

Film

# 'Sheikh Jackson' moonwalks into Toronto Film Festival

TORONTO, Canada, Sept 13, (AFP): Egyptian director Amr Salama pays homage to the late Michael Jackson in his new film "Sheikh Jackson", a tale of how a young imam struggles to reconcile his desire to be a better Muslim with his love for the King of Pop.

The film — which landed a spot as Egypt's Oscar bid for best foreign film Tuesday — is based loosely on Salama's own life as a former orthodox Muslim whose obsession with the flamboyant popstar caused him a crisis of faith.

It takes audiences back to the day the Gloved One died on June 25, 2009, and shows them how it sent a former devotee into a tailspin.

Jackson's death stirs childhood memories in the film's lead character Khaled, making him question what it means to be a man and being true to oneself.

"This film is a turning of the page on so many obstacles in the road (in my life) in terms of identity and faith crises", Salama said in an interview with AFP ahead of the film's Friday premiere at the Toronto Film Festival.

Although many older conservatives and orthodox Muslims in the Middle East may have despised Jackson during his lifetime as "a freak, the guy who changed his color", Salama said he was wonderstruck when he first listened to his music.

"He was a poor black kid who grew up to be one of the most famous people in the world, his music crossed borders", he said.

## Film loosely based on Salama's own life

Salama recalled how the father of a friend who introduced him to Jackson's music "gave him (the friend) hell for liking Michael Jackson".

"My own father was also not happy about me listening to Michael Jackson", he added.

Ignoring their disapproval, Salama said he read and learned everything he could find about Jackson, who influenced his clothes, his hair, and his world outlook (as suggested by song lyrics). Those are Salama's feet doing the moonwalk in the film.

**Worships**

The film stars Ahmed Malek as a young Khaled who worships Jackson, from his Thriller-era haircut and moon walk to his Bad tour bondage pants.

But he is eventually steered away from the Man in the Mirror by a macho father who fears his son becoming soft, and later by religious mentors who encourage him to preach to "those who dance to the music of the devil" to reject pop culture.

An older Khaled, played by Ahmad El-Fishawi, is torn up inside. "I don't want to be a hypocrite", he says in the film.

"For Muslims, to not walk the talk is a sin", Salama explains.

The writer-director said he hoped to reveal devout Muslims' inner struggle, rather than criticize them as pretenders.

The character Khaled, he notes, "wants to be devoted but he just

can't" because of his love of Jackson's music.

How does one juggle these contradictions? "I don't have an answer for that", Salama admits. "That's the question that the film asks, more than answers".

"I think we just need to accept our contradictions and all ourselves", he then offers.

Thirty-five years after Jackson released "Thriller", which went on to become the world's bestselling album of all time, the Toronto Film Festival is also screening a digitally remastered version of John Landis' original music video in 3D, as well as the documentary "The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller".

Landis himself oversaw the frame-by-frame restoration of short film, with its legendary zombie dance sequence, and featuring Jackson as a walking dead and a werewolf.

The original "Making Of" was conceived to help fund the production of "Thriller" and was shot simultaneously and debuted alongside the music video in 1983.

It took audiences behind the scenes, showing them the movie making process from makeup to choreography to filming at a time when such glimpses were rare.

"I can't tell you how many filmmakers have told me that 'The Making of Thriller' was their first window into how movies are made and inspired them to become filmmakers themselves", Landis said.

Variety



A model pauses on the runway in The Garage at the Ralph Lauren Fashion Show during the New York Fashion Week on Sept 12 in Bedford, New York. (AP) — See Page 19

Film

Strangeness abounds in Franco's latest

## Cult of 'The Room' cheers 'Artist'

TORONTO, Sept 13, (Agencies): The spoon-throwing, football-tossing cult of "The Room" was out in full force at the premiere of James Franco's "The Disaster Artist", a making-of movie that earned the blessing of the notorious film's creator Tommy Wiseau.

