Hajjan (2023, Egypt/Jordan/Saudi Arabia, 117 min.) Directed by Abu Bakr Shawky; produced by Mohamed Hefzy; with Omar Al Atawi (Mattar), Azzam Nemr (Ghanem), Toleen Barbood (Majd), Abdelmohsen Al Nemr (Jasser), Al Shaima'a Tayeb (Sara), Ibrahim El Hissawi (Abed), and Hofira The Camel. In Arabic with English Subtitles.

Filmed in Tabuk, the stunning desert area located on the Red Sea Coast of Saudi Arabia, *Hajjan* is a mix of the mythical and the realistic, magical realism and the Western, the exciting world of camel racing and a classic coming-of-age story.

After his older brother dies on the camel race track, young Matar sets off to avenge his death. He too becomes a camel jockey fighting for his life and his freedom.

At the heart of the film is the close, magical bond between Matar and his camel, Hofira. The camel owes her life to Matar, and he will be amply rewarded by her for his devotion. His success as a jockey will depend on her, but she will ultimately give him much more than mere victory in thrilling race after race.

As we would expect in a coming-of-age film, young Matar will learn and grow as a result of his experiences: from his relationship with his beloved companion, from his confrontation with the antagonist in the film (Jasser), and also from the actions of the women in the film. But he will also learn much from the desert itself, as he finds his place in it.

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From the Press Packet: Bios of the Director and Producer

Director Abu Bakr Shawky

Abu Bakr Shawky is an Egyptian-Austrian writer and director. His short documentary ***THE COLONY*** has been awarded at festivals around the world. It was followed [in 2018] by his debut feature ***YOMEDDINE [CFAF 2019],*** which premiered in the Main Competition of the Cannes Film Festival, won the Francois Chalais Award, and was nominated for the Palme d'Or. ***HAJJAN*** is his second feature film [and the second that we have the honor of showing here at CFAF].

Producer Mohamed Hefzy

Mohamed Hefzy is an Egyptian screenwriter and producer, with an evolving filmography of more than 40 feature films including worldwide acclaimed titles *Clash* (2016), *Sheikh Jackson* (2017), *Luxor* (2020), and *Feathers* (2021). He served as a jury member in various international festivals including the 2022 Sundance Film Festival and the 75th Venice International Film Festival. As of its 40th edition and for four consecutive years; Mohamed Hefzy was the appointed President of the Cairo International Film Festival.

In 2005, He founded Film Clinic; the now pioneer production house in the MENA region with a variety of commercial blockbusters & Art house films that have participated in major film festivals worldwide including Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Sundance, Toronto, and Tribeca with more than 100 international awards under its belt. Later Hefzy founded Film Clinic Indie Distribution, with a mission to create opportunities for Arab independent films within and beyond festival circuits & Co-founded Meem Creative Circle which produced Netflix's first Egyptian original series: *Paranormal*.

Hefzy was cited among 30 future leaders in film production by Screen International, headed *Variety*'s list of Ten names you need to know in the Arab Film Industry and was among *Variety*'s 500 list of the most influential people in the media industry worldwide. He was granted the Arab Cinema Personality of the Year award by the Hollywood Reporter & Arab Cinema Center. Hefzy is an official member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts And Sciences in the producers' branch. In recognition of his significant contribution to the Arab film scene, He was honored as a "Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres" from France.

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From the Press Packet: INTERVIEW WITH WRITER-DIRECTOR ABU BAKR SHAWKY

Question: Unlike your previous work, you did not initiate "Hajjan." How did the project come about?

Abu Bakr Shawky: I came on board in summer 2021. [Producer] Mohammed Hefzy called me up and said that he's working on a film project in Saudi Arab and it's about

camel racing. And that was it really. There was no story; no specific guideline. I was intrigued by the idea since we had a lot of liberty to do whatever we wished.

I don't think I've seen any film about camel racing before and I always had the dream of doing my own desert epic. I knew that world a little having spent some time teaching film to young Bedouins in Jordan's Wadi Rum in 2019. Over the next year and a half, I started to write the film with [Egyptian scriptwriter] Omar Shama and [Saudi writer] Mufarrij Almajfel, and that's how the script was developed.

Q: How was the experience of working on a project for hire vs. your debut, *Yomeddine*, which you initiated?

ABS: Well, over the course of the writing, *Hajjian* became as personal to me as *Yomeddine*. What was common with *Yomeddine* is that it allowed me to dive into a world that was alien not just to me but to most people as well. What was also exciting is that it allowed me to inject Arab folklore in the story: the flying camels, the camels that are faster than everyone else, the Hajjan that's faster than everyone else…the moon and the stars and the sandstorms.

Arab folklore is a subject I'm particularly fascinated by. Historically speaking, Arab storytelling is very aural; we did not use to transmit stories in writing, it was through these shared anecdotes by the campfire. That's also how the stories became legends: true stories are passed on from one person to another, and each person mixes it up a little before they're completely transformed into these fantastical yarns fifty years later. We are a largely storytelling community that relies a lot on aural tradition – this facet of Arab culture is thoroughly underrepresented in cinema. The same goes with our literary heritage: the parables, the stories, and especially the poetry.

What was also intriguing is the form we ended up choosing to combine these elements together. *Hajjian* is essentially a Western realized from an Arab perspective. At heart of the film is the tale of a young innocent boy who runs into this monumental beast and restores order into his town. This is the basic premise of most Westerns.

Q: What shaped the story? Going to the desert and finding inspiration there? Did you already have a concept in mind before you started spending time in the wilderness?

ABS: It was a mix of both. I already had some ideas from my experience in Wadi Rum. Spending time in the Saudi desert got me acquainted with the language and terms that their inhabitants use and the way they interact with each other. It's there, in northwestern Saudi in particular, where I learned about the concept of "Namous" – the social honor – which would shape a significant part of the story.

