



NEW RELEASES

Souad

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Movies about suicide too often make it seem as if their protagonists' every action leads inevitably toward that end, as if they're narrowly a product of their environment. Other films make the opposite mistake, surrendering to the characters' opaqueness and to the stigma that surrounds mental illness, so that secrets and impulses are impossible to puzzle out. In her nuanced debut feature, *Souad*, however, the Egyptian director Ayten Amin steers clear of such pitfalls. She delicately balances her story, by immersing viewers in a young woman's quirks and passions first, and only then slowly pulling back to reframe what has happened.

That young woman, Souad (Bassant Ahmed), is by most counts ordinary. She prepares for her school exams, while in her free time chatting with her girlfriends about her country's moral strictures, but also about frilly lingerie and men. In its intense camaraderie, the scene in which Souad and girlfriends dance sexily strongly recalls Céline Sciamma's *Girlhood* (2014). Maged Nader's intimate handheld camera is patient but never too clingy. Meanwhile, the long takes and rolling dialogue make the most of the young women's rant-like chatter. Both aspects deepen the overall sense of comfort; for a long beat, it seems as if Souad's family ties and friendships are robust enough to help her resist any psychological tear.

The first signs of trouble come in flashes, mostly around gender roles. Souad's father is a brooding presence, bossing her around in a few curt exchanges as she helps with domestic chores. A scene in which Souad brags to a stranger on the bus that she might soon be getting married plays out against the background of her girlfriends receiving marriage proposals from well-off suitors.

But when Souad finally has her angry exchanges by phone and message with her alleged fiancé, it quickly becomes clear that her imminent marriage is a brittle fantasy, to the point that Souad soon demands that her absent long-distance beau delete all her pictures (though at least some of these demands seem like she might be bluffing, merely playing it tough).

Amin and her co-writer Mahmoud Ezzat pull off a great feat in fleshing out Souad's behaviour: she is spirited yet disquietingly short-tempered, strong-willed, but possibly too rancorous to let grievances go. Whatever the reasons might be, her finale is more than the sum of any preceding acts; a brutal, startling caesura, which the film leaves to feel ruthlessly abrupt.

Before then, Amin doesn't dwell on Souad's darkening mindset. Hers is not a classic romantic tale of a spurned lover wrapped in a spiralling revenge fantasy (think Goethe's *Werther* and his endless imitators). Instead, the story is filtered through Souad's life at home, increasingly through her younger sister, Rabab (Basmala Elghaiesh). It is Rabab, played by Elghaiesh with laconic poise, who will be the last to see her sister. It is she who will travel

from their small town, Zagazig, to Cairo to meet the feckless Ahmed (Hussein Ghanem), who might – or might not – be responsible for her sister’s death.

The ambivalence about where to assign guilt is the film’s theme and its narrative strength. When Rabab finally faces Ahmed, who turns out to have a steady girlfriend in Cairo, she is not impressed. Ahmed is a social media designer, and could have just as easily engineered the mystique of his romance with Souad as he designs campaigns for Instagram. But it’s too easy to lay the blame solely on him, and Amin wisely refuses to turn him into a villain. Instead, the 13-year-old Rabab (though she lies that she’s older) must experience her sister’s infatuation for herself.

During the long night that she spends in Ahmed’s company, in Cairo, Rabab grows exponentially in will power and spirit. Far from being a timid, naive young girl, she smartly takes stock of Ahmed’s emotional and character failings, as well as his genuine empathy. And as much as it seems shocking, at first, that Amin has Rabab get so close to the one man she has every reason to hate or maybe fear, this storyline gamble pays off handsomely.

Ahmed can’t help Rabab mourn, but during their wandering, while listening to his stories, and, at one point, imitating her sister’s voice – revealing Souad’s humour but also her stark intransigence – Rabab emerges as a remarkable protagonist: someone whose insistence on mourning as an exploration, a prelude to her own womanhood rather than a closure, brings her closer to the one she’s lost.

Ela Bittencourt, *Sight and Sound*, September 2021

Ayten Amin

The Egyptian director was featured in the ‘Newcomers’ selection of 2020’s cancelled Cannes festival with *Souad*, which she co-wrote with her regular collaborator, the poet and social media influencer Mahmoud Ezzat. The film premiered in Berlin this year.

