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CLASH

Directed by **Mohamed Diab**
Written by **Khaled Diab and Mohamed Diab**
Produced by **Moez Masoud, Mohamed Hefzy, Eric Lagesse**
Director of Photography **Ahmed Gabr**
Film Editor **Ahmed Hafez**
Production Designer **Hend Haidar**
Music Score **Khaled Dagher**
Sound Engineer **Ahmed Adnan**
Costume Designer **Reem Al Adl**

Nagwa **Nelly Karim**
Adam **Hany Adel**
Hossam **Tarek Abdel Aziz**
Mans **Ahmed Malek**
Fares **Ahmed Dash**
Fisha **Husni Sheta**
Huzaifa **Aly Etayeb**
M. Hashem **Amr El Kady**
Radwan **Mohamed Abd El Azim**
Salah **Gameel Barsoum**
Omar **Ashraf Hamdy**
Huseein **Mohamed Tarek**
Awad **Ahmed Abdel Ameed**
Nader **Waleed Abdel Ghany**
Aisha **Mai El Ghaity**
Zein **Mohamed El Sabaey**
Abdel Hamid **Mohamed Abu Elso'ud**
M. Hashem **Mohamed Salah**
Badr **Mohamed Radwan**
Eweis **Mohamed El Souisy**
Tamer **Mohamed Gamal Kalbaz**

THE ROUND-UP

by Michael Brooke

On the evidence so far, claustrophobes should stay well away from Mohamed Diab's films. After a few years as a screenwriter, he made his directing debut with *Cairo 678* (premiered in 2008, belatedly released domestically in early 2011). This powerful indictment of sexual harassment frequently and unforgettably forced us to share the experience of reluctant female commutes sardine-crammed into a bus full of potentially and sometimes actively predatory men. Premiered at Cannes in May 2016, Diab's second feature *Clash* crams us into a similar setting for over an hour and a half, the vehicle here being a police van notionally intended to transport suspected criminals to prison, but in this case used as a makeshift holding cell for anyone the authorities want to get out of the way during mass protests, regardless of whether they're guilty, innocent or share political/religious/cultural values.

Opening titles set the scene: in 2011, the Egyptian revolution (the highest-profile by-product of that year's so-called "Arab Spring" of uprisings across the Middle East) overthrew the 30-year dictatorship presided over by Hosni Mubarak, who was replaced by the democratically elected Mohammed Morsi, representing the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. Just two years later, Morsi was in turn overthrown via a fresh series of popular protests in the summer of 2013, resulting in the military dictatorship that, as of mid-2017, remains in power. These seismic events have already produced some superb films, notably Ibrahim El-Batout's *Winter of Discontent* (2012) and Jehane Noujaim's documentary *The Square* (2013). *Clash* offers reminders of both: *Winter of Discontent* is also largely set in confined spaces (albeit domestic ones), with the various protests and crackdowns more audible than visible, while *The Square* focuses on protesters from numerous factions (and is similarly concerned not to demonise the Muslim Brotherhood) and offers an equally vivid you-are-there approach to the one offered by *Clash*, helped considerably by extensive use of actual protest footage captured by witnesses spanning professional TV crews and amateur phone-touters. Diab himself (who wrote the screenplay for *Clash* with his younger brother Khaled) was a high-profile activist and blogger during this period, one of the reasons for the gap of several years between his first two features.

Clash takes place in July 2013, shortly after Morsi had been deposed by the army, which in turn commenced a round-up of Muslim Brotherhood activists. However, it's made clear from the start that the approach is far more literally catch-all, the van's very first

occupants being Associated Press photographer Zein (Mohamed El Sebaey) and his colleague, American-Egyptian journalist Adam (Hany Adel). As with similar dramas about the 1990s Balkan conflict, they're regarded more with suspicion and fear than anything else: as representatives of the media, they're seen as complicit in the peddling of distorted narratives, even though the film tacitly demonstrates just how hard it is to get a handle on fast-moving events from a constricted vantage point. Adam is further stigmatised by his dual citizenship – unlike everybody else in the van, he can leave the country any time he wants, which raises further questions about why he chooses to be in Egypt at all. (In the interview elsewhere in this booklet, Diab discusses the real-life inspiration for these two characters.)

