



—SQUAD

A Film by Ayten Amin

PRESSKIT



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GERMANY

2021

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ARABIC

A film by
Ayten Amin

SCREENINGS IN EFM

TUE 2nd, 2:00 ^{PM}
WED 3rd, 11:30 ^{AM}
THU 4th, 11:00 ^{AM}

@ Panorama
@ Virtual Cinema 26
@ Virtual Cinema 40

SOUAD

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— SYNOPSIS

Zagazig, a small city on the Nile Delta in Egypt. Today.

Souad, 19-year-old young woman, leads a double life. While remaining conservative and veiled among her family and society, Souad is obsessed with her image on social media, and goes in several secret virtual relationships with men. She constantly lies about her personal life, projecting wishfully images of a different desired life. Her ambitions are slowly crushed by the invasion of her true reality.

A series of small incidents lead to a tragic event, that makes Rabab, her 13-year-old little sister, embarks on a real-life journey looking for answers.



— CREATING SOUAD: A CONVERSATION WITH AYTEN AMIN

Joseph Fahim: We can't start our conversation without asking about the genesis of the project. How did *Souad* Come about?

Ayten Amin:

The very basic idea pretrains to the real suicide of the sister of a schoolmate that happened when I was nine-year old. The girl took time off from school in the wake of the event; when she came back, nobody ever talked about what happened, not even till we graduated.

The memory of what happened suddenly hit me while I was shooting my first film, *Villa 69* (2013), for one reason or another. I started to imagine the dead girl talking to someone virtually whom she never met, and that the sister would travel somewhere to meet him. I took this idea to [co-writer] Mahmoud Ezzat who himself was a sort of a social influencer after the 2011 Revolution and knew girls with the profile I was looking for.

I wanted the setting to be outside Cairo, particularly in the rural parts of the country which is completely under-represented in cinema. I also felt that the largely conservative rural Egypt is the perfect locale for virtual relationships where people conduct such connections for long periods of time without ever meeting.

After talking with different girls from different governorates, we finally settled on Zagazig, a city situated in the eastern part of

the Nile delta. The city feel like a strange hybrid between the urban and the rural; it has the look of the urban but in essence is more of a rural city, where highways and farmlands co-exist disharmoniously with each other. It's a city that has an identity crisis, just like all characters in the film.

The endless, aimless chatter between Souad and her friends in the first half of the film can be seen as an embodiment of the emptiness of their girls' lives. It feels especially as such when juxtaposed to Souad's conversations with Ahmed that are more pointed and dramatic.

I'm fixated on the cadence and mannerism of everyday chatter, which as you mentioned, is never represented in its raw form in Egyptian cinema. As empty and redundant this chatter is, it reveals a lot about the characters and how they live their lives.

I could see similarities with Abdellatif Kechiche in that sense. Was he an influence on you?

Very much so. The freewheeling dialogue he employs is the type I always wanted to recreate but was apprehensive of adopting simply because I was concerned that it may be deemed artistically unacceptable.

My assistant directors were shocked with the amount of chatter in the scenes; the editors were equally surprised as well. What I always told them is that I didn't want any silent contemplation; I wanted the contemplation to be within the chatter itself...within the vibrancy of the everyday life.

I didn't have any rigid pre-perceived notions that I wanted to convey; I simply wanted to explore and experiment. We improvised a lot and incorporated these improvisations within the script.

I didn't have any pre-perceived notions of where every scene would go and how would it sound and feel like, which's why we did so many takes in different locations and in diverse tones.

Because we had very limited budget, I was constantly forced to suspend shooting and go back to the editing room where I'd try different things, come up with different things and change the script accordingly. The budget restrictions turned out to be a blessing in disguise because it gave me so much freedom I may not have had with a bigger budget and with a more concrete shooting schedule.

Did casting amateur actors also give you freedom?

Absolutely. I worked with amateur actors before in my previous work but not in such extensive scale; certainly not with an entire cast comprised of non-professional performers facing the camera for the first time.

Mahmoud Ezzat and me initially conducted several auditions to get some details that would help us in the writing process. And after the script was finished, I still needed the actors to bring their personal experiences, their personal demeanors, into the written scenes. The two female leads evolved and were shaped after the actors. We rehearsed for five months prior to the start of the shooting and continued to hone the performances during the copious breaks. That allowed me and them to discover the characters along the way. None of this would've happened had I had professional actors.

