



## **THE VIRGIN, THE COPTS AND ME...**

A film by Namir Abdel Messeeh  
An Icarus Films Release

Official Selection, Berlinale 2012  
Official Selection, Tribeca Film Festival 2012  
Best Arab Documentary, Doha Film Festival 2011

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## SYNOPSIS

In his feature debut, French-Egyptian filmmaker Namir Abdel Messeeh sets out for Cairo to investigate the phenomenon of miraculous Virgin Mary apparitions in Egypt's Coptic Christian community. As he seeks out witnesses to the well-known 1968 sighting in Zeitoun, where hundreds of thousands of people claimed to see a vision of a hovering Virgin Mary, the professed secular skeptic Namir quickly discovers that no one within the church will agree to speak with him. Without the cooperation of the Coptic community, and facing opposition from his traditional family and skittish producers unwilling to fund his aimless project, Namir changes course and travels to his birth village hoping to find answers. There, against his mother's initial forbiddance, he reconnects with long-lost relatives and a provincial life so foreign from his own.

Slowly gaining the trust of his extended family, and that of his doubtful, yet devoted mother, Namir enlists all of their help to reimagine his film as a touching and often hilarious portrait of family and heritage. Ultimately, and in a breathtaking conclusion, the journey leads an entire village to discover the power of community and for Namir, an individual recognition of spirituality.

—Tribeca Film Festival



## PUBLICITY

# SCREENDAILY

Screening in Berlin's Panorama section after its prizewinning debut at Doha, this alternately hilarious, moving and illuminating first-person documentary, ostensibly about miraculous apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Coptic Christians in Egypt, comes on at times like the work of a French-Egyptian Morgan Spurlock.

But there's less spin and showmanship in the mix here: director Messeeh foregrounds himself, and his difficulties in finding an angle for his film, more out of what appears to be a genuine desire to tell the truth than from any self-centered desire to make a comedy-tinged issue documentary. And in the end, the film overcomes the post-modern games it's been playing to give us a touching insight into the lives and dreams of villagers in a remote area of Egypt.

That said, Messeeh is a wonderfully deadpan centerpiece for a documentary in which the 'making of' becomes the work itself. And the director is also well aware that there's great audience enjoyment to be derived from his stubborn relationship with his bossy, emotional mother, who becomes the most memorable character of a film she is sure will be a failure – “just like your last”, she tells her son.

Culture-TV cable action is assured, but *The Virgin...* could book one or two theatrical slots as well – beginning with its most obvious territory, France – if distributors can work out a way to market to wider arthouse audiences a film that sounds from its title and strapline like an ultra-niche religious documentary.

Messeeh's mother and father moved in 1973 from their Coptic Christian village in Upper Egypt to a suburb of Paris, where the director was born (the Copts, the director's voiceover narration reminds us, are a strong religious minority in today's Egypt, and trace their line of descent back to the Pharaohs). His mother has adopted all the trappings of French bourgeois society without losing her religious faith or her ties with her homeland. He himself is no longer a believer, but is fascinated by the workings of faith: so when his mother claims to see, on a grainy VHS tape sent from Egypt, evidence of a celebrated 2009 apparition of the Virgin at El-Warraaq, Messeeh decides there and then to make a film about these apparently miraculous phenomena.

After roping in a French producer, Messeeh travels to Cairo but – partly due to his undisguised agnosticism – comes up against stonewalling and suspicion on both sides of what can be a tense religious divide. A few witnesses of a 1968 apparition of the Virgin in Zeitoun are interviewed – including a couple of Muslims.

But frustrated both by his lack of progress and his own uncertainty about whether he's found the right way into the subject, Messeeh continues onto the remote country district that his parents hail from – despite having been told by his mother, via Skype,



that she will sue him if he dares to rope the family into his film. Further comic obstacles come when his producer – whose increasingly irritable phone messages we overhear – pulls the funding because Messeh seems uninterested in making the hard-hitting documentary about inter-faith violence that he expects.

So it's a slightly mollified but still combative mum who takes over the financing of the film, which closes hilariously, and also with a certain throat-catching emotion, with a reconstruction of a miraculous apparition of the Virgin starring a cast of family and villagers.

