

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON



CAIRO CONSPIRACY
(Language: Arabic)

Director: Tarik Saleh, 2022. Running time: 126 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 13 March 2024.

“It would be fascinating to make a study of films that have rendered their makers persona non grata in certain countries. *Cairo Conspiracy* would certainly do the trick for Swedish-born filmmaker, Tarik Saleh, whose father was Egyptian. A ban, however, would be superfluous, because Saleh has been barred from returning to Egypt since 2017, when he offended authorities with his movie about the Arab Spring, *The Nile Hilton Incident*.

It may not take much to upset the authoritarian regime of President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, but *Cairo Conspiracy* doesn't stop there, extending its reach to Al-Azhar university, the most important school of Islamic education for Sunnis. This prestigious academy is portrayed as being rife with hypocrisy, corruption, power plays and political intrigue – just like every other university!

The movie is set in Cairo but had to be shot in Istanbul, where the Suleymaniye mosque plays the role of Al-Azhar. The story and the characters are fictional, but the portrayal of the internal security bureau and the country's most powerful religious leaders is nothing short of inflammatory. More disturbingly, it has the ring of truth.

The story is a two-hander, with a naïve new student being used as a spy by a shrewd old intelligence agent. Adam (Tawfeek Barhom) hails from a small coastal town called Manzala, where fishing seems to be the only means of subsistence. Whenever Adam tells anybody he's from Manzala they immediately reply: “Fisherman!”

It's his intellectual abilities that offer Adam a path out of this life. When he secures a scholarship to Al-Azhar, his father tells him: “God gave you a brain that thinks more than necessary.” This trait will become at first a liability, then a means of survival.

Upon arriving at the university, which often seems more like a prison or an army barracks, Adam is befriended by an older student, Zizo (Mehdi Dehbi), who shows him the local nightlife, and assures him that an energy drink is “halal”. Later we'll hear that McDonald's is also “halal”. What Adam doesn't

know is that Zizo is an informant working for Colonel Ibrahim (Fares Fares) of the security forces.

When the Grand Imam – the virtual Pope of Islam – is taken ill while addressing the students, and quickly dies, a train of secret machinations is set in motion. The shaggy-haired Ibrahim, experienced, jaded and cynical, is given the task of ensuring the new Grand Imam is a man whose views align with the government. Their choice falls on one Sheikh Beblawi (Jalal Altawil), but to get their man over the line Ibrahim needs to disqualify two more likely candidates: a blind sage, Sheikh Negm (Makram Khoury), and the militant Sheikh Durhani (Ramzi Choukair).

Zizo, who is Sheikh Negm’s assistant, wants out, but Ibrahim tells him he must find another “angel” to be his replacement. He chooses Adam and begins to groom him for the job by undermining the young man’s ideas about the school. “Your soul is still pure,” he tells him, “but every second in this place will corrupt it.”

No sooner has Zizo made this pronouncement than he is murdered. Adam is seized upon by Ibrahim and coerced by classic carrot-and-stick methods into being his new inside man. His first task is to infiltrate a cell of extremists, a process that will lead him into a web of deceit and betrayal, as the stakes get progressively higher.

In many ways, *Cairo Conspiracy*, also known as *The Boy from Heaven*, is a conventional espionage thriller which starts slowly and becomes more suspenseful with each new wrinkle added to the plot. Saleh’s innovation has been to set the story within the highest echelons of Islamic learning, an inconceivable feat for directors based in most Middle Eastern countries.

Both Adam and Colonel Ibrahim are stock characters brought to life by accomplished performances from Tawfeek Barhom and Fares Fares. The latter is especially good in his portrayal of a world-weary operative forced to take orders from his ambitious young boss, Sobhy (Moe Ayoub), who has all the traits of a psychopath. Where Ibrahim knows when it’s better to take a softly-softly approach, his fanatical superior follows a policy of “no loose ends”.

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The film also benefits from an excellent script, which won the prize for Best Screenplay at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival. The dialogue is sprinkled with

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well-chosen epigrams and references. We might expect the Koran to be an obvious source of wisdom, but it's a shock for both us and the students when Sheikh Negm begins a lecture on freedom with a quotation from "the Jewish philosopher, Karl Marx".

