

et Film



In making their documentaries, the students learned that a few minutes on screen means hours behind the camera. (Courtesy Craig Duff)

Reel Life

In a first-ever course in documentary-making, AUC students learned how to capture — and maybe even change — their world with film

By Marwa Helal

They are the faces of Egypt, unvarnished, honest: A makwagi practicing the dying profession of foot ironing; Upper Egyptians haggling over the price of a camel; a felucca captain

going about his day; Iraqi refugees struggling to adjust to life in a new country. Images captured not on canvas but on film, in documentaries produced by students at the American University in Cairo (AUC).

The 12 documentaries premiered in

June at a special screening titled “First Person Films” at AUC’s Adham Center for Electronic Journalism. The endeavor, a first for the university, was spearheaded by Emmy award-winning documentary producer and broadcast journalist Craig Duff, who came to AUC as a Knight International fellow for the 2007-08 academic year. The filmmakers were all students in Duff’s professional development and graduate-level courses.

Documentary-making is considered a difficult art in Egypt, with its many restrictions on filming in public, and Duff is as pleased as viewers have been with these innovative student productions.

“I was really happy to have sparked interest in a group of very smart, talented and good people,” says Duff of his students. “I

Away From Home

NADIA EL-GOWELY CAME to the classroom as a journalist from Reuters, seeking to expand her horizons and career beyond print media. Her documentary *Away from Home* explores the story of Omm Ola, an Iraqi woman who was separated from her husband when she fled their home in Baghdad. The film follows the woman and her two children as they adjust to life as refugees in Egypt.

“I [became interested in documentaries] when I watched a few excellent ones on satellite channels like the BBC. I was taken by their quality so much that I wished we had similar resources in our region. Then I had the opportunity to do some TV work and it made me feel that this was the sort of thing I want to do. [...] Documentary-filmmaking became a continuous dream haunting me day and night. So I did not hesitate a second when I found out about the course at AUC.”

El-Gowely’s experience in print media opened the doors for pursuing her chosen topic. “I have been aware of the growing problem of Iraqi refugees through my work as a journalist. Working for Voices of Iraq,

an independent Iraqi news agency funded by the UNDP and guided by Reuters, introduced me to many Iraqis living in Cairo. So when Craig Duff asked us to choose a topic for a documentary, I didn’t take long to make up my mind.

“Getting shooting permits in Egypt is a daunting job, so I had to change some sequences in the original script to avoid having to ask for permits. The toughest lesson was learning to take as many shots and sequences as possible because usually you need to shoot one hour to produce just two or three minutes of usable footage. If you think you can shoot a few perfect sequences to ease your burden when you sit down to do the editing, you may end up with an incomplete film. A few seconds makes a lot of difference in a documentary.

“I certainly hope to have a career in documentary filmmaking. How is a big question mark because it is costly, and one good documentary could take months of preparation. On the one hand, you have to solve the issue of financing the project; on the other, you have to find the right crew to bring the film to life.” (MH)

Omm Ola and her daughter in *Away From Home* (Courtesy Craig Duff)

have no doubt that many of them will go on to produce films that will be shown on television and in theaters very soon. There couldn’t be a better time for them — places like Al-Jazeera International are hungry for producers and [these students] have the hunger to produce.”

As a testament to the films’ popularity, they will be shown again in the fall at AUC as well as at an AUC alumni gathering in New York City, and at the International Center for Journalism in Washington, DC. For more information, visit www.aucegypt.edu.

Indeed, each documentary dug out some hidden gems: the story behind an intriguing face, an oft-discussed but little understood issue and even issues unnoticed by the public. Egypt Today spoke with three of the student filmmakers about their work. *et*



Resonance

RESONANCE, PRODUCED BY Alaa Al-Dajani and Hala Osman, is a film portrait of Mustafa Said Mohamed Antar, who has been blind since birth, and has overcome several hurdles to become an accomplished oud player. In this moving, musical film, Mustafa revisits his childhood school, performs in public and discusses the challenges he's encountered, including his father's belief that music is forbidden.

"Mustafa used to teach me music," Al-Dajani says. "He was an interesting subject because of how he manages to live the life he wants despite his handicap — it's inspiring for me."

For Al-Dajani, the path to making a documentary was a twisted one. He worked in finance for a few years before switching to the media production industry, where he works as a researcher and producer for a local company. He signed up for Duff's course for professional development, rather than as a graduate student.

Among the lessons Al-Dajani is taking

away from the project is flexibility; he learned that filming doesn't always go as planned — often to the benefit of the work. "Technical difficulties while shooting were a challenge. But the magic was found in how the story unfolds itself as you go. It's good to have a plan but other things appear as you go."

The producer has high hopes for documentaries. "The documentary is the perfect medium for Egypt because — I hate to say this — but because it has a lot of problems or issues that people need awareness about. Because of the status of the country, we need to push people to try to help each other more and exert their influence on society."

"Documentaries portray real life, they're not superficial. It's not like watching a film where most of the characters have nice cars and houses and at times are not even living in the same country as the viewers — documentaries give us the chance to relate to one another and show people as they are, how the government is and how people are really living."

Blind oud-player Mustafa Said Mohamed Antar performs for the film crew. (Courtesy Craig Duff)



Kasr El-Masr

IN KASR EL-MASR, co-producers Bassel Sabri and Sara Abou Bakr present an intimate portrayal of emergency room doctors who strive everyday to give the best care they can amid the bustling chaos of Cairo's public charity hospital. Sabri, who came up with the topic, says they had to obtain unprecedented access to Kasr El-Aini hospital for several weeks of filming.

Sabri says that making documentaries has been a long-time dream. Dreams do not come easy, however, especially on this project.

"Getting permission [to shoot at the hospital] wasn't the biggest problem," Sabri explains. "We went to the officials and spoke with them, explained that we wanted to shoot — the challenge was that once we brought out the camera and started rolling, everyone starts looking at you and it's no longer a real moment. Then security would come along [...] we almost got into a [physical] fight while filming because of them."

"For the first three days, we didn't shoot much because every time we started, someone would stop us. In over a month of shooting, we compiled 10 to 12 hours of footage and then condensed that all down to 12 minutes. It was hard to do because you have to let the people judge, so you have to show them as much as you can."

"The amazing thing about Kasr El-Aini Hospital is that they have a shortage in everything, not all the staff is qualified, but the doctors, they are the best thing there. How Egyptians deal with each other in troubled times, how everyone compromises to get things done — you see it at places like Kasr El-Aini. [...] There are a huge number of incoming cases everyday and they don't reject a single patient — I don't think any other hospital in the world can do this with the few resources available at Kasr El-Aini."

While making the film the producers learned not just about shooting and editing, but also about dealing with people. "The experience in itself is unique, especially the interaction with the people," Sabri notes. "People are not the same on camera as they are off. You learn that how you interact with a person off camera will reflect in how they appear on camera."

"I hope that in the future the audience in Egypt will be more open to this medium. They should expose themselves to documentaries and informational films because they enrich our culture." et