

'You will die at 20:' Cursed boy's Sudanese struggles mix fantasy, superstition



CHENNAI: Sudanese director Amjad Abu Alala's debut film, "You Will Die at 20," which premiered at Venice, winning the Lion of the Future Award, and El-Gouna, where it clinched the Golden Star for best narrative feature, has all the magical qualities of a fantasy, tipped in superstition.

Mounted with almost ethereal sensitivity with some lovely color tones of the Sudanese landscape, the movie explores the dilemma of a family whose child may not live beyond 20.

In a land where blind beliefs rule, often cynicism overwhelms logic and reason. And with mind-blowing landscapes along the Nile, Alala takes us into the bitter-sweet story of Muzamil (Moatasem Rashed, later Asjad Mohamed).



Sudanese Amjad Abu Alala directed "You Will Die at 20." (Supplied)

His mother, Sakina (Islam Mubarak), takes him for a blessing soon after he is born, and at the religious ceremony a dancer in a trance stops counting at 20. The sheikh, who gives his benediction, states the child will die on reaching 20. Sakina is shattered, and the boy's father, who cannot contemplate seeing his son die so young, leaves the country to find work.

Muzamil is aware of his fate and faces the ridicule of other children with unbelievable stoicism. His mother tries to keep him out of harm's way and stops him going to school. But he manages to attend Qur'an classes, and proves a master at memorizing it.

However, his job with the village shopkeeper sees him befriend a cynical man, who encourages him to question his fate. The man also introduces him to cinema, opening up a whole new world for Muzamil.



The movie's latest premier was at El-Gouna Film Festival. (Supplied)

Unfortunately, Alala veers into unnecessary terrain where we see a religious man asking Muzamil to remove his T-shirt. The director just leaves this scene hanging. And he skews into another inexplicable zone by introducing Naiema (Bonna Khalid), a vivacious young woman who falls in love with Muzamil. Does she merely pity him? We are given no clue.

Yet, the splendid visual design makes up for the somewhat slipshod script. There is also something very personal about the film, drawing on Alala's experiences in Sudan where he spent five years of his childhood.

"I think my relationship to Sudan, my memory and my childhood — it's all there," he once said. The rest of the movie is based on a short story by Sudanese writer Hammour Ziada.
