

Film review: Fact meets fiction in ambitious drama ‘Yomeddine’



- Yomeddine is a touching road-trip drama
- It steers clear of becoming a celebration of disfigurement and poverty

EL GOUNA: It takes phenomenal guts for a first-time director to tackle a subject such as leprosy, with an actual victim of the disease in the lead role.

A. B. Shawky’s “Yomeddine,” which screened at the El Gouna Film Festival this week, is a touching road-trip drama starring Rady Gamal, a real-life leprosy survivor. The director met Gamal at a leper colony north of Cairo when he made a short documentary, “The Colony,” in 2009. He could not have found a better actor. Gamal is not ashamed of his disease or disability and uses his wrinkled face with marvelous ease to express his joys and pains.

Gamal stars as Beshay and when first we see him, his gnarled hands rummaging through a garbage bin, we are shocked. When his mentally unstable wife Ireny (Shoq Emara) dies, Gamal decides to find his estranged family. He gets into his donkey cart and, along with young friend Obama (Ahmed Abdelhafiz), embarks on the journey of a lifetime. Since ancient times, lepers have been treated as outcasts (as we saw in most

brutal form in William Wyler's 1959 classic "Ben-Hur"), and not much has changed for Beshay in the present day. He is looked down upon and kept at arm's length by people unduly fearful of contracting the disease. The road from Cairo, where Beshay begins his journey, to Luxor, where the family that abandoned him lives, is filled with adventures, some happy, some not.

Although the movie has several high points, which probably helped it earn its competition slot at the Cannes Film Festival in May, the plot is weak in places, becoming boringly predictable, and some scenes simply seem unnecessary. For instance, was there really a need for flashbacks and dream sequences, which appear to stick out like a sore thumb?

The climax, meanwhile, seems forced as Shawky seems to have taken the easy way out. If the idea was to draw the viewer into an emotional trap, it does not quite work. However, "Yomeddine" does steer clear of becoming a celebration of disfigurement and poverty.

