

# Cairo festival brings recognition to women film-makers

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Cairo

The *Cairo International Women's Film Festival* aims to celebrate contributions by female film-makers, shed light on the problems women face and bring attention to the need for changing misconceptions about their role in society, festival organisers said.

"Women have been a main driving force behind the progress in international cinema has made so far," festival Director Amal Ramsis said. "They are everywhere in the cinema industry: Behind cameras, writing scripts, directing films and in leading roles in front of the cameras."

The festival, scheduled for March 4th-9th, was first organised in 2008 to showcase cinema innovations in the Arab region and in Latin America by women artists, directors and scriptwriters. The festival was the first artistic event to be solely focused on cinema created by women.

**"Audiences play the central role in the festival."**

**Amal Ramsis, festival director**

Through the previous nine festivals, organisers presented the works of scores of female film-makers from both regions. Some of the films entered into the tenth edition document problems faced by women in different parts of the world.

The works of 53 female directors from 30 Arab, Latin American, Eu-

ropean and Asian countries were on the schedule.

"These directors will have the rare chance of communicating directly with the audiences after the shows," Ramsis said. "They will be hearing viewers' opinions bluntly and without any barriers."

■ International cinema has a very long way to go to get to the heart of the suffering of women.

The event aims to empower female film-makers, who, critics said, do not get enough credit for their work although many women have been instrumental to the progress of international cinema.

"Mention any film, either here in the Arab region, or in other parts of the world, and I can assure you that a woman is behind its success, even as her name is little mentioned together with the male stars," said cinema critic and director Ena'am Mohamed Ali. "While their contributions to world cinema are undeniable, women still struggle for equality with men."

Films shown in the festival are diverse and cover a variety of topics. *The Long Night of Francisco Sanctis*, directed by Argentinian Andrea Testa, tells the story of a man who risks the safety of his family to rescue friends who are about to be kidnapped by the army.

Another film, *The Newsroom*, is the work of Danish director Mikala Krogh. It tells of a notorious Danish tabloid's struggle to stay afloat in a changing world.

To spread the word about women's contributions to cinema, festival organisers allow audiences to attend for free.



A scene from *The Newsroom*, directed by Mikala Krogh.

(Cairo International Women's Film Festival)

The festival is unique in the way movies are selected to win its awards. There is no jury but, at the end of every show, audiences are asked to vote on whether the film should be given the festival's top award. The film receiving the largest number of audience votes is given the award.

Ramsis said by doing this, festival organisers empower viewers and allow them to make the cause of the film-makers their own.

"Audiences play the central role in the festival because they are

the ones who decide the winning films," Ramsis said. "This selection strategy is very effective in making the audiences attach themselves to the makers of the films."

The festival administration also presents Arabic language subtitles to allow viewers to better understand the films and the issues they raise.

Nonetheless, experts said international cinema has a very long way to go to get to the heart of the suffering of women around the world. They added that few films,

even those made by women, discuss the problems facing women, especially in conflict zones and areas where violations against them go unreported and unpunished.

"Despite this, events like this festival do a wonderful job bringing to light the work done by women and also the problems faced by them," cinema critic Ali Abu Shadi said. "There are women directors, women scriptwriters and camerawomen everywhere but little do they get credit for the work they do."

# New film fights ISIS's ideology through comedy

Marwa al-A'sar

Cairo

Few Arab films tackle the Islamic State (ISIS) but *El-Armouty Fi Ard El-Nar* (*El-Armouty in the Line of Fire*), a recently released Egyptian film, dares to fight the extremist group's ideology through humour.

"I thought of making a film about Daesh through a character the audience will love and show how the terrorist group has infiltrated many aspects of life, not only in Egypt, but also in other Arab countries," film director Ahmed al-Badri said, using the Arabic acronym for ISIS. "We attempted through the film to expose their lies and deception."

Badri said comedy can be a tool to fight extremism.

