



Yomeddine

An Egyptian Feature Film by Abu Bakr Shawky

Produced in 2018

Research and writing by Rasha Azab

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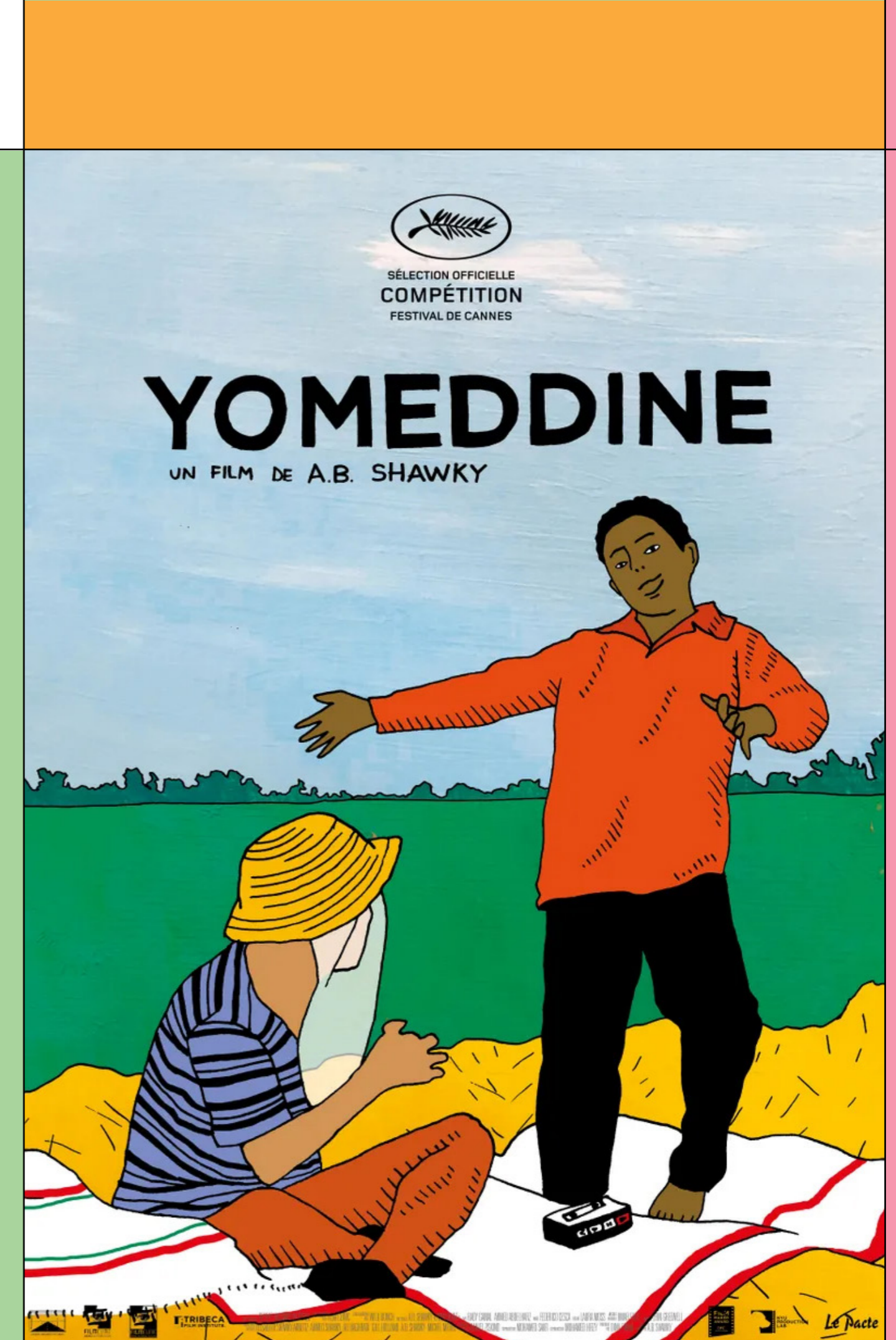
A film about a marginalized group outside the capital in a remote area: filmmaker Abu Bakr Shawky presented his documentary 'The Colony' in 2009 as a graduation project from the Higher Institute of Cinema. The film's events occur in the El Gozam colony in Abu Zaabal, a remote area serving as a quarantine for leprosy patients. Survivors never return home to their families and live in exile for the rest of their lives because of social stigma.

