

## Plain Talk

By Mursi Saad El-Din



I do not know why we always take those close to us for granted. Whether relatives or friends, we tend to think of them as just being there. We may love and cherish them while paying very little heed to what they do.

This is the case of one of my closest friends, Nagui Riad. Nagui is a successful film director who has directed a number of films, both documentary and feature. I have seen several, yet the human relation between us always overshadowed his artistic achievements. That has been the case until I was pleasantly surprised to receive a beautifully produced book about Nagui and his films.

I have known Nagui for over 30 years. I first knew him as one of my students in the English Section of the Faculty of Arts, Cairo University. After he received his BA in English language and literature he joined the Institute of Cinema of the Academy of Arts and was one of the first batch of the Institute's graduates.

The book, apart from an introduction by Sayed Khamis and a preface by the filmmaker's brother Nader Riad, contains a survey of the 28 films Nagui has directed until now. It would be difficult, indeed impossible, to give even a bird's eye view of the films; thus I have selected some which I believe are of his best.

Nagui is preoccupied with Pharaonic Egypt and a number of his films deal with aspects of life in ancient Egypt. One such film has received a number on international prizes including the first prize at the Paris International Festival of Short Films and the first prize at the Cork International Film Festival. It is available with commentaries in Arabic, English, French, German, Spanish.

The film presents the fate of the soul as portrayed in the Book of the Dead and in its emphasis on the developing concept of the individual conscience illustrates how ancient Egyptian religion paved the way to the three major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

A number of films about Pharaonic monuments reveal the director's almost obsessive interest in the past civilisation. Yet together with these Pharaonic films, Nagui has directed a number of others delineating events and scenes from Egypt's more recent history. His film Friend of Life dealt with the episode of Denshwai and was based on The Hanging of Zahran, a poem by Salah Abdel-Sabour entitled. Zahran was one of Egyptian farmers hanged by the British in the Denshaw incident.



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Another film which depicts an important event which links the Pharaonic past with modern times, deals with the festival of Amon held at Luxor. The festival is held every year and marks the entrance of the Pharaoh and the chief priest into the Karnak temple to perform a secret ritual in the temple shrine by the bank of the sacred lake. The Pharaoh is transported in a holy boat, carried on the shoulders of his priests, to make his yearly appearance to the public who waited outside the temple. Elements of the ceremony survived to become a thanksgiving for the harvest, with which the ten day celebration coincided.

Two films Nagui has directed deal with modern figures and scenes. Witness of the Age is about the life and struggle of the famous Egyptian writer and journalist Mustafa Amin. Apart from the documentary scenes there are many photos depicting his life on which Amin himself provides the commentary.

Nagui's latest film is called Hymn to Cairo. It is a brief survey of the city of Cairo since its early beginnings, more than a thousand years ago, and takes the viewer down streets and alleyways, and inside monuments, which are allowed to tell their own story.



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