There are times when Messeh's stubborn coercion of the simple peasant folk he lands among feels like bullying; but at the same time he seems to have a genuine affection for them, and his inability to take no for an answer from cousin, mother and even the local bishop does eventually engineer some sort of small miracle. Shot on hand-held HD digital, the film grows in visual confidence as well as emotional punch in its second-half village section, painting a vivid picture of a part of Egypt that may not make the TV news, but is equally worthy of our attention. —Lee Marshall (2/14/12)



Despite having gone through various incarnations, or perhaps because of it, *The Virgin, the Copts and Me* is a disarmingly honest, thoroughly winning personal portrait of family and heritage, grounded in religion but not dependent on belief. Tyro helmer Namir Abdel Messeh struggled long and hard to get this personal project made after being dumped by his French producers for not adhering to their vision; the last laugh's on them, since the docu bagged \$100,000 at Doha Tribeca and should easily find auds at fests and in Gallic theaters, as well as on TV.

It's fair to say Abdel Messeh was unfocused when he went into the project with the partial support of French TV. The initial idea was to look into various apparitions of the Virgin Mary claimed by Coptic communities in Egypt over the last few decades. Though completely Frenchified, the helmer comes from Egypt, and his mother Siham's family from Asyut, in Upper Egypt, where devotees claim the Virgin appeared in 2000.

In Egypt, his skepticism rubs the faithful the wrong way, and following the New Year's Day attack on Copts in Alexandria this year, the producers pressure him to focus on Egypt's religious tensions. Instead, Abdel Messeh heads south to his maternal family, despite Mom's implacable opposition to her son filming her nearest and dearest. The reason is clear: The family members are dirt-poor peasants, and despite her love for them, Siham also feels some shame in her roots.

Reconnecting with his family inspires Abdel Messeh, but his producers aren't pleased, and when he fails to incorporate the Egyptian Revolution into the mix, they ankle the project; the phone conversations, heard onscreen, straddle the line between painful and hilarious. Mom, an accountant, saves the day by flying to Egypt and agreeing to

be the docu's treasurer. She's dropped her threats to sue her son, and quickly gets into the swing of things, despite not understanding how this is going to come together as a movie.

At the beginning, she's not wrong, yet somewhere along the way, Abdel Messeh realizes the real story is his family, not merely as believers in the visions but as hard-working, good-hearted people who can't be reduced to a stereotype. He decides to re-enact the vision with family and locals in various roles, and while this reps the culmination of the docu, the real meat lies in the process.

For Siham, too, there's a transformation as she reconnects with her family and realizes her son's interest is respectful rather than exploitative. Viewers are left to contemplate parallels between being a Christian minority in Egypt and being an Egyptian in France; he's an outsider in his two worlds, yet very much a part of them both.

Visuals are strong in the off-the-cuff way auds expect from this kind of personal docu. Given constant changes during the production, the excellent editing warrants special commendation, finding a rhythm and keeping pace with it all. —Jay Weissberg

## THE HUFFINGTON POST

It is no secret that in the Arab world religion becomes an undeniable part of a person's identity. While most often the media concentrates on the more epidemic responses of the Muslim communities in the countries of MENA, there is little talk here in the West of the

Coptic minority, a dwindling population which continues to observe the original, purest form of Christianity across the Middle East.

At this year's Tribeca Film Festival, my personal appreciation grew immensely, for both the "budding" nation of Qatar—if one can use such a word when talking about a country with the highest per-capita income in the world—and one of its most prominent cultural organizations, the Doha Film Institute. An educational and artistic entity—founded by H.E. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani—within a country where the entire indigenous population is Muslim, the DFI helped to finance Namir Abdel Messeh's *The Virgin, the Copts and Me*, a touching feature walking the line between fiction and documentary, about the complicated dogmas of faith and belief. While I sat watching Messeh's film for a second time, inside the SVA theater in NYC and surrounded by an audience which palpably welcomed its themes, humor and charmingly personal POV, I could not stop thinking I was witnessing history in the making.