In 2013, while preparing for his master's degree graduation project, the colony's residents came to his mind again, and he decided to make a feature film inspired by the documentary. The production journey, as the lives of the film's characters, was imprinted with challenges and a lack of resources. The film portrayed the lives of Leprosy survivors far from society-drawn outlines. The actors confront reality as the filmmakers' battle to reach the conventional production market begins. And through a series of struggles, setbacks, and successes, 'Yomeddine' was born.

“Shawky's humanitarian journey is not limited to the film and its events. He also takes credit for casting Radhi Gamal, a leprosy survivor, to play the lead role. When the filmmaker became acquainted with the leprosy colony and presented his graduation film at the Higher Institute of Cinema in Egypt about it in a short film, The Colony, in 2009, he decided to make a feature-length film about the survivors, their lives, and their struggle with social stigma. He also wanted them to participate in the film, so he cast Gamal as its lead. The aim was to bring a closer look at survivors' lives and to raise awareness about the importance of understanding the disease and reintegrating survivors into society without discrimination. The film also distances itself from traditional stereotypical ideas we see in romance, comedy, action, and adventure.”

About the film

- A 97-minute Egyptian feature film, released in 2018.
- It tackles an unfamiliar social issue, never related in film before: the life of leprosy patients in Egypt. The actors are real-life survivors.
- The actors received training for four months before the shooting.
- Yomeddine intertwines documentary and fiction filming. The film faced many challenges regarding production because of the issue it tackled, which propelled its release for ten years.
- Production phases depended solely on the support of friends and networking until somehow the film found its way to the Cannes Film Festival in 2018 and was selected as the first Egyptian film in six years to participate.
- The film received wide local and international acclaim, attracting vast and new audiences to this new type of film that Egyptians call “Festival Films”.
- The residents of El Gozam refused that any filming should occur inside the colony. So the film was shot in other areas and governorates such as Al Buhayrah and the Saeed.
- The first commercial screening was at Cinema Skip in Al Minya, the hometown of actor Rady Gamal who plays the role of Beshay, the main character in the film.
- The film does not focus on the disease itself but on the struggle of Leprosy patients who are torn from their homes and families and face loneliness, discrimination, and bullying



Cast and Crew

Directed by:
Abu Bakr Shawky

Cinematography:
Federico Casa

Soundtrack:
Omar Fadel

Executive Producers:
Dina Emam and Mohamed Hefzy

Editor:
Erin Greenwell

Budget

The film had a \$300,000 budget. The funding journey lasted five years and reached several sources (universities, festivals, institutions, individuals).

“The film is not only about lepers. That's only one aspect of the story. Indeed, the film's lead is a survivor, and the events review his pain. His journey with the child Obama was not only about family but any marginalized person in search of identity, belonging, and humanity. The film is about all those outsiders prevented from reaching their dreams.”

“Yomeddine puts forward a director and a producer who are loyal to their profession and believe in their dreams. Their first experience directing and producing a feature-length film reveals that they are an example that deserves to be followed by young people.”

A funding journey



حصل شوقي ودينا على تمويل فيلمهما من عدة مصادر، فأولا فازا بجائزة ريتشارد فيج لإنتاج الأفلام الخاصة بجامعة نيويورك، والتي شكلت قيمتها جزءا ضخما من الميزانية. ولأنهم لم يستطيعوا الحصول على أي تمويل من مهرجانات أو منح أمريكية أو أوروبية أو شرق أوسطية، لجأ للتمويل الجماعي. تقول دينا: «لم يرغب أحد في إعطائنا المال، لذا أطلقنا حملة تمويل جماعي عبر منصة كيكستارتر. تلقينا مساعدات من أصدقائنا وأهلنا أيضا، وبالطبع وضعنا جزءا من مدخراتنا في المشروع كحل أخير».

