

# Traces of Change in Egypt

A moderated program of short-films, trailers and video-letters  
by independent film-makers from Egypt

Friday, February 18th, 4-6 pm at Arsenal 2, Potsdamer Platz



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**Traces of Change in Egypt** is an ad hoc program initiated by film-makers in Egypt, coordinated by Irit Neidhardt (mec film/Berlin) and supported by Berlinale's Forum section.

On the backdrop of the current revolutionary events in Egypt, film-makers who see themselves as part of the democracy movement decided to produce video-letters to Berlinale visitors as well as share their experiences and debates about film-making in their country.

The selection of works is introducing the ideas behind the independent film-scene in Egypt. In conversation with film-scholar/director Viola Shafik from Cairo Irit Neidhardt will moderate the program. The films shown will be related to the larger picture of the Egyptian film-industry. Shafik also gives eye-witness report on the latest developments in Egypt, especially on the process to form of an alternative film-syndicate and the film-makers demonstration on Wednesday, February 9<sup>th</sup>.

Since its nationalization in the 1960s and despite its privatization in 1973 the country's film-making is under state control and producing outside this structure is officially impossible. Over the past four to five years however, opposition and resistance arose and the first full length feature films were produced independently.

If you wish to talk with film-professionals behind this program over the phone, please get in touch with Irit Neidhardt at 030-66766700 or +49-163-5684073 in order to make the contact. Till Tuesday, 15<sup>th</sup> you can arrange meetings at Berlinale with media analyst Alaa Karkouti from Cairo, please email him to [alaakarkouti@gmail.com](mailto:alaakarkouti@gmail.com)

*Cover picture: THE LAST DAYS OF THE CITY (Tamer el Said)*

*I am making this film out of love for my city and because I want to show its contradictions – its rising violence and invisible magic, and the story of our silence as we watch our cities being conquered by oppression, ignorance and extremism. In Cairo, like in every other city in the Middle East, there is the feeling that we can't keep going like this – the end is near, and it might be violent.*

*Director's note THE LAST DAYS OF THE CITY (Tamer El Said, summer 2010)*

## THE PROGRAM

The current uprisings in North Africa took many by surprise. Since weeks the upheaval in Egypt dominates the news, the urgency and tremendous energy expressed by millions of Egyptians on a daily basis finds little echo in Europe though. Until a few weeks ago Tunisia and Egypt were seen as stable countries from a Western point of view. Their dictators were reliable partners to European and USA governments and their landscapes are invitingly beautiful tourist destinations.

Yet for decades the population was suffocating under the authoritarian regimes and a kind deadlock could be felt within large parts of society. Over the past four to five years however, an independent film-scene emerged in Egypt. With the help of digital technology more and more film-makers try to express themselves outside the highly commercial state-controlled film-industry and against the ever increasing repression of the regime.

In this ad hoc program we show some short films as well as trailers of full length independent Egyptian films. They introduce the range of political and esthetic approaches to film-making within this scene and reflect important changes in the structures of Egyptian film-industry. Additionally video-letters made for the Berlinale audience are presented.

All film-makers participating in the program define themselves as part of the Democracy Movement. Due to the unpredictable situation in Egypt there might be last minute changes in the program.

## SHORT FILMS



### **On a monday**

*Tamer el-Said, Egypt 2004,  
8 min, video, Arabic with Engl. ST*

An ordinary couple ... a different day.

- Special Jury Award, Sakia Festival for Short Feature Films, Cairo 2005
- Best short film, "Image Encounter", Cairo 2005
- Best short film, 11<sup>th</sup> National Film Festival for the Egyptian Cinema, Cairo 2005
- Silver Hawk for short fiction, 5<sup>th</sup> Arab Film Festival, Rotterdam 2005
- Best short film, 2<sup>nd</sup> Al-Fayoum Short Film Festival, Egypt 2005
- Ebenseer Bear in Silver, 33<sup>rd</sup> Festival of Nations, Austria, 2005
- Best film "Faucon d'OR" at 22<sup>nd</sup> Kelibia International Independent Film Festival, Tunisia, 2005
- Special Jury Award, Mediterranean 3<sup>rd</sup> Short Film Festival Tangier, Morocco, 2005.

