanted the film to be the same. I didn't want a heavy, miserabilist film - I wanted a "feel-good movie".

The process was pretty similar with the kid who plays Obama, Ahmed Abdelhafiz, who, of course, isn't a professional actor either. I was concerned it might not work between him and Rady, but I didn't want them to meet too soon either, I wanted the chemistry to develop slowly. They got to know each other, and it went very well. Perhaps also because Rady has never had children. He developed a real father-son relationship with Ahmed.

How did you find Ahmed?

By chance, really. I spent a few weeks looking for children. I went all the way to Assouan, a city with a large Nubian community, but I didn't find the right person. Back in Cairo, someone told me about a film being shot in a block of flats, and about the caretaker's son, who would hang around the sets every day. I was told they were from the South. I met him, and he was better than all the other kids I'd seen, with an amazing energy. He was ten years old during the shoot, he doesn't do so well at school, and he doesn't know how to read or write much.

The fact that he is of Nubian origin doesn't mean anything specific, but it contributes to my wanting to show a different side of Egypt: we don't see a lot of Nubians on our screens. It's my way of avoiding 'Cairene domination'. Nubians are people from Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan, with their own culture and their own language. Today they are completely integrated into the Egyptian population, and while Assouan is the city where most of them live, many have made it to Cairo... While I was doing research in Assouan, I stumbled upon a kid everyone called Obama, without knowing why. I liked the idea and it stuck.

Why did you make Beshay a Christian?

Again, it was my desire to show a different face of Egypt. There is a direct link between leprosy and Catholicism. It says in the Bible that Jesus cured the lepers. Catholic nuns often run leper colonies - as is the case at Abu Zaabal, a public institution that receives the help of many religious societies. Not many films from this part of the world talk about Christian minorities, and the Egyptian Christian minority deserves to be represented. But the film doesn't talk about religion directly: there's nothing in particular about the Muslims Beshay meets, they are just very devout...

Rady Gamal's face and hands are marked by leprosy, and it was a real responsibility to film him, and in particular to show him to the public...

We thought we'd introduce him slowly, progressively to the audience. We wanted to start with his hands, and only show his face in close-up later. But little by little, when we edited, while keeping a progressive approach, I thought the audience would end up seeing him. One of the points of reference here is of course THE ELEPHANT MAN: by the end of the film, the audience loves John Merrick, they get over the fact that he is not like anyone else. Of course, in THE ELEPHANT MAN, we all know it is only make-up, but in fact, when you're face to face with a real person like Rady, it's easier to relate to him.



Who are the other members of this “Court of Miracles”, who ends up adopting Beshay and Obama?

The very small man is a dubbing actor: I gave him the Judgement Day monologue. One day will come when all humans will be equal and no one will be judged by his appearance... YOMEDDINE, the title of the film, means Judgement Day in Arabic. The legless man has an interesting story: I wrote the character for someone I know, who sells handkerchiefs on the street. He gave his agreement but when the day of shooting arrived, he withdrew it. The crew had already set up under the bridge, near the fire; as is often the case, we had requested the local residents' protection. When they found out we wouldn't be able to shoot because our actor had let us down, they were very angry. They told us we should find another actor. I said: “OK, *but it has to be a legless man.*” “*Is that all? We know one.*” He arrived the next day, a man who has lost both his legs but who is completely independent. He even drives his own car. He read the scenes and immediately said: “*I want to do it - this character, it's me*”. He was excellent; we were very lucky.

The scenes with them, and later on, the trip on the locomotive, are moments that give an impression of serenity, even of joy...

The most symbolic moment is when Obama returns and lies to Beshay, telling him his family isn't there. “*Are you sad?*” Obama asks. “*At least we have seen the world*”, Beshay replies. If they don't find Beshay's family, they will go back but at least they will have travelled and enjoyed their adventure... Again, I didn't want a film wallowing in self-pity, which would leave you depressed for a week. It wouldn't ring true because lepers aren't like that: they know God is testing them and they have to live with it. They accept their fate.

Isn't there something of Charlie Chaplin and The Kid about Beshay and Obama?

