



Lina Attalah in conversation with Ibrahim El Batout

*In the winter of 2009 a huge billboard on the flyover linking downtown Cairo and its eastern suburbs showed the poster of the movie *Ain Shams* (*Eye of the Sun*). Unlike movies that traditionally make it to this billboard, *Ain Shams* is a star-less, low budget picture bravely introduced into the lives of random Egyptians. Around it lies a context of a thriving independent film-making scene that struggles to develop itself amidst prevalent facts of commercial production rules regarding funding and distribution. Ibrahim El Batout, the man behind *Ain Shams*, tries to reverse those prevalent models of production. He tells us his story of before he even set foot in this contentious field.*

Lina Attalah: You once told me that, after having worked for 18 years in war zones as a documentary maker for news outlets, you've realized that people are quite alike and what they are fighting for is nonsense. Is that what made you leave the world of documentaries?

Ibrahim El Batout: There are various reasons. I started doing this work in January 1987. From that time on, I walked into a very long corridor where I have seen nothing but conflicts and wars. The amazing fact is that technology has changed, the camera that I have been carrying on my shoulders has changed, but what I kept on recording for those 18 years was the same: people were killed, raped or forced to leave. In those 18 years I have covered 12 wars. At the end it was the war in Iraq. I was doing a documentary on mass graves and it was nominated for the Rory Peck Sony International Impact Award. I went to London to receive the award in October 2003 at the London Film Academy. There they projected all the films that were nominated for the award. They showed films from Afghanistan, Africa, Palestine and my film from Iraq. I felt my CV was portrayed in front of my eyes on a screen. They read the names of all the journalists, cameramen, soundmen and other people who died while working in the field. Five of them were my friends. The reason I was willing to put my life at risk is the belief that these pictures have a value, that what we are telling from these warzones will bring change at some point. But that was an illusion. My role as a filmmaker in these situations did not bring change. It might even have reinforced these situations by making them an item of consumption. You switch your channel from a music video to a news channel showing the picture of a shot child. I felt that not only I am not doing anything positive, but I might actually be doing something negative that has some voyeurism.

LA: I always hear this critical narrative from you, but it does not seem to take into consideration broader premises such as information is power.

IB: It's not power anymore. We are just watching things happening and we're not doing anything about it. We take the information, we consume it, tell others, and carry on living. We are occupied with our day-to-day survival issues.

LA: So that's an entry point to fiction?

IB: No. Coming back to Egypt and deciding not to go to warzones anymore, I had a huge reservoir of energy. What would I do with it? All that energy to stand before a sniper and shoot, to see the death of your friend and move on, to go to Rwanda and Chechnya and what not... It's a lot of energy. The way out

was to make fiction. It was also like a healing process; for me to be able to sit, look into your eyes and talk to you. It's an arena where I can use this energy to transform it into something else that would be useful for me and others.

LA: So you go on and do Ithaki and it receives a lot of reviews. The common review is that although you've stepped out of documentary making, the picture is still a docu-drama. You also receive a critical review of it being an elitist picture that doesn't touch the life of average Egyptians. And of course, for me it felt like an interesting venture into personal lives narrated through the power of self-expression. What is your version of the story?

IB: It's much simpler than that. Ithaki was a trial to find out how I can make a film with no budget. I wrote a script called The Black Hole before. I was trying to find a producer to do it, but no one was interested although I was told it was a good script. I thought there must be a way to make a film I want to make. What are the main challenges? Money? How about a zero budget film? I have a camera and a group of friends. What kind of story can I tell with a camera and a group of friends? I wrote a very loose story. It became Ithaki, a 70-minute film that created all what you mentioned. People didn't get it right away because it was different from what they are used to seeing. At that point it was time to try something different, like Ain Shams.

LA: And Ain Shams came after the time of experimenting. You were a bit more conceptual. For one, you addressed the criticism that you were exposed to in Ithaki with regard to elitism. But also you decided to step over the conventional non-profit viewing spaces for independent films in Egypt and to bring Ain Shams to regular commercial movie theatres. It's clearly a different project.

IB: Look, Ithaki proved that I can make a film with no budget. Now I wanted to go for a bigger challenge. I wanted to make a film with no budget and with no stars and yet to be able to screen it in movie theatres. I wanted to complete the circle. I wanted people to buy tickets and get inside movie theatres to watch the movie. If we manage to complete this film-making cycle, it could be the grounds for other people to have similar experiences. Artistically, Ithaki is closer to my heart. I like characters telling their stories and giving you revealing moments whereby you feel rather than understand. But people are not slaves to your artistic fantasies. You need to give them something that they can understand. The idea is to create layers: one layer that is understandable to everyone and other layers for people who want to go deeper. There is a language



Ibrahim El Batout on the phone in his apartment in Cairo
Photo Credit: Hossam El Hamalawy

that can bring all those layers together. This is what Ain Shams managed to do. The question is how I can reconcile my artistic ambition with everyday life. This is what I tried to do in Ain Shams, and to my great surprise, it worked.