[http://www.mecfilm.de/en/content/world\\_sales/on\\_a\\_monday/index.html](http://www.mecfilm.de/en/content/world_sales/on_a_monday/index.html)

**Shortfilm 2** – tba

**Shortfilm 3** – tba

## TRAILERS AND CLIPS

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### Ein Shams (Eye of the Sun)

*Ibrahim El Batout, Egypt 2008, 90 min, 35mm, Arabic with Engl. ST*



From once being the capital of Egypt during the Pharaonic era and a sacred location marked by the visit of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, Ein Shams has become one of Cairo's poorest and most neglected neighbourhoods. Through the eyes of Shams, an 11-year-old girl inhabitant of this neighbourhood,

the film captures the sadness and magic that envelops everyday life in Egypt. In a series of heart-rending events, the diverse characters of the film showcase the intricacies of Egypt's political system and social structure, and give a glimpse into the grievances of the Middle East region and the complex relationships of its nations.

- Rated No. 6 Of 10 Best Films Of The Year 2008
- Golden Bull, The Top Prize At The 54<sup>th</sup> Taormina Film Festival, 2008
- Golden Hawk, Rotterdam Festival, 2008
- International Carthage Festival Award, 2008
- Best First Film, Rotterdam International Film Festival 2008

[http://ibrahimelbatout.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=53&Itemid=54](http://ibrahimelbatout.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=53&Itemid=54)

**watch Trailer** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHbRHolkYUQ>

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### Hawi (The Juggler)

*Ibrahim El Batout, Egypt/Qatar 2010, 112 min, HDCAM, Arabic with Engl. ST*

Shot in Alexandria using non-professional actors and an unpaid crew, Ibrahim El Batout's third feature continues the Egyptian filmmaker's obsession in contemplating the details of daily Egyptian life. Inspired by the alternative cinema of Godard, Vertov and Kiarostami, the story follows the journey of Youssef, a prisoner released after five years of solitary confinement in order to fetch a sheath of important documents, with a number of seemingly unconnected subplots, concerning a group of aspiring songwriters, a satellite TV executive searching for a show host, an elderly juggler leading his sickly old horse through the city streets, and so on. As a result, what might have been a straight-ahead story with predictable scenes becomes an organic study of a city populated by disparate, often desperate, characters, a closer view of so-called reality and the lives of everyday people.



- Best Arab Film, Doha International Film Festival 2010

<http://www.hawithemovie.com>

**watch Trailer** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAbyaYStnic>

## TRAILERS AND CLIPS

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### Heliopolis

Ahmad Abdalla, Egypt 2009, 96 min, 35mm, Arabic with Engl. ST



In this low-budget underground indie, we are intimately to the lives of five different characters in the span of a sunset into late night, in Heliopolis, a unique neighborhood in Cairo, where different kinds of churches, mosques, synagogues and ethnic restaurants sit quietly side by side on the same street. Each is trying to resolve a conundrum, mundane or serious, none succeeds, they will have to

try again when the sun rises again. As their paths cross, they are oblivious to one another, but we discover the neighborhood's beauty, its glamorous past fading day after day, as the weight of Cairo's quotidian becomes more heavy.

- Special Mention, Cairo International Film Festival 2009
- Best Script, Sawiris Foundation 2007

<http://heliopolisfilm.com/welcome.html>

**watch Trailer** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOC-AwX56F8>



### Microphone

Ahmad Abdalla, Egypt 2010, 120 min, 35mm, Arabic with Engl. ST

Upon returning to his native Alexandria after traveling abroad in the United States for several years, Khaled discovers that time has altered and severed many of his prior relationships, namely between he and his former flame, Hadeer. Feeling alone and rejected, Khaled wanders the city and quickly stumbles into a new world: the underground arts scene. As he becomes increasingly enchanted with this counterculture movement, Khaled crosses paths with street hip-hoppers, rooftop rockers, graffiti artists and documentary filmmakers. Captivated by this diverse intersection of creativity, he attempts to pull together his limited resources in the hopes of supporting the onslaught of fresh talent. It is not long before his professional and personal life become completely immersed in music, film and

art, a movement all the more extraordinary for it having not emerged from Cairo, Egypt's bustling capital city. In addition to stringing together vibrant characters and locales, Microphone is a rich depiction of some of the most exceptional non-professional musicians the city has to offer. Just as dazzling as the music they create, their performances come to life in the film's myriad sequences of action shots.