تستطرد دينا: «كنا صناع أفلام للمرة الأولى بدون شركة إنتاج كبيرة أو نجوم كبار، صعب ذلك علينا إنجاز الأشياء، من تأمين التمويل إلى استخراج تصاريح التصوير مرورًا بأخذنا على محمل الجد أصلا».

- In 2014, the filmmaker founded DESERT HIGHWAY PICTURES with his wife, producer Dina Emam. The film was the company's first production.
- The team reached out to people in business to persuade them to produce the film. Indeed, businessman Ali Baghdadi agreed to finance part of the film.
- In 2015, the film received production support from The Richard Vague Production Fund in the amount of \$75,000.
- In 2016, an online crowdfunding campaign was launched, to which friends and cinephiles contributed.
- The film also received funding through Nextpix / Firstpix, who expressed their admiration, but no further steps have been taken to the date of this study.
- Shawky: "We also received assistance from family and friends. One of them is my brother's business partner. He wanted to invest in cinema and people like Jill Holland, a producer, took over all the production authoring fees.
- The film won a project in development award at Cine Gouna Platform 2017, which opened the door to a network of relationships with filmmakers and international festival program managers.
- New York University offered another grant for the film.
- Mohamed Hefzy at Film Clinic in Cairo became co-producer, helped with post-production in Egypt, and expressed his desire to help distribute the film in the Middle East and Africa.
- Hefzy co-produced it through Film Clinic in the post-production and distribution stage.
- It received post-production support from the Tribeca Film Festival.
- One of the most challenging undertakings was the crowdfunding campaign launched by the film crew in 2016, which is an unconventional way to fund independent films in Egypt.

Chronological Context

Crowdfunding in Egypt

More about the film's Funding

“Dina and Shawki succeeded in collecting funding from different sources. First, they won the Richard Vague Production Fund prize, which covered a large part of the budget. They couldn't get any funding from American, European, or Middle Eastern festivals, so they resorted to crowdfunding. Dina says, “no one wanted to give us money, so we launched a crowdfunding campaign via Kickstarter. Friends and family helped, and we used part of our savings. We were making a film for the first time without a large production company or big stars. Everything was difficult for us, from securing funding to obtaining filming permits and to being taken seriously in the first place.”

Leprosy is an old epidemic that has affected millions throughout history. The disease attacks the nervous system. Some patients with extreme cases may become unable to feel pain; some lose limbs, and some lose sight. Most patients recover from leprosy, but some are left with scars and deformation.

At the beginning of the last century, the epidemic struck again during the British occupation of Egypt. The so-called "leprosy colony" was established in the Abu Zaabal area, 18 kilometers from the capital. Hundreds of patients lived there. Families of survivors would not welcome them back into their homes, so they were forced to return to Abu Zaabal, the only place that accepted them.

The residents lived in a siege-like situation, and the colony became a symbol of the disease. The state tried to close it down after the decline in medical and psychological services, but that would have threatened thousands of recovering patients expelled from society.

The film's events revolved around the nature of this place, its transformations, and what happened to things inside the leprosy colony. The site was an essential component of the film.

About the History of the Disease in Egypt

"On Judgment Day (Yomeddine), we are all equal, and no one will pay attention to how we look." Perhaps that sentence was the essence of the film's message and the reason for giving it that title. It comes in line with the feeling of its main character, a leprosy survivor, ostracized because of his appearance and illness."¹

“This work is above all social criticism. Through this film, I want people to walk around Egypt with open eyes, discover all these diverse faces, and stop discriminating against anyone different from them.”²

“Before Yomeddine, few in Egypt had heard of the colony of lepers in the Abu Zaabal area, forty kilometers from Cairo. Those people are exiled in that place, even if their infection is not contagious.”³

1 Walid Abdel-Fattah, Yomeddine.. When All Are Equal on Judgment Day, Al-Azhar, September 26, 2018

2,3 The French Press, Yomeddine... When Egypt Takes a Look at its Minorities. Al Jazeera, 10/28/2018

The Film as an Impact Tool

“In his interview with the Egyptian CBC satellite channel, Shawki says that he still suffers from debts because of Yomeddine.”

“The film did not get a large advertising budget and relied on social media and voiced campaigning to promote it.”

