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آخر ايام المدينة

Akher ayam el madina

In the Last Days of the City

Tamer El Said

Producer Tamer El Said, Khalid Abdallah, Hana Al Bayaty, Marcin Malaszczyk, Michel Balagué, Cat Villiers. **Production companies** Zero Production (Cairo, Egypt), Mengamuk Films (Berlin, Germany). **Director** Tamer El Said. **Screenplay** Tamer El Said, Rasha Salti. **Director of photography** Bassem Fayad. **Editor** Mohamed Abdel Gawad, Vartan Avakian, Barbara Bossuet. **Music** Amélie Legrand, Victor Moïse. **Sound design** Victor Bresse. **Production design** Salah Marei. **Art director** Yasser El Husseiny. **Costumes** Zeina Kiwan.

With Khalid Abdalla (Khalid), Laila Samy (Laila), Hanan Youssef (Hanan), Maryam Saleh (Maryam), Hayder Helo (Hassan), Basim Hajar (Tarek), Bassem Fayad (Bassem), Ali Sobhi (Ali), Islam Kamal (Cutter), Mohamed Gaber (Gaber).

DCP, colour. 118 min. Arabic.

Premiere 14 February 2016, Berlinale Forum

World sales Still Moving

Downtown Cairo is an organism that still seems alive back in winter 2009/10, but is becoming increasingly alien even to those born there. Khalid is looking for a flat. He's a filmmaker. He looks at his images over and over again, as if he were waiting from them to produce some sort of meaning. The stories of his protagonists seem to come from somewhere inside him, he seeks points of reference in the outside world. The more he looks for them, the more they seem to disappear; not abruptly though, but in lengthy moments full of tenderness, such as when he bids farewell to his girlfriend who is leaving him, to his ill mother, to friends who have come to the city to premiere their films. For them, Cairo is a fixed reference point: One left Baghdad and is now living as a refugee in Berlin, another stayed there, a third lives in troubled Beirut. When they decide to send Khalid video material from their cities, it's not so much about helping him with his film than preserving something they still associate with Cairo via this bond, fully aware that it's already a fantasy. An almost noiseless film in which time is overtaken by history.

Stefanie Schulte Strathaus

The pulse of an extraordinary moment

Akher ayam el madina was born as an idea in 2006, while war was raging in Iraq and Lebanon. By the time shooting began at the very end of 2008, the global financial crisis had begun, the Gaza war was underway, and protest movements calling for social and political change had become established as a regular reality in Egypt. With an ageing dictator priming his son to inherit power and extreme levels of poverty amidst the luxurious excesses of corruption, the sense that things could not go on like this was palpable.

The film was conceived as an act of witness, set on the borders of fiction and reality. The screenplay was completed by Tamer El Said and Rasha Salti in 2007. It created the soul of the film while being open enough to allow the film to respond to life in the cities and the people that would carry it. With the exception of Khalid and Laila, all the film's characters play a version of themselves. The stories of Hanan and Mariam are very personal stories of loss, filmed as documentary. Khalid's mother is played by Tamer's mother. His three friends are filmmakers who got to know each other through filmmaking before working on *Akher ayam el madina*.

Bringing together the cast and crew was a major undertaking that came together by 2008, however at that point less than fifteen per cent of the budget was in place. Faced with the decision of postponing the film, and recognising a now-or-never moment, the cast and crew decided to throw caution to the wind, defer their fees, and film guerrilla-style. Originally planned as a three-month shoot, the film took two years and three winters to complete. Without the unrelenting dreams and efforts of an entire cast and crew willing to adjust their lives to the needs and unruly rhythms of the film, it simply would not have been made.

The story of the filming was an epic improvisation, of losing locations and finding new ones; of losing actors and changing story lines; of filming events that became part of the fabric of the story; of gradually finding a community of investors and funders willing to take a risk on the film's team. Throughout, Tamer's mother was ill. Sadly, she passed away weeks before shooting was completed. Utterly exhausted, the film's team returned to their lives in December 2010 hoping to rest for some time. Six weeks later, Egypt's streets erupted in revolution and toppled Mubarak.