For Sheikh Negm this maxim: "Necessity is blind until it becomes conscious and freedom is a necessity of consciousness," is not mere rhetoric but a blueprint for action. He is the only one of the major imams whose integrity is not suspect, which makes him a danger to a government for whom truth is a sworn enemy.

Saleh would probably argue that through Sheikh Negm he shows us that Islam itself is not the target of his criticism, only those flawed beings who mouth the words of the Prophet while secretly breaking His laws. There will be many who refuse to recognise this distinction, viewing any negative portrayal of the imams as an insult to the faith.

If we take a broader view, it's clear that tensions between church and state are not peculiar to Islam. Neither are we short of examples of religious groups being corrupted by politics, as one sees in the world's most fundamentalist country, the United States, where evangelicals rallied behind the ungodly Donald Trump. Politics will always have its zealots, and religion its politicians. It's when these worlds are in perfect accord that we need to be worried."

John MacDonald, *Australian Financial Review*, May 13, 2023.

"Church and state collide in the corridors of Egypt's Al-Azhar University, where the students square off in Qur'an recital contests and the head of the Muslim Brotherhood eats Big Macs on the sly. On the prospectus it's billed as "a beacon of Islam". In reality it's a warren of dark corners, a place so thick with intrigue that even the most astute student of conspiracy thrillers may sometimes find themselves struggling to keep up.

Our hero is Adam (Tawfeek Barhom), a lowly fisherman's son who's awarded a scholarship, only to be promptly recruited as a government informant. Now he's working for Colonel Ibrahim (Fares Fares), the wily, bear-like state enforcer, wedged in between the warring factions, scared half out of his wits. Each night, he beds down in a cramped dormitory, surrounded by his fellow students. For all he knows, they might be spies and informants themselves.

Galvanised by the sudden death of the chief imam, Tarik Saleh's political saga turns progressively knottier and more claustrophobic, almost to a fault. But it's also horribly tense, richly textured and showcases a terrific supporting performance from Fares as the tale's shadowy Thomas Cromwell figure. Ibrahim has been in the game long enough to view himself as a battle-hardened survivor. More likely, he's just another pawn in the game, to be toppled and replaced as part of some wider gambit."

Xan Brooks, *The Guardian*, 16 April 2023

"Elections, as everyone knows, are too important to be left up to chance, and so the world is constantly inventing ways to ensure their desired outcome. In Egypt, where the choice of a new grand imam is concerned — a lifetime appointment, whose fatwas impact national law — the process doesn't even pretend to be democratic: The successful candidate is selected from a small Supreme Council of Scholars, with considerations the outside world will never know. But we can wonder, which is where Swedish-Egyptian filmmaker Tarik Saleh comes in, imagining the equivalent of a John Grisham thriller set inside Cairo's world-famous Al-Azhar University.

Banned from Egypt since 2017's *The Nile Hilton Incident*, the director may well have nothing to lose by implicating the Egyptian government in a conspiracy to fill the country's highest religious position with the candidate of the president's choosing — the equivalent of suggesting the American CIA stuck its hand into the process to decide the last pope. In the film, no sooner has the last grand imam expired than the country's top brass calls an emergency meeting. "The land cannot support two pharaohs," announces high-ranking General Al Sakran (Mohammad Bakri), ordering Colonel Ibrahim (Fares Fares) from State Security to see to it that their guy gets elected.

Ibrahim has a well-placed ally inside Al-Azhar named Zizo (Mehdi Dehbi), but this mole is first compromised, then murdered. He needs a new "angel," which leads him to the film's protagonist, fisherman Adam Tala (Tawfeek Barhom), who's only just started his religious studies at the university. Saleh's screenplay — which is dense and plot-driven but rarely holds up to even basic questions of logic — makes it clear why someone like Adam might fit the bill: This poor patsy is essentially disposable in the government's eyes. Still, it's ludicrous to think that such an important operation might be entrusted to a newcomer, or that State Security wouldn't have dozens of contacts within a university of nearly 300,000 students all contributing to the common goal.