Yomeddine's production and filming for years directly impacted the film's actors, who are survivors and part of the marginalized minority.

The film has achieved a social impact as well.

'Yomeddine' has achieved social impact and impacted the independent film industry and production in Egypt. This film's impact campaign began with networking to produce a film that is not associated with famous names, highlighting a marginalized group. The network of influence was formed around 'Yomeddine'. The participants in the production process in the different stages of the film had no intention of creating a network. The goal was to make the film. That journey yielded essential keys that filmmakers need, such as:

- Friends: The filmmaker had a documentary film about the leprosy colony and a script for a feature film. He tried to convince friends, relatives, and acquaintances of the film's case and collected some funds from them to start the production process.
- He found his project partner, Creative Producer Dina Emam. An American-Egyptian producer based in Cairo and New York. Emam has worked in TV market research and production management at MTV Networks in New York City. She is a graduate of the Creative Production Program at Columbia University.
- In 2014, the director and producer founded the production company DESERT HIGHWAY PICTURES, making this film the company's first production.
- Dina Emam started preparing a file for donors, film festivals, and film development laboratories.
- The director and his crew developed a production plan.
- The search for funding went on for five years, and at each stage, new supporters appeared, and a new part of the film was shot.
- The Egyptian producer Mohamed Hefzy, known for making independent films, helped in the post-filming phase and presented the film to international festivals through his production and distribution company “Film Clinic.”

Direct Impact

The training period for the two main actors (Beshay and Obama) who were unable to read or write lasted for four months, during which they received continuous training in acting.

The film's lead, Radi, who played the role of Beshai, was subjected to constant bullying by his companions, thinking that he could not act. Many expected the failure of the whole experience due to the actors' crises during filming.

The administration of the leprosy colony denied filming on its premises for fear of being presented in a degrading manner and because they had painful previous experiences in that field.

“It was the first time Rady ever stood in front of a camera. It wasn't easy. Not only because it was his first experience, but because he cannot read and write. That was a challenge for the crew. For example, it is known that actors must abide by certain information on the filming site to ensure that they remain in the frame. The camera team had to adapt to the actors' movements instead of the opposite. Instead of the camera standing still and the actors working around it, we worked in their service.

They were the ones directing us.”

Dina added: “We did our best to film on authentic sites. If someone says we are presenting a distorted picture of reality, they should take another look around them.”

Still, some accused the filmmakers of damaging Egypt's reputation.

“The film was accused of damaging its power to tarnish Egypt's reputation. There is nothing in the film that tarnishes Egypt's reputation. We presented a story from the reality of the daily events experienced by the marginalized classes.”

“Why did some accuse you of damaging Egypt's reputation?”

- It is only a phobia of imagination. We are not alone in this world. My film does not damage Egypt's reputation. It presents stories of real people who grieve, rejoice and suffer. I showed people who had accepted their lives despite the disease they did not choose. They love life and see it with optimism. We see them dancing, laughing, and singing. Beshay had accepted his illness and his pain, but the problem was the people around him.”

Impact Distribution

“Did the participation of Egyptian films in a festival like Cannes positively impact the film industry?”

- Of course, it will have a positive impact, and the audience should know that participating in major competitions is a big event for any country. And I hope that the participation of Yomeddine at the Cannes Festival will not be an exception. I hope it will encourage the industry and those in charge. People would ask me about myself and those working in the film when I announced that it was selected for the festival because I had never worked in the industry before. I did not take the traditional steps of working as an assistant to other filmmakers for years. I finished my studies, decided to work on my own project, and started a production company. I hope my experience will encourage the new generation not to resort to traditional ways.”

Accolades

– Friends, family, and some businessmen helped with standard promotion during fundraising.

– When the film was complete, the filmmaker stumbled to find funds to finish post-production. Individual support and crowdfunding efforts were exhausted, and only festivals and platforms were left.

– The film's producer, Dina Emam, decided to join the 2017 Cannes Film Festival in an attempt to build a network, and there she met producer Mohamed Hefzy, whose company took over the film in its final phase.

– The film was selected to participate in the official competition of the Cannes Festival 2018. That was the moment for the major promotion of the film internationally and locally, especially since it was the first Egyptian film to participate in the festival in six years.