*LA: It reminds me of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's **Le Petit Prince**, which I read in kindergarten, then in high school, and then in political theory class at university. This is successful multi-layering.*

IB: Exactly.

*LA: I don't know exactly what happened with the selling of **Ain Shams**, but there was a lot of brouhaha. I want you to tell me what happened, but more importantly what did you want out of this move and how did you feel about it?*

IB: I raised my stakes high. I wanted everything out of Ain Shams. I wanted to make a film with a very limited budget, with no permissions, with no script, and I wanted this film to be screened in theatres. This was my target from day one. Each of those components is a huge goal in and of itself and needs years of hard work. But I wanted all this to happen. I took it step by step. We started shooting in May 2006 and it took us until March 2007 to finish shooting and editing. Critic Samir Farid saw the film and took it to Nouredin Sayyigh in Morocco, who liked the movie and offered to transform it into a 35-millimeters-film. This was in mid-2007. In January 2008, the film was ready. We wanted to bring copies back to Egypt, but the censor disapproved, saying that they don't know anything about it. They asked me to write a script of the film, present it to the censor, and when they approved the copies could be shipped to Cairo. I thought it wasn't a good solution because it was based on the idea that, in order to do a

film, I have to write a script and get the government's approval of it. This is totally against freedom of creativity and expression. It's like getting permits to shoot in the streets that I walk in everyday. Those streets are mine. So I showed the film to a group of five journalists and all of them wrote about it in a campaign to support the film, and it mushroomed. When the censor saw I was determined not to write a script, they said the film could pass as a Moroccan picture. That was also unacceptable. I was lucky at that time because the film got nominations in the Taormina and the Rotterdam film festivals, and after a few days I came back home with two festival awards, which is not common in Egypt. The awards represented international support. In November 2008, while I was in Carthage, my producer called me and told me that the problem was solved, the film had been purchased by a distribution company, and it would be screened in theatres as an Egyptian picture. I don't know how, but the situation was suddenly totally reversed. I knew that my dream was realized. The film went to movie theatres. It proved the point that I am not living in la-la-land, that you can make a film with a low budget and go to festivals, and that you can make a film with a low budget and go to movie theatres.

LA: Now that you've hit the low budget, the prize and the theatre, what's missing?

IB: The experience has to be replicated. The next step is Ali Me'za. I am trying to copy the model of Ain Shams, but with a budget. We proved that we can make a film without a budget. How about if we have a budget? I am talking about some \$120,000. The idea here is about creating a model not just for myself but for other directors as well, trying unconventional production structures and going into untested areas.

LA: How is this possible given the prevalent monopolistic practice in Egypt whereby production companies have their own distribution channels and, most of the time, own the movie theatres? How can you penetrate into this structure without falling prey to its rules?

IB: There are two ways to do it. First, we have to make films that have a certain appeal. I am not making a film for the few intellectuals who go to cultural centers. Second, we have to create a product that is commercially viable, so I can go to those big producers who spend millions of Egyptian pounds (EGP) on movies and tell them that you can just spend a few hundred thousand pounds and you'll make EGP 3 million in revenues, thus tripling your income. Then they'll be interested in listening to me and eventually opening their theatres to me. We have to speak their language. For example, the production

of Ain Shams cost EGP 40,000. According to official records, it made EGP 500,000 in theatres and has a lot of buying offers from television channels.

LA: This is interesting. My sense is that low-budget filmmaking in Egypt is taken as an excuse for producing some mediocre pictures. Do you think there's a bit of a crisis?

IB: There is a problem in quality and in content, but those are people working in very difficult conditions. Most of them are new and still experimenting. We are still far from having a strong independent scene, but we have some seeds, and depending on what we do, those seeds can grow into tree or die out.

LA: And then the other side of the coin is the viewing culture and the aesthetic judgment of a public that is not commonly interested in independent movies.

IB: Theatres are part of a very honest and organic experience whereby viewers buy a ticket to watch a film, and if they like it they tell others, others watch the film and the picture brings a lot of money to the theatre. But filmmakers have a duty to draw those viewers by helping audiences perceive things a bit differently. For example, a filmmaker has the challenging role of explaining to his public that we are a consumerist population: We consume everything and create nothing. This can be a distant piece of information for a man occupied with his everyday life. So the idea is for this man to go out of the theatre with new ideas and thoughts. The problem with most movies is that they only serve as painkillers and do not touch on real issues. My role is to relay ideas in an accessible way without compromising my artistic integrity.