## TRAILERS AND CLIPS

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- Golden Tanit – Best Film, International Film Festival Carthage 2010
- Best Arab Film, Cairo International Film Festival 2010
- Best Editing, Dubai International Film Festival 2010

<http://microphone-film.net/about-the-film/>

<http://www.microphone-themovie.com>

**watch Trailer** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShKGkDGu90o>  
**scene 1**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U\\_QV6514n\\_0&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_QV6514n_0&feature=relmfu)

**scene 2**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faimwnF8GJY&feature=relmfum>



**Teaser**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xp\\_n4WfgPY&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xp_n4WfgPY&feature=relmfu)



### **The Last Days of the City**

*Tamer El Said, Egypt/UK/UAE in post-production,  
Arabic with Engl. ST*

In the fading grandeur of downtown Cairo, Khalid struggles to make a film about the city in which he is losing everything he loves: he is about to be kicked out of his apartment; the woman he loves is emigrating; and the death of his father has rea-

wakened memories of his childhood, when Cairo and his country seemed a brighter world. Now, all around him, dreams as much as buildings are disintegrating, but the need to keep going has not. Capturing the stories of his friends at home and abroad, in Baghdad, Beirut and Berlin, Khalid learns how to live and keep creating, in the face of ruin, of war, and disappearing hopes.

## FILM-MAKERS AND GUESTS

### Ahmad Abdalla

Born in 1978 in Cairo, Egypt, Abdalla studied classical music and viola in 90 s. Since the end of the 1990s he has been working as film editor for commercial Egyptian films as well as for documentaries. He has also worked as a visual effects supervisor, and credits designer. After completing his two award winning feature fiction films, he is currently focusing on establishing a new independent film production company in Egypt with other young filmmakers.

### Filmography

- 2010 • *Microphone*, 120 min, as writer and director  
2009 • *Heliopolis*, 100 min, as editor and director  
2008 • *Ein Shams*, 87 min, as editor (director: Ibrahim El Batout)  
2007 • *Kash Hisab*, 97 min, as editor (director: Amir Ramsis)

- *Al Ghaba*, 92 min, as editor (director: Ahmed Atef)
- 2006 • *Akher El-Donya*, 108 min, as editor (director: Amir Ramsis)
- *Only to Please You*, 23 min, as writer and director
- *Hide and Seek*, 91 min, as editor (director: Emad El-Bahat)
- *Ma'lesh ehna benetbhel*, 99 min, as editor and visual effects supervisor (director: Sherif Mandour)
- *Sudanese refugees in Cairo*, 52 min, as editor (director: Ibrahim El Batout)
- 2004 • *Faces from Dust and Mud* (docu), 24 min, as editor (director: Hala Lotfy)
- 2003 • *Al-Ragol El-Abyad El-Motawasset*, 111 min, as editor (director: Sherif Mandour)

### Ibrahim El Batout

Ibrahim El-Batout, who was born in 1963 in Port-said, is a graduate of the American University in Cairo in 1985, majoring in Physics. El Batout's infatuation with the camera started in the Video Cairo Production House, an agency that provides facilities for foreign TV-stations. There, he worked as a sound engineer. Shortly after, El Batout began to experiment with filmmaking and learned about the skills required of cameramen, editors and directors. Later, he worked for a year at a British television station called TV-Am, located in Cyprus. Since then, he has worked as a director, producer and cameraman, capturing stories mainly about human loss, suffering, and displacement since 1987, and has also directed numerous documentaries for international TV channels, such as ZDF (Germany), TBS (Japan) and ARTE (France).

El Batout documentary work has received numerous international awards, such as: the Axel Springer

Award in Germany (1994 and 2000) and the Direct Marketing Association's coveted ECHO award (1996). Towards the beginning of 2004, El Batout stepped into the world of fiction to make the long feature film *Ithaki* (2005). His second feature film *Ein Shams (Eye of the Sun)* (2008) has won the Golden Bull, the top prize at the 54<sup>th</sup> Taormina Film Festival, 2008. In 2010, El Batout has completed his third feature film *Hawi (The Juggler)*.



*Hawi*, Ibrahim El Batout

### Tamer El Said

Egyptian filmmaker and producer Tamer El Said lives and works in Cairo, where he was born in 1972. He studied Film Directing at the High Institute of Cinema, graduating 1998 with Honourable Mention, and received his diploma in 2002.

After graduating, he worked for a couple of years as 1<sup>st</sup> AD on some of Egypt's bigger feature films, then spent a year directing high end commercials while teaching at both the High Institute of Cinema and the Actor's Studio in Cairo.