Q: As an Egyptian, did you face any challenges in the writing or direction of this inherently Saudi story?

ABS: The accent was certainly difficult to get my head wrapped around given how extra thick it is in Tabuk, the northwestern part of Saudi where the film set and shot in. Even the urban Saudis find it difficult understanding the accent. The experience was akin to directing a foreign-language film at time you don't necessarily understand everything they're saying, but you do know that they're reciting the words in the script. We also had a dialect coach to make sure the other actors who were not from Tabuk got the accent right.

Q: There's a great kinship between *Yomeddine* and *Hajjan*. Both involve kids having convoluted relationships with adult figures and who embark on treacherous journey that changes their lives. Both touch upon intergenerational relationships; both are coming-of-age stories of sorts.

ABS: I never actively thought of recreating something similar to "Yomeddine." I was more fascinated by the culture of the cameleers and the culture around them. That was the main impetus of the project. I can now see that both films share some commonalities; unlike *Yomeddine*, though, the journey of Matar is not of his own volition. In *Yomeddine*, Obama willingly tags along in Beshay's quest, whereas Matar is almost a passive character forced into this extraordinary situation that he must deal with.

Q: Tell us more about your cinematic influences. Not only does *Hajjian* hark to classic westerns, but the theme of vengeance and the sports framework it's placed under is also reminiscent of the noir films of the '40's and '50's.

ABS: I feel that some of the themes in the film transcend the western genre: Love, hate, betrayal, vengeance…these are all universal themes that could be set anywhere and within any genre. Vengeance for me is a more powerful drive than love by the way.

I did indeed look at a lot of film noirs and westerns though while making *Hajjan*. I was particularly struck by the '90ies revisionist westerns of Clint Eastwood. The neo-westerns share the same epic feel as their classical predecessors, but I always felt they were more character driven, and certainly darker in tone. The world they traverse is utterly chaotic; nobody is clean, nobody is playing by the rules, and everyone has something to hide. That's the direction we mostly took.

Q: And visually?

ABS: The desert informed our visual structure. The desert gives you so many ideas and opportunities. We were lucky to have been able to shoot in places that were almost untouched before – unfeatured in any film before. The desert is no mere backdrop…it is an integral character of the story.

The mountains in the northwestern region are quite similar to those in Wadi Rum where a lot of Hollywood productions are shot. Unlike Wadi Rum, the desert in Tabuk and Neom used to be under water millions of years ago, so their look and texture is very different: they're very steep, extremely high, extremely sharp at the top. It goes without saying that we didn't need to build anything; all we did was simply capture it on camera.

Q: *Hajjan* also has a very different look than *Yomeddine*. The latter is quite intimate and small in scale, whereas *Hajjan* has this epic, larger-than-life feel to it. It's an action movie in essence – there's an element of *Ben Hur* to it.

ABS: The look of *Hajjian* is indeed very different to *Yomeddine* which had more of a documentary approach to it. The use of non-actors and handheld camera shooting is the complete opposite of what we did in *Hajjian*; we were always on a tripod, always sticking to steady imagery. *Hajjian* has a slow burn feel to it; it's all about gazes and looks and how people converse and react to one another. That's what generates intensity.

It's funny that you mention *Ben Hur* because it was indeed one of the first films that came to mind when I started prepping for "Hajjan." For the race scenes, we actually

tilted towards the direction of *Mad Max*. We approached every race differently: the first is somewhat gritty, where get to see flashes of what had happened if not the entire race. In the second one, we largely adhered to Matar's point of view, showing a more structured perspective of the race with a beginning, middle and an end. The other two are completely different from the other one.

The racing scenes were shot in a raw, intense fashion. We designed the races to be an integral part of the storytelling and not a mere action element. I wasn't interested in making an action film whereby the action is presented in snippets without geographical orientation or cohesion. I wanted to tell the story through the action.

Q: Was it more exciting or challenging for you to do the visual effects on camera à la Nolan or George Miller rather than using CGI?

ABS: I wasn't really interested in using CGI. We do have CGI in the film but it was only used for little additions or subtractions. I was more interested in making the races look as real as possible. First of all, using CGI for the race scenes wouldn't have felt right. We made a point in putting the camera inside the track instead of being outside observing the action, which would've diluted their intensity.

I didn't want to cut a lot, but naturally you're shackled with the limitations at hand, be it in the behavior of the animals or the constraints of the budget. We did not have an unlimited budget with which we could shoot the races for 50 days with five cameras. *Hajjian* is a Hollywood-sized film with a very indie budget. We were cash-strapped on several occasions and had to find solution for things that were not working.

Q: You worked with kids before in *Yomeddine*. How was directing the kids in *Hajjian*?

ABS: It was a very interesting process. I have already worked before with non-actors in *Yomeddine*, which took three months to train them. Omar Alatawi, who plays Matar, was such a natural talent. We went through the normal casting process of searching for a boy who can both ride camels and who is from Tabuk, and it was not easy to find an actor with such a profile. Omar had a noticeable innocence; his face was very cinematic. We sent him to an acting workshop for a week and he came back ready for the film.

Q: How do you position *Hajjian* with your young cinematic oeuvre?

ABS: *Hajjian* really came out of nowhere. I was in development hell prior for several years for another film that I was trying to do before taking *Hajjian* on. The way I see it now is that I want to try to do something different with each film. I want every new film to be completely different from the ones I've done before; I don't want to rehash the same ideas or forms. There's a lot of movies I want to make; there's a lot of different genres I want to tackle. I want to keep surprising people.

You can find another interesting interview with the director here:
https://variety.com/2023/film/festivals/yomeddine-abu-bakr-shawky-camel-epic-hajjan-1235823976/