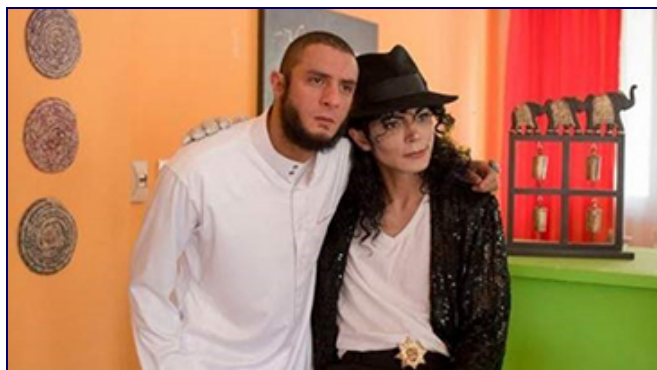


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By Gautaman Bhaskaran
South Asia Editor



El Gouna Film Festival opens with Sheikh Jackson.

The first edition of the El Gouna Film Festival started in style on Friday evening with a star-studded party where just about who's who from the Arab cinema world turning up in an exquisitely decorated venue by the Red Sea, an expanse of water which once upon a time parted to allow Moses and his fellow Israelites to escape from the pursuing Egyptians.

Today, there are no pursuits of this kind. Instead what we have is something more sinister. But on the luminous grand evening at El Gouna, nobody thought of Moses and his men, or the way the Red Sea played friend and ally. With clinking glasses and cocktails flowing, the inaugural ceremony took off with a band of men and women singing Arabic songs setting the mood for the opening movie, Amr Salama's Sheikh Jackson.

Believe it or not, the plotline was amazingly novel, and talks about the unusual and intense cult following that Michael Jackson enjoyed in the Arab world. His songs and albums were passed around in utmost secrecy even as some of the regimes in the region looked down upon and banned pop music. The ghost of Jackson, who had toyed with the idea of converting to Islam, permeates every frame of the film, deliriously dramatic created by Saudi-born Egyptian auteur, Salama. The movie is Egypt's official submission for the 2018 foreign-language Oscars.

Sheikh Jackson uses its canvas to talk about compassion, passion, friction between generations and family dysfunctionality. Sheikh Khaled Hani (a gripping performance by Ahmad Alfishawy) leads a joyless life – sleeping on the floor to remind himself of the inevitability of death, insisting that his wife wear full veil, and rebuking his daughter, Beyonce, about the perils of diabolic music and other forms of

pop culture.

But then the news of Michael Jackson's death shocks Sheikh beyond imagination, and in a flashback we are told that he was an almost obsessive fan of the pop star. Though, Sheikh was mocked by his classmates for copying Jackson's hairstyle and dance steps, though he was admonished by his father for following the “drag queen”, the boy happily found himself at the centre of female attention because of his likeness to Jackson.

Strangely, Jackson's death pushes the adult Sheikh to ponder over his faith and beliefs. It also brings back memories of his mother's death, his father's arrogance and his own failed school romance. Sheikh begins to hallucinate and finds himself being visited by Jackson's ghost – till he walks into a counselling session to rid himself of the nightmare.

An interesting movie, Sheikh Jackson layers itself with some of today's dilemmas, especially those that relate to religion and the way it causes animosity and angst. Often, presented in a lighthearted vein, but carrying a meaningful message, Sheikh Jackson seemed like an apt work to push eight-days of cinema in a little town called El Gouna – which has till now been a haven for mostly European tourists flocking for the sun and sand in an attempt to forget the woes of the world.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran is covering the first edition of the El Gouna Film Festival in Egypt)

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Gautaman Bhaskaran is a veteran film critic and writer who has covered Cannes and other major international festivals, like Venice, Berlin, Montreal, Melbourne, and Fukuoka over the past two decades. He has been to Cannes alone for 15 years. He has worked in two of India's leading English newspapers, The Hindu and The Statesman, and is now completing an authorized biography of India's auteur-director, Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Penguin International will publish the book, whose research was funded by Ford Foundation.



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