In 2002 he took on the role of Senior Producer and Artistic Consultant for Nile Productions, moving across to Hot Spot in Dubai in 2003. His time as Senior Producer at Hot Spot saw the company expand dramatically, producing 250 documentaries in 58 countries, and winning several international awards.

In 2003, Tamer directed *Take Me*, a documentary about five friends who unwittingly became political prisoners in Morocco, for Al-Jazeera TV. *Take Me* went on to win several awards at international film

festivals. The following year his short film, *On A Monday*, was screened at more than 51 festivals in 24 countries, and scooped nine international and local awards. In 2006 Tamer co-wrote the feature film *Ein Shams* with Ibrahim El Batout. He is also part way through filming a long-term project about the village of Aytaroun which was destroyed in the 2006 war in Lebanon.

In 2007 Tamer left Hot Spot and founded Zero Production, an independent production company in Cairo, of which he is both founder and director.

### **Viola Shafik (will be present at the Friday-program)**

Viola Shafik is a renowned film scholar and documentary filmmaker. Her historical work *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (revised edition 2007) is a groundbreaking analysis of genre, political-economy, and film culture. She is also the author of *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation* (2007). Her own films *The Lemon Tree* (1993), *The Mother of Light and Her Daughters* (1998), and *The Planting of the Girls* (1999) have an interna-

tional audience. Her newest film is a feature length documentary with a working title of *My Name is not Ali*. It explores the life of El Hedi Ben Salem, German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's unlucky North-African lover and lead player of *Ali: Fear Eats Soul* (1973) who reputedly committed suicide. El Hedi Ben Salem has been the subject of a myth: described as a 'cultural miracle' he was said to have terrified film director Fassbinder until he was jilted by him, only to take his own life soon after (sic).

## **COORDINATOR AND MODERATOR**

**Irit Neidhardt** was born in Germany in 1969 and brought up in Germany and Israel/Palestine; now she based in Berlin. Since 1995 she has been teaching and curating in the field of cinema from the Middle East. She was manager of an adult education centre before founding mec film in 2002. mec film (middle eastern cinemas) is a distribution company for films exclusively from the Middle East.

Irit Neidhardt is associate producer of Mahmoud al Massad's award winning feature-documentary *Recycle* and co-producer of Simon el-Habre's Hot

Docs winner *The one Man Village*. She worked as consultant for Tamer el-Said's *The Last Days of the City* as well as for the cinematic adaption of Sayed Kashua's highly acclaimed novel *Let it be Morning*. She is editor of the books "*We are the Good Ones. Antisemitism in Germany's Radical Left.*" (with Willi Bishof) and "*Living with the Conflict?! Reports and Analyses from Leftists in Palestine and Israel*" as well as author of various articles on subjects related to cinema and the Middle East.

## **EGYPTIAN CINEMA-INDUSTRY. A brief historical overview**

Egypt was the first country in Africa and the Middle East to establish a film-industry. Film screenings took place as early as 1896 when the works by the Lumière Brothers were presented in Alexandria and Cairo. Still under foreign rule, Egypt was the only colony in which the production of news-reels and short-films by the local population was possible, first reports about productions date back to 1909.

Gaining control over culture, education and economy is a core element of any anti-colonial struggle. After the country's formal independence in 1922 an Egyptian, thus national, infrastructure was set up gradually. As early as 1925 nationalist entrepreneur Talaat Harb, founder of *Misr (Egypt) Bank*, set up *Misr Company for Acting and Cinema (Studio Misr)* as one of many investment sectors of his bank. Against this backdrop it becomes evident that Egyptian cinema

has been extremely commercial from its very beginning.

In 1952 *The Free Officers Movement* made a military coup d'état and started what is known as the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July Revolution, which abolished the monarchy and established a republic. Step by step the industry was nationalized and with it, in the 1960s, the cinema sector. Scarce financing as well as the spread of TV caused a dramatic decline of the once flourishing Egyptian cinema in the following years. In the 1960s the Egyptian film organization produced, like equivalent bodies in other socialist states, realist films in order to confront the problems within society and to educate the people.

After Nasser's death Anwar el Sadat implemented economic reforms that encouraged domestic and foreign investment in private entrepreneurship. As far as film-production is concerned, the cinema sector was de facto privatized again while TV remained state-owned. Hence public production in the 1980s and 90s was limited to TV-Movies, which were also distributed in cinemas, while private companies produced commercial films mainly for the markets in the Gulf.