“Yomeddine returned to Cairo with an added value after receiving cinematic praise to find that the traditional Egyptian media, which had ignored it so far, was seeking to talk about it and celebrate it!”

The Egyptian and international press were interested in the film, its humanitarian cause, and its filmmakers.

A campaign in support of the film started on social media. There was no possibility of commercial campaigning.

After returning from Cannes, the filmmakers decided to organize the film's first commercial screening in the leading actor's hometown in Minya Governorate, which had a major impact on the film's advertising trends.

Co-Producer Mohamed Hefzy orchestrated an unprecedented and daring plan to distribute the independent film to theaters in Egypt, capitalizing on the film's international success.

Impact Dynamics

Change in opinions

As the film participated in international and local festivals, and the actors had their pictures published on websites and newspapers, their journey of success began.

They started handling the press and spoke confidently about their roles in the film, their personal lives, and the pain society inflicted on them for years.

Broad discussions spread about the lives of lepers and survivors in Egypt, a rarity before the release of the film.

“Yomeddine, an unconventional film, carries a meaningful humanitarian message. It is the first of its kind to raise the issue of leprosy in Egyptian cinema and discuss matters of love, sincerity, and loyalty.”

The traditional marketing campaign brought less than enthusiastic reviews and commercial rivals. The success of 'Yomeddine' relied on personal cinephile and public acclaim from viewers based on their viewing experience, not on the film's reputation.



Impact Dynamics

Change of Structure

1 Awareness Structure

Repeated attempts to change stereotypes form layers of awareness. Knowledge and empathy lead to that, and cinema can create both. Hostile thoughts and behaviors will not change without changing the structure of cumulative consciousness.

“The film highlights the importance of raising awareness about leprosy and the fact that it is not contagious and has nothing to do with scabies or any skin disease. This misconception of leprosy was evident in the film.”

“In a previous statement, you said that you’d like to portray the Egypt we do not see. Do you think that cinema has moved away from presenting a realistic image of Egyptian society in its last years?”

- That is true to some extent. Most of those who suffer from poverty and marginalization are not portrayed in films, which is sad. My ambition with Yomeddine was to present Egypt in a different image, which prompted me to conduct long research in preparation for the film. I traveled to all the governorates until I reached the borders with Sudan. As I expected, many viewers did not know that the pyramid depicted in the movie is located in the governorate of Beni Suef and that it is older than the pyramids of Giza.”

“Despite some negative comments, Yomeddine remains one of the notable films presented recently. Shawky sheds light on several problems within Egyptian society at the political and social levels. The film aims to alarm the government and motivate attention to the marginalized South and its people and preserve it, providing its people with basic human life needs: good health care, safe roads, and dedicated places for people with special needs or suffering from leprosy.”

The government must take a developmental role in raising awareness through education and cultural outlets about the nature of some diseases and how to deal with them. Societal awareness is not just the responsibility of the people. The government and civil society must participate in providing and achieving it, as it is done in societies that respect human rights and value human beings.

Impact Dynamics

Change of Structure

2 Industry and Audience Structure

— In the opening week of Yomeddine, the revenues exceeded half a million Egyptian Pounds. This event was the largest in the history of Egyptian independent films. It competed at the box office for a month with several Egyptian and foreign commercial films. The film's total revenues reached one million 47 thousand, and 575 Egyptian Pounds.

— Most of the moviegoers in Egypt are between 15 and 35 years old, and they allowed this unconventional film a new feature: the mass turnout!

— The large audience of Yomeddine engaged with the film's social media, which was the only way to obtain information about the film.

— Commercial screenings were held for a month in Egyptian cinemas.

— It screened in 18 theaters in Cairo and the governorates, including nine where the film played throughout the day.

“Yomeddine's revenues exceeded half a million pounds in a week. Those are unprecedented figures among Art House films. The film competed fiercely in theaters and ranked seventh among Egyptian and foreign films.

It even surpassed Muhammad Ramadan in Diesel and Youssef El Sherif in Bani Adam in their sixth week after their Eid al-Adha release.