I was adamant on casting girls who were not from Cairo, not just for the sake of representation, but I just wanted to see different faces from the ones I see around me in the city. Finding the male lead proved to be far more arduous than expected though. I later came to the realization that girls are more expressive of their thoughts and emotions than men; or rather more truthful in expressing themselves than men. Plenty of men auditioned for the role of Ahmed: professional



actors, non-professional actors, and influencers even. They were all coming with a static persona that prevented them from expressing themselves in a genuine way.

Another remarkable aspect of the film is the display of life in the streets – a rarity in Egyptian cinema these days where most productions are shot in studios. There is an interesting contrast between the rural Zagazig and the urban, more affluent metropolis of Alexandria; between the forced, unnatural urbanity of Zagazig and the fading glamor of what used to be the biggest cosmopolitan city in the Middle East. This contrast is also reflected in the characters: the girls are not farmers, but also not exactly urbanites; while the decadence of Alexandria is a deeply-rooted characteristic of Ahmed's persona.

I wanted to show both cities as they are, in their raw forms. The fact that the actors are amateurs helped the camera to move smoothly and blend in the street without being stopped. The look of both cities are vastly different; their colors are different. The sky in Alexandria is more clearer and bluer than the more foggy, more polluted Zagazig for instance. Same with diverse shades of greens of the trees in both.

This rawness is also reflected in the sound design. The incessant background noise, and how it varies from Alexandria to Zagazig, is an integral competent of delineating that difference, while also underlining how little personal space the characters possess.

Absolutely. The noise in both cities are different. In Zagazig, it's mainly composed of the loud babble of the neighbors and the kids in the street. In Alexandria, it's more of car horns and loud rapid common – far more industrial in tenor than Zagazig. Even the prayer's call is different in sound between the two cities.

There's a stylistic flourish in the use of sound in the suicide scene, which stands in contrast to the general, more natural aural design of the picture:

Several scenes in the film are punctuated with moments where the sound goes off, primarily for Souad and on occasion with Rabab in the second half of the film, for a few seconds to indicate how each momentarily disappear inside their heads; to indicate how they both feel certain things but cannot express.



This use of sudden silence is also used to indicate Souad's emotional imbalance – the imbalance that would later lead to her suicide. In the suicide scene, this temporary suspension of sound is underlined in a more obvious, more dramatic fashion. It's also the first time when the camera, which has been strictly anchored to Souad's perspective, starts following another character (Rabab).

A central preoccupation of the film is virtual relationships and how they give the impression, or rather the delusion, of erasing class barriers in a country where nearly every aspect of life is governed by class. The virtual space also appears to be the sole personal space where the girls can be whoever they wish to be.

I am obsessed and fascinated with how the internet has changed our relationships with one another, especially in Egypt where there's very little space for people to be as they actually are. This is a country where the moment you step out of your apartment door, you're forced to don a different persona, especially if you're a woman. This is something I share with Souad and Rabab despite our differences: as a woman in Egypt, you're forced to adopt a different persona to protect yourself...to be safe.

The type of freedom the internet grants is an artificial one, a fake one, because you can't realize it in real life, which makes the process all the more frustrating. For Souad, it allows her to live a type of life she fantasizes about living; it allows her to engage in relationships she fantasizes about engaging in without feeling any guilt. Even when she has phone sex with Ahmed, she doesn't feel shame or guilt because it didn't actually happen. And while the rush of energy engaging in such fantasies can be tantalizing, it can also be crushing because it's not real. The cell phone, as such, as a primary character in the film; the fantastical portal where her alternative life entirely lies. Rabab later inherits the phone and continues the journey her sister was never brave enough to embark on; it also become her last physical connection to Souad.

All characters in the film aspire to be in more elevated classes than their own.

This is all of us in Egypt, really. We all want to be in better classes than our own. Souad wants to be where Ahmed is, even though they're both middle-class; but Ahmed's middle-class feels loftier than it actually is simply because of his Alexandrian environment. That's why I intended to show Ahmed's shabby apartment at the end of the film; because even though he may look and behave as his rich fiancé, in reality, he doesn't belong to the same class.

There doesn't seem to be a lot in common between Ahmed and Souad, which begs the question of why was he talking to her to begin with. Despite his charming exterior, he remains your average Egyptian man who needs unadulterated adoration to feel better about himself. His rich fiancé doesn't give him that, but Souad certainly does.