"The audience's reaction after watching the film proves that our message has been delivered successfully," he said.

"The film is quite funny with el-Armouty throwing jokes all the time and making fun of Daesh and other extremist groups," Heba Fawzy, a 37-year-old housewife, said.

The key character in the film is el-Armouty, played by Ahmed Adam. El-Armouty is a simple man who is shocked to see Mohamed, played by actor Mohamed Adel, the son of his neighbours whom he helped raise, drop out of college and grow a beard, returning home after a year's absence to accuse his parents of being "infidels".

El-Armouty goes on holiday with his in-laws to Marsa Matrouh, a coastal city in north-western Egypt on the border with Libya. He jumps off the boat with his wife and her brother-in-law before it collides with a ship. He drifts ashore at the northern Libyan city of Sirte where he is captured by ISIS militants who



The poster of the recently released film *El-Armouty fi Ard al-Nar*.

(Ahmed al-Badri)

mistake him for a member of al-Nusra Front, the former affiliate of al-Qaeda terrorist organisation and

an ISIS rival.

El-Armouty miraculously escapes being beheaded by ISIS by getting

involved with the militant group. Inside the camp, he either follows the orders of ISIS leaders or dies. He discovers that Mohamed had joined the group and is at the camp.

El-Armouty attempts to engage in a debate with the militants over the ideas they promote through a series of humorous situations.

"Schools turned into prisons and gardens turned into execution yards," he says sadly, commenting on what becomes of Sirte under ISIS.

At one point, he fools the ISIS leaders, convincing them that he is on their side. At the same time, he attempts to save Mohamed and win him over by trying to reason with him and show him that ISIS misinterprets the true meaning of Islam and its teachings.

"How did they persuade you that it is OK to kill?" el-Armouty asks Mohamed.

In several other scenes, he humorously tackles the *takfiri* thinking of ISIS as well as disagreements between ISIS and other terrorist groups.

"I can't get it. The people of Allah are fighting fellow people of Allah," el-Armouty says, joking when ISIS members engaged with al-Nusra militants.

Badri said the "film's theme is a simple one... I only try to deliver a message to the audience, namely terrorism cannot win the battle."

El-Armouty is ordered to carry out a suicide attack in Egypt but the attack turns into a heroic action on his part.

"You antagonised the government at first but now you will antagonise the whole people," el-Armouty tells Mohamed, referring to the Egyptian people. "And believe me, you will never overpower us. We are 90 million and we are all ready to become 90 million martyrs."

While the film tackles ISIS terrorism, it does not show bloody action.

"The challenge for us was to present the subject of bloody terrorism without viewers resenting it," Badri said. "I thought there must not be a drop of blood in the film. We make a political comedy but do not want to give ISIS much importance by portraying blood in the film."

It took the crew two years to complete the film.

■ Comedy can be a tool to fight extremism, film director Ahmed al-Badri said.

Even though the main idea of the film is interesting, critics said, the plot is not quite coherent, with many comic situations not serving the main theme. On the other hand, Adam tends to repeat the same character of el-Armouty that he plays in other works, using the same jokes, they added.

"The film is rather weak, depending only on a series of jokes told within a script that is not concrete," critic Magda Khairallah said.

Tarek el-Shenawy, another critic, agreed.

"What we see has nothing to do with cinema," Shenawy said. "In the film, we can only see Adam occupying the whole space and nothing else."

This is the third work in which Adam appears as el-Armouty. He played the part in the comic television series *El-Armouty Fi Mohama Sereya* (*El-Armouty on a Secret Mission*) in 1998. He also played the character in the film *Maalish Eha Benetbahdel* (*We are Being Screwed*) in 2005.

*El-Armouty Fi Ard El-Nar* was written by Alaa Nabawy and Mohamed Hassan and produced by Ahmed al-Sobky.

Marwa al-A'sar is a Cairo-based journalist.