It hit me that this cinematic organization from a tolerant yet conservative Islamic country was opening up the discourse on the nearly untouchable subject of religion in

the region. Groundbreaking! Ever the woman who tries to find ways how cinema can transform this chaotic world of ours, I could not hold back tears.

*The Virgin, the Copts and Me* is undoubtedly a labor of love, from all sides involved. Messeeh, born in France of Egyptian parents, disclosed that "DFI arrived at a moment when I was underneath the earth" and continued "we had finished shooting, I had problems with the producer because we had run out of money and he didn't believe in the film." Then Doha Tribeca Film Festival programmers Hania Mroué and Chadi Zeneddine watched a rough cut and insisted that the film be in the 2011 edition of the festival. "That's how I got a post-production grant, left my producer, created a company and finished the film without him."

But the film, mostly shot in 2010, is also a testament to a time past in Egypt, and Messeeh admitted, "it would not be the same film today" after the revolution, even if "the revolution has not changed very much in upper Egypt, in the villages, where lives are still the same and they are more concerned with problems like eating, working..." The filmmaker was asked by his first producer to add in some references to Tahrir Square and those infamous 18 days, but thankfully Messeeh resisted, keeping the film about his own journey home, the intimate relationships within his extended Coptic family and his personal struggles between skepticism and belief.

His reasons for resisting are perhaps a great insight into his humble genius "I didn't want to include the revolution, because I still personally don't understand what is happening in Egypt today."

Apart from keeping true to the artistic integrity of his project, the chasm between Messeeh and his producer led to a wonderful development in the story of the film. The filmmaker's own mother turned into the film's producer, accountant and public relations specialist, helping to diplomatically negotiate the fragile boundaries that surround any discussion about religion, within their own family and the Middle East. And for the audience, she brings insight into what a proud, strong and modern Arab woman truly is, an image so far removed from the stereotype misrepresented in the West. As Messeeh answered, when asked whether he knew he was making such an important statement: "Well, women are the ones who have the power in Arab countries."

When I questioned how his own faith has changed, from the beginning of his quest to make *The Virgin, the Copts and Me*, Messeeh responded "to be honest, in the beginning I was a little skeptical of the apparitions, because when you are raised in a Christian family, even if you don't believe there is still something that makes you care deep inside." Once shooting started, he continued "I turned very skeptical, because I really wanted to discover that these apparitions were real, but I felt disappointed and deceived because of all the information I received and started to get confirmation that it was more like a social phenomenon."

The apparitions Messeeh refers to are at the center of the story of his film. The first one recorded was seen on the roof of the Church of Our Lady of Zeitoun in Cairo, in 1968 just after Egypt's defeat in the Six-Day War—which led many to speculate it was a state ploy to lift the population's spirit. The second were a series of mass apparitions in Assiut, upper Egypt which were later approved by the Coptic church.

To comprehend the full power of these visions, it is essential to understand how important the Virgin Mary is in the Arab world, where she is considered "the most perfect woman and the ideal mother." And, as a taxi driver tells Messeeh in the film, "Egypt is the mother of the world... Egypt is my mother" but also where Mary lived for three years, perhaps explaining her predilection for appearing there. While many Muslims will not publicly admit to having viewed the apparitions, those who do confess to having seen her talk of Mary as their own saintly matriarch, another enlightening point brought up by the film.

After the TFF screening, a young male audience member congratulated Messeeh by saying "This film is a jewel! I loved how you portrayed your family, human and without turning them into victims or exotic creatures," while panelist Andrew Lund confessed to the filmmaker "You had us at hello!" because "you went on this impossible quest to film the apparition, which of course, is what filmmaking is about, constantly impossible quests." Continuing on, Lund also pointed to the fact that "the commercial aspect of a film is important, but what is also important is the ripple effect a project will create," which is what I personally found so groundbreaking about this film.

Ultimately, *The Virgin, the Copts and Me* is about what it portrays but also what it conveys. Each audience member at that screening came away with a very personal feeling. Mine was a resolve to continue to believe in the magical power of cinema.