Indeed. Soaud's main function for Ahmed is to give him a boost of self-esteem, which he lacks and needs. He can insult and humiliate Souad because he feels superior to her, but he can't do that with his fiancé. At the end of the day though, he's a byproduct of his environment. He's not a bad person; his actions contain no intentional malice. His rotten masculinity is deeply entrenched inside him; a part of his upbringing. As such, it's difficult to hate him; it's difficult not to empathize with him.

All characters in film are imprisoned in roles they're obliged to play in order to fit in. They're all charlatans one way or another; Rabab is perhaps the most honest of the lot, even though she also lies on occasion.

JF: Were you concerned of losing your audience for not giving sufficient reasons for Souad's suicide?

I don't think there's always a tangible reason for suicide. People can be subjected to similar circumstances but act in different ways. At the end, it's up to the audience to determine whether they buy the implied reasons or not. What startled me in the test screenings though is that all women did buy those reasons; they all sensed she'd eventually take away her own life. That wasn't case with men, some of whom were more skeptical.

I didn't have a clear-cut feminist agenda behind the telling of this story. What I did want to do is tell a real, genuine story about Egyptian women; about real women with real problems. Even though there are now considerable number of female filmmakers, it's seldom in Egyptian cinema that you see such stories. I still don't understand why I don't see stories of women like me, of women like Souad and Rabab, in Egyptian cinema.

The girls, as attractive as they are, are not as glamorous or sexy as most women you see in mainstream Egyptian cinema. They don't follow the same standardized criterion of beauty ; they don't have the look of film stars in other words.

That was also intentional. I wanted to challenge those standards of beauty. And like I said, I just wanted to see normal girls who look and talk just like us.

Interview conducted by Joseph Fahim, Egyptian film critic and programmer.



— BIOGRAPHY

AYTEN AMIN

Ayten has been working in the film industry for the past 12 years. Her first short film 'Her man' was selected at Clermont-Ferrand Film Festival, and after receiving several national prizes and exclusively acquired by Canal Plus in France.

In 2013, her debut feature film 'Villa 69', received the Special Jury Award for Arab Film at Abu Dhabi Film. Throughout her career, Ayten received multiple prestigious awards and recognitions such as the Cairo Film Connection Award for Best Film or Hubert Bals Award at Durban FilmMart. She co-directed the documentary 'Tahrir 2011', that was selected at Venice International Film Festival, TIFF Toronto International Film Festival and was nominated for Best Documentary in Cinema For Peace award Berlin 2012.

In 2019 she directed 20 episodes of the hit drama "Saabe' Gaar" (The Seventh Neighbor), a 70-episode TV series.



— FILMOGRAPHY

AYTEN AMIN



FEATURE

2021	Souad
2013	Villa 69
2011	Tahrir 2011: The Good, the Bad and the Politician
2009	Spring 89 (Short)
2006	Her Man (short)



CAST

Souad	Bassant AHMED
Rabab	Basmala ELGHAIESH
Ahmed	Hussein GHANEM
Wessam	Hager MAHMOUD
Amira	Sarah SHEDID
Yara	Carol ACKAD
Mother	Mona ELNAMOURY
Father	Islam SHALABY
Aunt	Nayera EL DAHSOURY

PRODUCTION

Souad is produced by New York based Sameh Awad for VIVID REELS, marking his production debut, with co-producers including Wim Wenders, under the banner of Road Movies, Tunisia's Dora Bouchoucha at Nomadis Images (*Hedi, Dear Son*), as well as Egyptian partners Mohamed Hefzy for Cairo-based Film Clinic (*Yomeddine, Luxor*).





Production Company:	VIVID REELS
Co-production Companies	Nomadis Images, Film Clinic, Road Movies, Fig Leaf Studios
Countries of Production	Egypt, Tunisia, Germany
North America Sales Rep	Creative Artists Agency - Media Finance
Middle East Distributor	Film Clinic Indie Distribution
International Sales	Best Friend Forever

CREW

Director	Ayten Amin
Director of photography	Maged Nader
Editor	Khaled Moeit
Sound Design	Victor Bresse
Sound Design Team	Sara Kaddouri, Moustafa Shaaban, Mohab Ezz
Sound Mix	Lama Sawaya
Art Director	Chahira Mouchir
Costumes	Nayera El Dahshoury
Co-producers	Dora Bouchoucha, Lina Chaabane, Mohamed Hefzy, Wim Wenders, Léa Germain, Ayten Amin, Mark Lofty
Producer	Sameh Awad



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