Called *In the Last Days of the City* long before this moment of rupture, it turned out to have been a film shot with a sense of foresight and edited with the benefit of hindsight. Everything the film had captured gathered entirely different meanings, and kept developing new ones with each turn of event. More than 250 hours of footage had to be grappled with in the editing suite against the backdrop of mass demonstrations and a country convulsing, each person participating in parallel to the film in their own way.

A key aspect of the film's journey was a common desire to confront the hurdles that made making *In the Last Days of the City* and films like it so difficult. Indeed, so much of what made the film possible was a sense that big sacrifices were essential to moving beyond the flattening of Arab stories and images into stereotypes and news. Aware that so many issues facing Arab cinema are infrastructural, and identifying themselves within a much larger movement across the region, work began to establish an alternative film centre called Cimatheque as a fully equipped hub for education and screening to support the local filmmaking community. Built over the last five years and functioning in part since 2012, it opened last June.

Making *Akher ayam el madina* was a defiant collaboration between individuals from many countries who broke away from roles and rules to make a seemingly impossible film happen – a search for the pulse of an exceptional moment.

“I want to distinguish between autobiographical and personal films”

What motivated you to make Akher ayam el madina, and what inspired the title?

Tamer El Said: I've been wondering why, when we try to capture a moment in reality and put it on the big screen, something is always missing. Where does this magical mixture of spontaneity and structure go? How can a film be just as intense, multi-layered, complex, astonishing and surprising as life? I felt I had to question the method of making films and try to find a process that keeps each moment fresh and real, to allow the magic to come through.

I was born in Cairo and have lived in the downtown area most of my life. It's one of the most photogenic cities in the world. It has this amazing mixture of tenderness and harshness. I wanted to try to learn how to film Cairo in a different, cinematic way, to reflect and create the experience of Cairo on screen, to show the pulse of the street, the pulse of the people.

Personal life experiences motivated me to think of the film, too. Between 2005 and 2006, many events shaped my life. I lost my father. I also lost some friends in a fire that took place in a theatre in Beni Suef. It is horrible to imagine people burning inside a theatre and nobody is being held accountable. These were the last years of Mubarak's rule when it was clear on a political level that we couldn't continue like this. I wanted to reflect on all these complex feelings.

Akher ayam el madina is about the sensation that something is ending and a need to witness and document this moment. It has been the title of the film since 2008 and somehow it has always echoed what is happening in reality.

How did you approach making the film, given it was inspired by real-life stories?

Rasha Salti and I worked on the screenplay for a year to weave all the stories together. We knew it had to have an open structure so we created a blueprint, knowing it would develop while making the film itself.

With the actors I did many rehearsals, improvising the dialogue in order for them to get the right pace and create complicity between all of us. I was trying to remain open to what the city was giving me while at the same time keeping a level of control. So when we went to the shoot, I would ask the actors to forget everything they did in rehearsal, and to start from the beginning. The crew knew that we needed to be there, ready to capture the magic when it happened. This is something you can't organise. When we were in tune, we all knew it.

Can you talk about Khalid in the film – how much of his story is autobiographical?

Khalid is stuck between the past, his memories, and a suffocating present in a city on the edge. He is trying to find his way to a future that he can't see. This situation for me is very cinematic.

I want to distinguish between autobiographical and personal films. *Akher ayam el madina* is a personal one. When I started to think of it, I was haunted by many events that were happening in my life. I promised myself that I would only speak about things I know. I don't feel comfortable speaking about people I don't know or presenting a world that I am not part of. I feel everything in cinema has to come from within.

Khalid as a character is in a battle against time. His mother is dying, he has to leave his flat, his ex-girlfriend is leaving the country and he has to finish his film. He doesn't feel that he has much time to achieve anything. Many things echo with what happened in my life, and his friends are my friends, but I don't see him as myself. Of course, the character has something of me in him, but he is distinct as well as fictional. Also, I didn't want to keep Khalid, the actor, from putting something of his soul into the character. And I think what he brought to the character is beautiful.