Yomeddine was promoted on the first page of the Art House marketing literature. The campaign focused on its Cannes Festival participation, its representation of Egypt at the Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film, critical reviews from the audience at the El Gouna Festival, and individual acclaim from industry circles. Cinema Zawya also campaigned for the film and played it in the small hall because the great hall was dedicated to restored films by Youssef Chahine. The film was released in 18 theaters across Cairo and the governorates, nine of which screened it throughout the day. In the second week, revenues decreased by 38%, which is a good rate even compared to commercial Eid films.

For example, El Badla decreased by 58% in the week after Eid. Diesel was at its worst stage in its third week. Yomeddine went on in five theaters, three of which presented all-day shows.”

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Film Production Through Crowdfunding in Egypt

With the beginning of the millennium, Egyptian cinema was acquainted with digital technology. Filmmakers started using new cameras in their works, such as 'The City' by Yousry Nasrallah and 'Conman (Klephty)' by Muhammad Khan, as well as younger directors like Ibrahim El Batout with 'Ithaki' and 'Ein Shams'.

Gradually, some film aspirants got rid of the burden of heavy equipment, and some low-cost films were released. Some Egyptian films also departed from the traditional production path after developing film platforms and international support entities, albeit with more difficulty and extended time. Some films, like 'The Last Days of the City' by Tamer Al-Saeed, demanded an entire decade of work.

Crowdfunding emerged as a solution. Individual screening makes a financial contribution with every purchased cinema ticket. Accordingly, filmmakers think of their circles and relationships to find ways to finance their cinematic projects. Over the past ten years, Egyptian filmmakers have used crowdfunding as a solution to break the industry's constraints. Several attempts have yielded promising results on crowdfunding platforms.

— In 2016, the makers of the documentary film *The Day I Ate the Fish* for Aida El Kashef organized a [campaign on Indiegogo](#) and received 68% of the amount required to produce the film.

— In 2016, the makers of *Yomeddine* organized a [campaign on Kickstarter](#) and received 110% of the requested amount.

— In 2017, the makers of *Trapped* by Manal Khaled organized a [campaign on Indiegogo](#) and collected 102%. The filming ended in 2018, and the film was released worldwide at SXSW 2021.

The funding journey lasted five years

It started with a grant from New York University.

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The film won a project in development award at CineGouna Platform 2017, which opened the door to a network of relationships with filmmakers and international festival program managers.

Then New York University offered another grant for the film.

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About the History of the Disease in Egypt

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In 1991, the World Health Organization declared eradicating leprosy after reaching a 1/10,000 ratio.

Egypt met the 1/10,000 ratio goal in 1994.

— At the beginning of the last century, and during the British occupation of Egypt, the epidemic struck again, and a "leprosy colony" was established in the Abu Zaabal area, 18 km from the capital. The Abu Zaabal area includes a central prison known for its severe conditions and its residents live a low standard of living.

— The leprosy colony was established during the reign of King Fouad. Every Egyptian diagnosed with leprosy was forcibly taken there.

— Hundreds of patients lived in this place, even those who recovered were no longer accepted by their families and society, so they would return to Abu Zabal, the only place that accepted them.

— The colony and its inhabitants suffered from the siege, and it became a symbol of a brutal disease.

— The events of the film revolve around the nature of this place and its transformations. The location is a character by itself, around which the events of the film revolve.

Accolades

— The Egyptian Film Nomination Committee selected the film to compete for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film.

— The film won eight awards at the Catholic Center Film Festival.

— The film won two awards for Best Arab Narrative Film and the Cinema for Humanity Award at the second edition of the El Gouna Film Festival.

— It won the Vanguard Award at the Orcas Island Film Festival.

— The film won three awards from the Arte Mare festival, including the Audience Award.

— It won the Best Foreign Language Film award at the Heartland Film Festival in Indiana, USA.

— The film won three awards at the 63rd edition of the Valladolid International Film Festival in Spain, the Audience Award, the Youth Jury Award, and the Special Mention of the Jury.

— The Student Choice Award at the 27th Philadelphia Film Festival.

The film was screened in 18 theaters in Cairo and the governorates, nine of which showed the film throughout the day and not in limited shows.