"The Disaster Artist" premiered at a midnight screening early Tuesday at a raucous "Tommy!"-chanting audience at the Toronto International Film Festival. The film, which Franco directed and stars in as Wiseau, chronicles the creation of one of the most famously bad movies ever made.

But 2003's "The Room" became an object of deep affection for moviegoers who cackle through late-night screenings of the film with a host of rituals. Wiseau, who was greeted by fans like a rock star, told Franco that he was 99.9 percent pleased with "The Disaster Artist". He objects primarily to the way Franco depicts him throwing a football, though Franco claimed Wiseau's 0.1 percent dissatisfaction was inconsistent lighting.

Wiseau hopped around the stage, introducing the cast of "The Disaster Artist" and later claiming that he would one day turn the tables on Franco and direct him in a movie.

"Eventually I will, probably", said Wiseau.

"The Disaster Artist", which A24 will release Dec 1, is in the mold of the B-movie tribute "Ed Wood": a Hollywood tale about a quixotic, perhaps misguided character aspiring to make it in Hollywood. It's based on the 2013 book "The Disaster Artist: My Life Inside The Room, the Greatest Bad Movie Ever Made" by "Room" actor and Wiseau's friend Greg Sestero.

The making of "The Disaster Artist" had its own quirks. Wiseau initially hoped Johnny Depp would play him. Wiseau was on the fence about Franco, who recalled Wiseau telling him in their first conversation, "I've seen your stuff James. You've done some good things and some bad things".

Franco largely stayed in character, shifting between playing Wiseau and directing the film. That meant Franco, with a wig of long black hair, was often direct-

ing actors as Wiseau, and in his unique, famously undefined accent. (Wiseau has long maintained he's from New Orleans, but his origins are largely shrouded in mystery.) The experience, said Dave Franco (who plays Sestero), was "as weird as you would expect".

**Better**

"It just made sense to go Daniel Day-Lewis", Franco said in an interview, chuckling. "Why waste the energy to pull out? I figured hopefully I'll give a little bit better direction than Tommy gave on 'The Room'".

But while "The Disaster Artist" very much plays the tale for laughs, it also has affection for its characters. Franco says Wiseau's "Dostoevskian struggle" is that "he's wrestling to be something he's not".

"Despite what he looks like and sounds like and his age, Tommy thinks that he's James Dean", said Franco.

That was something Franco could understand. Franco, himself, played Dean in a 2001 biopic.

"I have to admit, I relate to Tommy in a lot of ways", said Franco. "He's a dreamer and he will his movie into being. After everyone told him no, he still made it happen. I can relate to that, and I can even relate to a lot of the madness and the crazy self will run riot that he fell into".

It may sound odd, but inhabiting Wiseau has been a kind of watershed experience for the 39-year-old actor-filmmaker. While Franco had previously made a blizzard of films at once — including a number of more literary adaptations ("Child of God", "As I Lay Dying", "The Sound and the Fury") — "The Disaster Artist" marks a new chapter for Franco in sustained attention and an effort to reach a broad audience as a filmmaker.

"I wasn't trying to do five million projects at one time. I was just focused on the one thing", said Franco. "I said, 'James, you've been doing these little projects for a long time now. Look at ('Disaster Artist' producer and co-star Seth Rogen). He's been able to make movies at the studio level and still make what he wants to make".

It's just one more unintended consequence of "The Room", the worst movie to ever give so much joy to

so many.

James Franco comes to life as the abundantly strange Tommy Wiseau in A24's official trailer for "The Disaster Artist", which premiered Monday at the Toronto Film Festival.

The trailer begins with Wiseau and Greg Sestero (portrayed by Dave Franco) bonding over their dream to make it in Hollywood.

"We'll be famous; we'll show show them", they say.

There are several scenes of Franco yelling "Stella!"; he also attempts to impress the real-life Judd Apatow with a recitation of Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy in a restaurant, prompting Apatow to say, "It's not going to happen for you, not in a million years".

"What about after that?" Franco responds.

