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Cairo International Film Festival â?? Thereâ??s Always Next Year

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

By Jamie N. Christley

From the window of an airplane, metropolitan Cairo seems to stretch into infinity, a truly ancient city that keeps adding onto itself, year after year. A handful of cities occupy a greater land area, but fewer *appear* to be as impossibly intricate and dense, its overwhelming breadth a dreamed thing. The next thing you notice is that Cairo wears its history on its sleeve. Very little fails to carry signification of events and people, past and present. Does your town have a bridge named after an historic date? The river island of Zamalek connects with Tahrir Square and points east using the â??6th of October Bridge,â?• named for a successful show of force against Israeli occupiers in 1967. Even the hotel where most guests of the Cairo International Film Festival stayed, the Cairo Marriott, has thick roots in the 19th century, as related by a short documentary preloaded in each roomâ??s television set, explaining the co-location of a sleek, modern hotel within the 150-year-old Gezirah Palace. The Marriott, by the virtue of its dual structure, symbolizes the cityâ??s relentless, incremental layering of the new upon or within the old, the way a very old cathedral might be built over the ruins of an ancient one.



You can experience the festival from beginning to end without leaving the island of Zamalek, which sits in the Nile River the same way as Roosevelt Island sits lodged between Manhattan and Queens on the East River. A 20-minute walk orâ??at peak timesâ??a 30-minute drive conveys festival attendees to the Cairo Opera House, where, at each individual screening, you to pass through up to four metal detectors. The cadre of security personnel at each juncture carry out their duties without panic or fuss, occasionally taking a drag off a cigarette or a sip of koshary tea. Breaking up the landscape outside the Opera House is a solitary figure holding an assault rifle and standing at perfect attention for hours on end; in his 100% black outfit, kevlar accoutrements, and totally concealed face, he looks like none other than Kylo Ren from *The Force Awakens*. One doesnâ??t talk to him.

Every screening observes assigned seating protocol. When I took my seat for *This Life of Mine*, the usher led me, with the grave precision of a funeral director, to my exact chosen seat in an auditorium that remained empty but for one other attendee. Dozens of ticket-holders enter any given screening up to half an hour late, the insidious maglights that are now a standard feature on smartphones bathing the room in errant stabs of piercing light, as if they were volunteers combing the woods for a missing child.

Navigating the festival structure was challenging in some ways, simple in others. The tactic employed by festivalgoers in Toronto and elsewhere, of timing a contingency screening in case something goes wrong with your main choice (projection failure, a shutout, a bad film), staggered by a few minutes to allow for travel between venues, has no play in Cairo, where upward of 10 to 12 films start at exactly the same time, four times a day. If, say, the projection for one film fails, which actually happened to me when the correct media files for the 2003 Chinese film *Cell Phone* went missing, youâ??re out of luck for anything else playing during the same timeslot, unless you can suppress your inner Alvy Singer and miss the opening 15 or so minutes.

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The Cairo International Film Festival ran from November 15 â??24.

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