You were still in production at the time of the revolution in January 2011. Was there a decision not to include it, not to film it?

The revolution was a moment when you rethink everything, on every level. It was an amazing feeling seeing all our friends on the streets holding a camera freely, able to document without being arrested or trying to hide. It brought with it all these questions about what we should film, and our responsibility as filmmakers. During those eighteen days, I didn't feel the urge to film. I didn't want to look at what was happening through the lens of the camera. I wanted to participate and be part of this moment. But under the influence of others, we decided to film for half a day, and it felt wrong. For two years we had been shooting in the streets of Cairo using it as a backdrop and it always felt right, but it didn't feel right to use such a big moment as a backdrop for the film. When everything goes upside down, it's not simple. We couldn't use this moment before we understood it. And to understand it we needed time.

The revolution only opens up a possibility for change, but the change itself is our responsibility. I'm always asked if my film is about the revolution, or if it is 'revolutionary'. For me, a revolutionary film is not a film that just films a revolution. It is a film that revolts against the old, established cinematic language. This is what I identify with. I always say the responsibility of doctors is to come up with new proposals for healthcare, and so the responsibility of filmmakers is to come up with new proposals for cinema.

Akher ayam el madina took around nine years to make. Can you elaborate on this process and why it took so long?

It is difficult to sum up nine years in a few lines, but I will try. The journey of making any film is a journey of loneliness. Even though you are supported by everyone around you, the longer it takes, the harder it is. Every day you feel that you have an appointment with your failure.

When I started work on the film I knew I wanted it to be like a free-wheeling kite in flight, like a train that doesn't stop, and as multi-layered as life. I didn't know how to find the balance between these three things at first.

To achieve this we had to create a production model that allowed me to have a high level of autonomy and freedom. Finding the right people to join this journey was not easy with almost no money. We had to organise a schedule that allowed people to work on the film without destroying their lives.

Egypt has a strong, well-established mainstream industry. There is no infrastructure for independent films, so we had to create an infrastructure to make the film the way we wanted to. Ninety per cent of our energy was taken by building this infrastructure within a very difficult political and economic context. Keeping certain standards while lacking a big part of the budget was a crazy thing to do. We had to film, stop, look for money, film, and so on.

Directing and producing at the same time was hard, because you are fighting against yourself. Also, when you are talking about a film that was shot in four countries, with a crew from at least ten countries, it's a lot of work.

The revolution gave a lot to me and to the film, but it affected the schedule. It was impossible to make any plan and stick to it while there were daily battles in the streets.

The long production time is also related to building Cimatheque, a dream that grew with time. It's a place where people meet, watch films, learn things together – a home for independent cinema in Egypt. The revolution created a moment that made this dream possible. And it was impossible not to seize this moment. It's hard to imagine the time and effort it took to get this place built and opened.

I believe every film needs its time. Some films need less, some need more. In our case I'm convinced that *Akher ayam el madina* needed the time it took.

Interview: Yasmin Desouki



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Tamer El Said was born in Cairo, Egypt in 1972. He studied Film at the Higher Institute of Cinema at the Academy of Arts in Cairo and Journalism at Cairo University. He has made several documentaries and short films, and in 2007, he founded the independent production company Zero Production in Cairo. Tamer El Said is also a co-founder of Cimatheque – Alternative Film

Centre in Egypt. He lives in Cairo. *Akher ayam el madina / In the Last Days of the City* is his first full-length feature film.

Films

1994: *18 September* (12 min.). 1995: *Charlie* (8 min.). 1996: *Like a Feather* (12 min.). 1997: *Music of the Nets* (26 min.). 1998: *Criss-cross* (20 min.). 2004: *Take Me* (53 min.). 2005: *On a Monday* (7 min.). 2016: *Akher ayam el madina / In the Last Days of the City*.