Franco's Wiseau then sets about making "The Room", which he asserts is a story about an all-American hero named Johnny. "Also, maybe Johnny is vampire, we'll see", he adds.

**Also:**

**LOS ANGELES:** A24 and DirecTV have bought US rights on the British drama "The Children Act", starring Emma Thompson, Stanley Tucci, and Fionn Whitehead.

"The Children Act" premiered on Sept 10 at the Toronto Film Festival in the Special Presentations section. Directed by Richard Eyre from a script by Ian McEwan and based on McEwan's novel, the story centers on a high-court judge who finds personal and professional crises colliding when forced to rule in the case of whether a couple who are Jehovah's Witnesses can be permitted to deny a life-saving blood transfusion to their leukemia-stricken 17-year-old son, played by Whitehead.

Thompson's character is married to her work, which has become a problem for her husband, played by Tucci, who announces that he wants to have an affair — resulting in his being kicked out so she can focus on her current case.

**BOSTON:** A film chronicling the story of Boston Marathon bombing survivor Jeff Bauman premiered in the US on Tuesday at the hospital where he and others who were injured in the 2013 deadly attack were treated.

Dozens of people attended the screening of "Stronger" at the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston. The movie is based on Bauman's 2014 memoir of the same name.

The movie stars Jake Gyllenhaal as Bauman, who lost his legs in the attack, and "Orphan Black" actress Tatiana Maslany as Bauman's then-girlfriend, Erin Hurley. Bauman, Hurley and their on-screen counterparts graced a red carpet at the hospital on Tuesday with director David Gordon Green, producer Todd Lieberman and writer John Pollono. (AP)

**LOS ANGELES:** J.J. Abrams is returning to "Star Wars," and will replace Colin Trevorrow as writer and director of "Episode IX," pushing the film's release date back seven months.

Disney announced Abrams' return on Tuesday a week after news broke of Trevorrow's departure. After several high-profile exits by previous "Star Wars" directors, Lucasfilm is turning to the filmmaker who helped resurrect the franchise in the first place. Abrams will co-write the film with screenwriter Chris Terrio, who won an Oscar for adapting "Argo," and also co-wrote "Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice."

As the director of "The Force Awakens," Abrams rebooted "Star Wars" to largely glowing reviews from fans and more than \$2 billion in box office. Abrams had said that would be his only film for the franchise, but he's now been pulled back in. (AP)

**LOS ANGELES:** The International Documentary Association will give its Courage Under Fire Award to filmmakers and subjects involved with documentaries about the war in Syria.

The organization will present the award Dec 9 at its 33rd Annual Documentary Awards at the

Paramount Studios backlot in Los Angeles. Abigail Disney will receive the Amicus Award; Lourdes Portillo will receive the Career Achievement Award; and Yance Ford will receive the Emerging Documentary Filmmaker Award.

The Courage Under Fire Award — given from time to time to a filmmaker who demonstrates "extraordinary courage" in pursuit of the truth



Bauman

Abrams

— will honor both the people who shared their stories in the films and the filmmaking teams behind "City of Ghosts," "Cries From Syria," "Hell on Earth," and "Last Men in Aleppo." (RTS)

**LOS ANGELES:** Nicolas Cage will star in the independent action movie "Primal" as a big-game

hunter. Production is scheduled to start on Oct 23 in Puerto Rico.

The project was unveiled Tuesday at the Toronto Film Festival, where the Exchange is launching international sales.

"Primal" is the first project for Wonderfilm Media, launched by Kirk Shaw, Daniel Grodnik, Jeff Bowler, and Bret Saxon as a finance, development, and produc-

tion entity based in Vancouver and Beverly Hills. Grodnik, who has credits on "Heist" and "Bobby," is producing and Michael Becker is executive producing.

The film will be directed by Nick Powell, who is a veteran stunt coordinator with credits on "The Bourne Identity," "X-Men: The Last Stand," and "Resident Evil." (RTS)