Private producers faced (until this current revolution) the same bureaucratic hurdles as in the period of the nationalized cinema sector. Despite approval from the censor, film-makers need a permit from the film-makers syndicate in order to receive a shooting permit from the police. The permit by the film-makers syndicate can cost between 10.000 and 25.000 USD, transparent rules do not exist. To maintain a permit one has, officially, to be a member of

the syndicate, which is only possible for those who studied cinema. Other applicants have to pay higher fees, yet not everybody is given the much needed paper.

The procedure of applications and payments for permits is in addition necessary for every member of cast and crew of a film – also here the rules are not clear. For theatrical release of the movie only the approval of the censorship is needed.

Over the past five years a growing number of film-makers began to ignore these rules and produces outside the official structure. Some ignore part of the regulations to ease up their lives, others declare their dissent publicly. This emancipation is called independent film-making in Egypt and refers to a rejection of or sometimes revolt against the control of the state. Independent film-making in Egypt does not necessarily mean that the narrative or the form of the film challenges commercial or escapist way of telling a story.

The fact that four independent feature length fiction films were released in Egyptian cinemas since 2009 shows that taking an alternative route is possible. It also leads to question if it is only the formal control that makes diversity in film-making impossible or if it is a general atmosphere that restricts creativity to a degree that the idea of working outside the official system does not even come to ones mind.

The following articles from Egyptian newspapers give two examples of independent film-making, they talk about the directors' approaches to their way of working and give insight to the debate in the country.

## Article: CAIRO PREMIERE ENDS TWO-YEAR BATTLE

*The National* – May 07, 2009, by Nadia abou el Magd, Foreign Correspondent

The award-winning movie *Ain Shams (Eye of the Sun)* played to an Egyptian audience for the first time on Tuesday, ending a two-year battle for it to be shown.

“Showing the movie in Egypt is a miracle,” said Ibrahim al Batout, the co-script writer and director. “It’s a great victory, not only for us but for independent, low-budget filmmakers in Egypt.”

The 90-minute movie focuses on an 11-year-old girl, Shams, and her life in one of Cairo’s poorest neighbourhoods, also called Shams.

The girl’s dream is to visit downtown, which she pictures to be as beautiful as the photos in her English textbook. Her father, who works long hours as a private driver to a wealthy businessman, takes her on her dream trip just before she dies of leukaemia. Her brother, who is born after her death, is also named Shams.



*Ein Shams (Eye of the Sun), Ibrahim El Batout*

The film, which has scenes of the US-led invasion of Iraq, looks into the Egyptian political system and the relationships among Middle East countries.

The problems getting the film shown were not about content, but about lacking the needed script approval and interior ministry permissions to film the movie, according to Ali Abu Shadi, Egypt's director of censorship.

*"They came to us after they filmed the movie, ignoring all the rules,"* Mr Abu Shadi said. *"They should have got approval from us on the script first, then from interior ministry to film in the streets, and then show it to us after being filmed."* But al Batout said that still amounted to censorship.

*"I don't believe in censorship. I don't believe that I have to give my script, which are my ideas, to anyone to tell me that he approves of my way of thinking and it's OK to go ahead,"* al Batout said while at a mall on Tuesday where his film was being shown to an invited audience.

*"I believe in a different system of filmmaking, which I followed – I took my own digital camera, and filmed in Iraq and here, and the result is the first such made film in Egyptian history that finally the ordinary Egyptian audience will be able to see."* The final scene of *Ain Shams* depicts the arrest of the crew for filming without permission.

Al Batout worked in *Ain Shams* as a news cameraman documenting riots against the police there in the 1980s. He was shot in his right arm in Aug 1988. The scar of the injury was visible under the black T-shirt he was wearing at the premiere.

Al Batout, 45, went on to become a documentary filmmaker, covering 12 wars and conflicts in the

Middle East, Africa and Europe. He was shot again in Bosnia in 1993. In 2004 he "returned to Cairo feeling disenchanted by the world and my work".

*Ain Shams* is al Batout's second film. His first, *Ithaki*, about a war cameraman, produced in 2005, was shown only in cultural centres here. *"The world of fictional film reinstated my love for the camera,"* he said.

Produced by Film House, an Egyptian production company, it cost 300,000 Egyptian pounds (Dh 196,219) to make.