Amin was born in the Egyptian city of Alexandria and is based in Cairo, where she studied film and gained her first experience directing and producing short films. In Egypt she is best known for the TV series *Saabe’ Gaar* (2017-18), a huge commercial success, but Amin insists that cinema is ‘the main reason I became a director’. Her first success in European festivals came with *Tahrir 2011* (2011), a documentary shot during Egypt’s popular uprising of that year. This was followed by lighthearted drama *Villa 69* (2013) and then *Souad*, whose lengthy pre-production began in 2015. The film follows two sisters and their interactions with a love interest over social media and in person; its remarkable authenticity comes from lengthy interviews Amin undertook with Ezzat’s social media followers.

Thomas Flew, *Sight and Sound*, September 2021

SOUAD

A film by: Ayten Amin

Production Companies: Vivid Reels, Nomadis Images, Film Clinic, Road Movies Filmproduktion GmbH, Fig Leaf Studios

Executive Producer: Ahmed Zayan

Producer: Sameh Awad

Co-producers: Dora Bouchoucha, Lina Chaabane, Mohamed Hefzy, Wim Wenders, Léa Germain, Ayten Amin, Mark Lotfy

Executive Director: Morad Mostafa

1st Assistant Director: Mostafa Ihab

Script Supervisors: Ranya Roshdy, Fatima Fawzi

Screenplay: Mahmoud Ezzat, Ayten Amin

Cinematography: Maged Nader

Editing: Khaled Moeit

Art Direction: Chahira Mouchir

Costume Design: Nayera El Dahshoury

Colour Grading: Belal Hibri

Sound Design: Victor Bresse

Sound Design Team: Sara Kaddouri,

Moustafa Shaaban, Mohab Ezz

Sound Recording: Moustafa Shaaban

Sound Mixing: Lama Sawaya

Cast

Bassant Ahmed (*Souad*)

Basmala Elghaiesh (*Rabab*)

Hussein Ghanem (*Ahmed*)

Hager Mahmoud (*Wessam*)

Sarah Shedid (*Amira*)

Carol Ackad (*Yara*)

Mona Elnamoury (*mother*)

Islam Shalaby (*father*)

Nayera El Dahshoury (*aunt*)

Egypt/Tunisia/Germany 2021

96 mins

A BFI release

THE TIME IS NEW:

SELECTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY ARAB CINEMA

The Man Who Sold His Skin (L'Homme qui a vendu sa peau)

Sat 4 Sep 17:40 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Kaouther Ben Hania);

Thu 16 Sep 20:50

200 Meters

Tue 7 Sep 20:50; Wed 15 Sep 18:10

As Above, So Below (Kama fissamaa', kathalika ala al-ard)

Wed 8 Sep 20:45; Fri 1 Oct 18:10 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with

director Sarah Francis)

143 Sahara Street (143 rue du désert)

Sat 11 Sep 11:30; Mon 20 Sep 18:15

It Must Be Heaven

Sat 11 Sep 20:40; Mon 27 Sep 18:00; Mon 4 Oct 14:30

Let's Talk Ehkeely

Mon 13 Sep 18:00 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Marianne Khoury);

Tue 5 Oct 20:50

Tlameess

Tue 14 Sep 20:40; Thu 30 Sep 18:00

Talking About Trees

Mon 20 Sep 14:30; Mon 27 Sep 20:45; Sun 3 Oct 18:00

You Will Die at Twenty (Satamoto fel eshreen)

Thu 23 Sep 20:30 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Amjad Abu Alala);

Sat 2 Oct 14:20

Narrative Encounters: Shorts Programme

Fri 24 Sep 20:40; Tue 5 Oct 18:10

Adam

Sat 25 Sep 14:20; Mon 4 Oct 20:50

Abou Leila

Sun 26 Sep 18:00; Sat 2 Oct 20:30

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 6 Sep 18:00

Black to Front + Q&A with special guests TBA

Tue 7 Sep 18:00

Doctor Who: The Evil of the Daleks (animated)

Sun 12 Sep 12:00

Preview: Sweetheart + Q&A with director Marley Morrison

Mon 13 Sep 17:50

Prime Suspect: 30th Anniversary (First Series Complete Screening)

Sun 19 Sep 14:00

Lynda La Plante in Conversation

Sun 19 Sep 18:45

60th Anniversary: Whistle Down the Wind

+ actor Hayley Mills in Conversation

Sun 3 Oct 12:00

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

Now, Voyager From Fri 6 Aug

Censor From Fri 20 Aug

I'm Your Man (Ich bin dein Mensch) From Fri 20 Aug

Souad From Fri 27 Aug

Wildfire From Fri 3 Sep

The Maltese Falcon From Fri 17 Sep

(preview + extended intro on Wed 8 Sep 17:50)

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore.

Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780