

Yomeddine (2018)

Egypt

Written & Directed by Abu Bakr Shawky

Introduced by Dr. Kimberly Katz

Department of History, Towson University

“Run away from a leper as you would run away from a lion.” This phrase from the Hadith inscribes the narrative and theme of Abu Bakr Shawky’s award winning film, *Yomeddine* (“day of religious judgement”). It follows the arduous and highly emotional journey of Beshay (Rady Gamal) and Obama (Ahmed Abdelhafiz) as they try to find their families and overcome the social stigma of leprosy. Their friendship helps them survive rejection, hunger, disappointment, and death as they learn to embrace their identity and celebrate their independence.

Leprosy (or Hansen’s Disease) is one of the oldest medical conditions on record (Hippocrates described it in 460 BC) and arguably the most stigmatizing of diseases because of how it physically manifests. Even when cured and no longer contagious, the scarring and disfigurement caused by the infection are clearly visible. People with leprosy find themselves fighting discrimination, embarrassment, and ostracization – all stemming from social, cultural, and religious misconceptions of the disease. Leprosy is not hereditary, 95% of people are naturally immune, it is difficult to contract, and multi-drug therapy (provided free by the World Health Organization since 1981) can cure the disease and prevent deformities. And yet, even with a medical understanding of the disease and changing attitudes, people with leprosy are still often shunned.

A.B. Shawky (who studied filmmaking at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts) visited the last leper colony in Egypt – Abu Zaabal – in 2007 for his short documentary, *The Colony*. Abu Zaabal was established in 1933 when total quarantine was seen as the only way to manage the disease. An isolated community in the Egyptian desert through the 1970s, it is now a village in the sprawl of Cairo. Approximately 1600 patients still live there today with their families. They explain that they find it safer and more comfortable to adapt to a life among their own than to constantly suffer the judging eyes of society. Rady Gamal is a resident of Abu Zaabal. A non-professional actor, his performance as Beshay – who leaves the colony for the first time in his adult life – presents to the world an individual who strives to become part of a society that does not understand him or fully accept him. His cries of “I am a human being” poignantly emphasize his desire to be recognized as more than a disease and the global ideal of a common humanity.

Shawky was the first Egyptian filmmaker to be invited to the main competition at Cannes where he was nominated for the Palme d’Or and the Golden Camera award (for the best first-time director). At Cannes, *Yomeddine* won the François Chalais Award, which honors a film dedicated to the values of life affirmation. *Yomeddine* was also Egypt’s official entry to the 91st Academy Awards (2019).

Yomeddine runs 95 minutes. You can watch a trailer on YouTube or Vimeo.