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What we're dealing with here is a fairly conventional political thriller — think *House of Cards*, minus the sleek David Fincher aesthetic or much in the way of suspense — set in a world no one has dared to explore on screen before now. In choosing a newly arrived student, Saleh ideally would have spent some time giving audiences the lay of the land, revealing nuances of daily life at the university. (With Saleh obliged to shoot the film in Turkey, Istanbul's Süleymanyne Mosque doubles as Al-Azhar). Alas, the writer-director has crammed *Cairo Conspiracy* with too much plot to allow for crucial scene-setting, and he shoots nearly every location (most of them stunning examples of symmetric architectural design) from sharp angles that skew their natural beauty.

Saleh seems to have modeled the film after 2009 Cannes prize winner *A Prophet*, repeating the formula of taking a malleable novice whom others think they can manipulate, before revealing him to be smarter and stronger than anyone imagined. *Cairo Conspiracy* even feels like a prison movie at times, observing power dynamics and hazing rituals in the cafeteria and dormitories. But that arc is already familiar enough to be a cliché, and Barhom hasn't the magnetism of a Tahar Rahim.

The more interesting character here is Ibrahim, whose disheveled appearance serves to conceal a few of his cards. Fares plays him as more of a functionary than an outright villain: On one hand, the role represents how a pseudo-democratic regime perpetuates its own power, yet this spirit-broken old-timer has been kicking around State Security long enough to serve multiple masters and survive multiple coups d'état, such that his allegiances are undercut by cynicism. Ibrahim is plainly resentful of his much-younger boss, Sobhy (Moe Ayoub), who won't hesitate to sacrifice the life of anyone for his personal advancement, meaning this antihero may choose his ethics instead of following orders when it counts. Still, there's not enough dramatic excitement to back up such twists once they start to untangle.

Technically, the Egyptian government has no business interfering in the choice of a grand imam, though it's easy enough to understand why it might do so. In a way, the riskier implication of *Cairo Conspiracy* is that the top candidates for the position may be less-than-perfect religious leaders in their own right. Acting on Ibrahim's instructions, Adam ferrets out a small group of pro-jihad extremists, exposes a hypocritical sheikh who has a love child by a secret marriage, and positions himself as the leading candidate's new favorite pupil.

Through it all, Saleh is careful not to tarnish the faith, suggesting that Islam itself is not to blame for the ways that certain people misinterpret and abuse it. That's a refreshing view, considering how one-dimensionally the religion is typically treated by Western filmmakers — not that it will protect the movie from controversy. You can't make a film like *Cairo Conspiracy* without upsetting great swaths of people. Heck, if you're based in Egypt, you can't make such a film at all."

Peter Debruge, *Variety*, May 20, 2022.

"Put simply, the stark and flinty *Cairo Conspiracy* is a thriller: the tale of an innocent snared in the power games of contemporary Egypt. But it begins in the mode of *A Star is Born*. Provincial fisherman's son Adam (Tawfeek Barhom) is newly accepted at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, the world's most prestigious centre of Islamic education, teaching the clerics of the future. "May God bless you with learning!" his awestruck cab driver exclaims under the minarets. Barhom is a smart casting choice. At once boyish and earnest, he inhabits a character desperate to make the best of himself here, where the lessons of the Koran are presented as eternal. But men are not, as evidenced by the death of the university's grand imam. The vacancy at the top of an institution this crucial is not likely to remain so for long. The military have a favoured cleric they want to see installed; the supporting role of stooge falls to Adam, recruited by a colonel to act as his informant in Al-Azhar. "We don't forget those who work for us," he says. Even a naïf can hear both sides of that.

Director Tarik Saleh has a sharp eye for the quotidian detail of organised religion. (An early scene finds Adam's hometown imam hoovering the mosque.) He is good too at conjuring the jitter of downtown Cairo, where the student is summoned to meet his handler. But the film's biggest coup is the common thread it finds in both worlds: military back rooms and holy offices alike filled with the ambitious jostling for position.

If the story can sometimes feel overcompressed, Saleh reserves a chilly clarity for the suggestion of an ongoing pact between Egyptian generals and clerics, mutually invested in the status quo. (The film was shot in Turkey and Sweden.) He also gives the best line to Adam, left to voice the bitter truth of what he learns of faith and government: "Does it matter what I believe, sir?"

Danny Leigh, *Financial Times*, 13 April 2023.