That's interesting. I hadn't thought of that but I can see similarities: Chaplin's character never falls into self-pity and always manages to pull through...

You had a cosmopolitan crew. The DP for example, Federico Cesca, is Argentinian...

I called on my colleagues at NYU - either because we were close, or because I appreciated their competence. The DP is Argentinian and he did a great job. The composer is Egyptian but I believe he has only ever lived in the US. He lives in LA. I never met him in the flesh: we did it all on Skype. Every night, for a month, I called him around midnight because of the time difference. I pretty much knew what I wanted with the music: it had to emphasize the joyful, “feel-good” side of the film.

YOMEDDINE remains a distinctively Egyptian film nonetheless...

A film is a film. If the story is good, I don't think it belongs to any particular country. My idols are the Coen Brothers: they make films about average Americans, deep in the heartland of their country, in the snow, and despite differences of language, culture, religion, these films speak to me, who grew up in a desert country like Egypt. My goal is simple: that the audience will discover the film without understanding the characters' language, or their cultural or religious environment, and that despite this, the film will touch them. If I manage to achieve this, I will have succeeded.

A.B. SHAWKY, DIRECTOR

A.B. Shawky is an Egyptian-Austrian filmmaker born in Cairo in 1985. His short films “THE COLONY”, “THINGS I HEARD ON WEDNESDAYS” and “MARTYR FRIDAY” have screened at festivals around the world. He studied Political Science and Filmmaking in Cairo, and is a graduate of NYU Tisch School of the Arts Grad Film Program. YOMEDDINE is his first feature.

FILMOGRAPHY

“THINGS I HEARD ON WEDNESDAYS” (2012) - Short Film (English)
“MARTYR FRIDAY” (2011) - Short Documentary (Arabic/English)
“THE COLONY” (2008) - Short Documentary (Arabic)



CAST

RADY GAMAL (“BESHAY”)

Rady Gamal is from a small village in the Southern governorate of Minya in Egypt. After suffering from an initially unexplained condition in his teens and several misdiagnoses, a clinic recommended to send him North to the Abu Zaabal Leper Colony. There, he was brought back to life by nurses and nuns after being in critical condition and left for dead. After recuperating, he spent the rest of his life living in the colony. He runs a small shop that caters to the local residents and staff of the colony. YOMEDDINE is his first ever acting role. Unlike his character Beshay, Rady enjoys good relations with his family in Minya and visits them frequently.

AHMED ABDELHAFIZ (“OBAMA”)

Ahmed grew up in downtown Cairo, with his family originally from Egypt’s Southern region of Aswan. He is currently in 7th grade. He was discovered when another film was shooting in the building where his father is employed as a doorman. He would hang out on the film set frequently. Ahmed is a quick learner, and his quick wit and can-do attitude set him apart from many children his age. YOMEDDINE is his first acting role.

CAST

Beshay Rady Gamal
Obama Ahmed Abdelhafiz

CREW

Written and directed by A.B. Shawky
DP Federico Cesca
Set designer Laura Moss
Editor Erin Greenwell
Original music Omar Fadel

Producer Dina Emam
Executive producers Elisabeth Shawky-Arneitz
Ahmed Shawky
Ali Baghdadi
Gill Holland
A.B. Shawky
Michel Merkt

Coproducers Mohamed Hefzy
Mohamed Sakr

Associate producer Daniel Ziskind

A production Desert Highway Pictures
In association with Film Clinic
International sales Wild Bunch
French distributor Le Pacte



MEANING OF "YOMEDDINE"

"Yomeddine" means "Day of Judgment" in Arabic. While the film itself doesn't focus on religion, religion is still a part of people's everyday lives. It is believed on the day of judgment everyone will be regarded as equal and everyone will be judged according to their deeds only, not their looks - an important theme in the lives of the characters of the film. This is especially true for people who feel they are looked down upon in society, they look forward to this day because there is no hope in the physical world to feel equal. Regardless of the extent of their religiosity, and whether they believe it's real or not, it's still a source of comfort and helps them to pass their days. The main scene that hits the most upon this notion is the sunrise scene under the bridge, where Rayes tells Beshay that "on Yomeddine (Judgement Day), we will all be equal."



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