—E. Nina Rothe (4/27/12)

## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



Born in 1974, Namir Abdel Messeeh grew up in Egypt. He is currently based in France where he obtained a Masters in Cinema at the University of Paris VII and studied directing at La Femis. He directed two short fiction films before exploring more personal questions through his short documentary *You, Waguih*. He had the idea for *The Virgin, the Copts and Me...* after watching videotape of the Virgin Mary's apparition in Egypt with his Coptic Christian mother.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Born in France of Egyptian parents, I've always kept close ties with my family in Egypt, ties that are all the stronger because we belong to the Christian minority, the Copts, who are being persecuted more and more each day.

I don't share the religious beliefs of my community, and this has been a source of conflict between my family and me for a long time. In Egypt, as is often the case in Arabic countries where religion is part of one's identity, it's impossible to argue about religious beliefs. But it is precisely because this question of believing is at the very core of my relationship with my family and appears to be indissociable from what we are, how we define ourselves, I wanted to make a film about religious beliefs and more specifically about that of the Copts in the apparitions of the Virgin Mary.

I wanted to investigate what still ties me to this community where I no longer live and with which I no longer share the religious beliefs. But a film can sometimes take one where you least expect it to. The relationship with my producer, my mother's opposition, the Egyptian revolution have made me discover what I really wanted to recount: the path I've followed as a filmmaker, my relationship with my mother and the inhabitants of my village, my ties to Egypt. The goal was not to make a film about myself, but rather to use my persona as a filmmaker as a vector, as a means for those around me to reveal who they are.

I wanted to show the poor country folk of Said where my family is from. People who never draw the attention of the media, and for whom the revolution doesn't mean much – their conditions for just staying alive being extremely precarious. But these people are rich with humor, with a joy of life and a generosity that irremediably ties me to them.

I also and above all wanted to recount something profound about Egypt: the relations between Christians and Muslims, the role of women in society, the manner in which political powers use religion to maintain their positions, all while keeping it light, amusing.

This is my first feature-length film. I've tried a lot of things, some with success, others with failure. With this film I've sought to walk the line between fiction and documentary, mixing scenes captured live with scenes tightly written, sometimes reshooting scenes that had already taken place with some of the characters and sometimes filming other scenes without their knowing it.

The production of this film was very complicated, most likely due to a lack of resources, but also because of my determination to find a way to write the script progressively, as the shooting and editing work advanced. But I have had incredible luck because I have been surrounded by a team of extraordinary technicians who trusted me and backed me up. Tell me they were right to do so!



## FILM CREDITS

Title: *The Virgin, The Copts and Me...*  
Director: Namir Abdel Messeeh  
Running time: 85 minutes  
Written by Namir Abdel Messeeh, Nathalie Najem, Anne Paschetta  
Producer: Namir Abdel Messeeh  
Editor: Sébastien de Sainte Croix  
Additional editing: Isabelle Manquillet, Namir Abdel Messeeh  
Assistant editors: Juliette Kempf, Janusz Baranek, Gustavo Vasco  
Cinematographer: Nicolas Duchêne  
Assistant cameraman: Grégoire de Calignon  
Additional photography: Inès Leraud, Namir Abdel Messeeh, Yassa Safwat  
Sound: Julien Sicart and Cédric Delouche  
Assistant directors: Tarek Hassan, Noha El Meadawy, Ayman Ashwa, Antonios Safwat  
Sound editor: Gwénoïlé Leborgne, Geraldine Falieu  
Sound Mixer: Roman Dymny  
Original music: Vincent Segal  
Performers: Vincent Segal, cello; Renaud-Gabriel Pion, clarinet  
Music recorded at Studio Badabing by Jean-Pierre Sluys  
Graphics: Mickaël Lepers  
Post production: Isabelle Morax, Vincent Alexandre  
Calibrator: Guillaume Faure  
Special effects: Bertrand Levallois, Just Fuel  
English translation: Hermine Fuerst Garia  
Production company: Oweda Films  
Co-produced by the Doha Film Institute with the participation of the CNC  
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l'image animée.

With Namir Abdel Messeeh  
Siham Abdel Messeeh  
And the people of Om Doma  
France, Qatar / 2011 / Color / In French and Arabic with English Subtitles  
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Icarus Films  
32 Court Street, Floor 21  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
(718) 488-8900  
mail@IcarusFilms.com  
www.IcarusFilms.com

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