*Ain Shams* started showing in four cinemas in Cairo and three in Alexandria in late shows on Wednesday after another snag with the censorship, which did not give the cinemas its clearance label that has to be shown at the beginning of the movie.

*"The censor's office wanted to see the film again before issuing its final licence to be shown in cinemas, but they were also giving us a hard time till the last minute,"* said Sherif Mandour, the film's producer.

He said he had sent employees from his company racing to the cinemas with the permission certificates from the censor to try and make it before the 10pm show on Wednesday. Four shows earlier in the day were cancelled because certificates of approval had not been issued in time.

Mr Abu Shadi, the censor, confirmed that the licence was issued late on Wednesday. Filmed in 2006, *Ain Shams* last year won the Golden Tauro Best film Award at the Taormina Film Festival, the Best First Film Award at the Rotterdam Arab Film Festival and received Special Jury Mention at the Carthage Film Festival.

*"Al Batout's movie opens new horizons for new independent filmmakers in Egypt,"* Ibrahim al Aris, a Lebanese film critic, wrote in the London-based Arabic daily al-Hayat.

*"The film launches a new cinematic language, atmosphere and subject, in a country where getting a new film released is almost mission impossible, especially when a film wants to be poetic, pioneering and at the same time popular."*

## Article: THE LONELY LIFE OF HELIOPOLIS

*Al-Masry Al-Youm* – November 19, 2009  
by Amira el-Noshokaty

A middle class couple is swamped with financial obligations. A loner, whose family awaits his migration to Canada, maintains a hopeless affair with a neighbor. A receptionist dreams of living in France. A soldier is exiled inside his wooden kiosk. A heart-broken young researcher seeks to retrieve the social history of Heliopolis and ends up on his own journey of self discovery. Each character suffers from his or her own malaise in Heliopolis.

*Heliopolis*, which premiered 12 November as part of the Cairo International Film Festival, is the first feature film by Egyptian director Ahmad Abdalla. *Heliopolis* is set in the Cairo neighborhood of the same name and portrays the lives of eight people in the neighborhood whose lives seldom intersect.

Events move slowly, as the film takes place within a single day. This helps convey a sense of monotony and despair, which is the theme that binds the film's eight characters together despite their differences in class. They move through the film like secluded islands, sometimes even appearing in the same scene. Yet they remain strangers.

*"This film is about what's not happening,"* explained Ahmad Abdalla at the press conference. *Heliopolis*, he said, is a reflection of reality, where people who could make a difference in each other's lives cross paths yet never meet.

The film's characters reflect depth but they barely develop. *"Like our reality, I've noticed that despite the passing of time, I haven't developed much,"* explained Abdalla, also saying that such people represent the Egyptian status quo.

*"This film is about those trivial details that define, in one way or another, our lives and tie us to our own past,"* Abdalla said. *"The characters are unsatisfied with their present, so they delve into a parallel life with different dreams and alternatives."*

This is exemplified by the researcher who is obsessed with the Egypt of the 1950s and falls under the charms of the district's cosmopolitan legacy; the money and lies that the receptionist sends to her parents every month, telling her family about her time in Paris while all she has is a poster of the Eiffel Tower in her humble rented room in Cairo; the indecision of a Coptic doctor as he tries to sell his apartment and watches a girl chant in church; the soldier who guards the church yet hides in his wooden kiosk, listening to old songs and playing with a stray dog. When the day comes to an end, the alienated characters peacefully return to their homes.

*Heliopolis* is Abdalla's first film. He previously worked as a film editor and studied music in the 1990s. In 2007 he won best first script from the Sawiris Foundation. This year the film is being screened as an official selection of the Toronto Film Festival, the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, and Vancouver International Film Festival.

As a director, Abdalla has employed some unconventional techniques in the film. The actors became co-producers, improvising the dialogue. Abdalla also incorporated documentary-style footage into the storyline. Abdalla insists that it is not a new trend in Egyptian cinema

*"Khairi Beshara's film Ice Cream In Gleam included documentary footage, Mohammed Khan's film Al-hareef, and many others really documented the socio-economic status of Egypt in the eighties,"* he said, adding that he was meticulous in choosing actors who he thought would be able to improvise their own script within the context he created.

*"Unlike the common belief of the divine director who has ultimate freedom, I believe the director's role is to direct the actors who are not mere tools in his hand."*