

Obituary:

Death of an eye

FILMMAKER, director and photographer Nagui Riad passed away last week after a rich and multifaceted career in the arts. Riad was among the first class of students to attend the Higher Cinema Institute, after earning a degree in English literature from Cairo University's Faculty of Arts.

According to critic Sayed Khamis, Riad's principal concern was "Egyptian memory," which he set out to document from the beginning of his cinematic career. Almost as soon as he completed his studies at the Institute, Riad produced *Sadiq Al-Haya* (Life's Friend), a documentary based on Salah Abdel-Sabour's poem "*Shanq Zahran*" (The Hanging of Zahran), which depicts a real life chapter in the epic of the Egyptian people's national struggle.

His next offering, *Ka*, documented the comings and goings of one of the ancient Egyptian religion's most interesting entities. In a series of documentaries focused on ancient Egypt, Riad encapsulated a great deal of historical and cultural knowledge, linking past to present in a heartfelt and ongoing affirmation of the spirit of unity and longevity that defines the Egyptian character irrespective of religion.

His initial involvement in English literature drove him in the direction of drama, an arena in which he worked as translator and director; he also began -- in the 1960s -- to produce his (often short) film adaptations of the works of Naguib Mahfouz, Youssef Gawhar and Ihsan Abdel-Quddous.

By this stage Riad had already produced his first full-length feature, the popular *Thalathat Wujouh lil-Hubb* (Three Faces of Love), on which he collaborated with a fellow institute graduate, cameraman Mohsen Nasr.

He later produced the two documentaries for which he is best known: *Shahed ala El-Asr* (Witness to the Age) about the well-known journalist Mustafa Amin, and *Tarnima lil-Qahira* (A Hymn for Cairo), a rich and varied tribute to the city, based on Mustafa El-Tarabili's seminal book *Shawari' Iaha Tarikh* (Streets with their own History).

Like Shadi Abdel-Salam, Riad's interest in topics that may otherwise be branded Orientalist or even touristy does not reflect a desire for material success, but a courageous confrontation with those aspects of life that, to him, formed the essence of being Egyptian. To see one of his films on the Luxor temples, for example, is a rare treat -- not so much because of the film's own technical and artistic merit but because of this open, focussed and genuinely appreciative perspective. His was not the style of the chance purveyor or even the disinterested commentator, but of a profoundly engaged participant who, in depicting his society's heritage, was in search of a sense of self.

Riad is known to have been a sociable, helpful and giving individual, and his life in cinema constitutes but a small part of his many-sided and influential contributions.

For his wife, Nadia Sami, he was someone capable of "providing you with a sense of security and an ability to confront", as "a quiet yet purposeful breeze, in whose company you experienced the value of effortless refinement". His brother Nader Riad described Nagui as "life's friend" in an illustrated biography of the same name.

For his close friend, *Al-Ahram Weekly's* Mursi Saadeddin, he represented "the dearest friend, a man of extreme sensitivity and passionate emotions that make you feel as if he is there to look after you personally... As an artist," on the other hand, "he reflects the spirit of Egypt -- pure, loving, tolerant, a mixture of ancient Egyptians, Copts and Muslims..."

Riad's films took part in numerous festivals around the world, earning him countless awards and decorations, as well as a great deal of excellent press.

By Youssef Rakha

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