The first of the film's many clashes is between them and their captors outside, but as the van fills up, the conflicts are just as much internal as external. Taking a cue from such diverse films as Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot* (1981) and Samuel Maoz's *Lebanon* (2009) – respectively set mostly or entirely in a lifeboat, a submarine, and a tank – *Clash* becomes a microcosm of not just the conflict immediately surrounding the van but of Egyptian society in general. Zein and Adam are rapidly joined by nine more representatives: elderly mobile-phone shop owner Salah (Gameel Barsoum) and his middle-aged employee Radwan (Mohamed Abdel Azim), plus four younger men, including Fisho (Hosny Sheta) and Mans (Ahmed Malek) and a man whose English-language T-shirt slogan "F*CK THIS SHIT" [sic] offers a nifty encapsulation of everyone's all too heartfelt attitude. There's also an entire family: mother Nagwa (Nelly Karim, co-star of *Cairo 678*), father Hossam (Tarek Abdel Aziz) and young son Fares (Ahmed Dash), the last of whom made the mistake of owning up to throwing stones. They are at least together, whereas Salah has become accidentally separated from his teenage son Tarek, and spends the rest of the film worrying about his fate.

Although the van is ostensibly intended to house arrested Muslim Brotherhood protesters, that description doesn't apply to any of the initial captives, although they scour each other for telltale signs of factionalism: Zein and Adam's beards are assessed as potential evidence, as are their credentials as journalists (their card is dismissed with "You think it would say 'spy'?") and even their American embassy contacts ("I don't want to be saved by Americans"). But even erstwhile comrades turn on each other – Mans blames Fisho for their arrest, as it was his idea to join the protests, while Fisho retorts that Mans brought him bad luck. ("It's not you", says Zein. "Egypt is bad luck.") When genuine Muslim Brotherhood protesters are pushed into the van, Diab defuses initial tension by the fact that the first, Tamer (Mohamed Gamal Kalbaz) is both hugely overweight and sporting a colander as a makeshift helmet. Although chillingly serious at base, the film is peppered throughout with similarly black humour.

Up to this point, the Brotherhood have been caricatured, but once actual individuals enter the van Diab offers a more nuanced take. First of all, he firmly establishes the difference between devout Muslims, like fourteen-year-old A'isha (May El Ghaity), and active Islamists like Tamer, Huzaifa (Ali El Tayeb), Ahmed Hashem (Amr El Kady), Omar (Ashraf Hamdy) and their elected representative Moaz (Mohamed Alaa). There are also subdivisions among the latter group depending on how much one can demonstrate loyalty to the Muslim Brotherhood: merely voting for them is considered insufficient. One of Moaz's first decisions is to adopt a system of classification: yellow armband for full membership, red armband to denote a sympathiser, and nothing at all to denote "neutrality" (which in their eyes is the same as overtly backing the anti-Morsi coup). Later on, Diab blurs these lines by suggesting other equally plausible but much less inflammatory ways that the group could divide or bond: for instance, loyalty to a particular football team, or coinciding circumstances involving family members, canine as well as human. During a discussion about music, singer Ramy Essam is namechecked – he was one of the subjects of *The Square*, having shot to fame in 2011 thanks to a series of anti-Mubarak songs. ("Those were the days", someone nostalgically remarks, as though they were decades rather than a couple of years earlier.)

Diab spares little when it comes to underscoring the van occupants' various physical discomforts: there's an excruciating mid-point moment when both Radwan (a diabetic) and A'isha need to urinate but are forbidden to leave the van. It's a baking hot summer's day in Cairo, so it's safe to assume that the inside of the van could easily double as an oven, something that becomes only briefly advantageous when it comes to drying off quickly after a water cannon is fired inside to try to calm things down (Tamer's futile use of his hole-ridden colander-helmet as a makeshift shield provides momentary light relief). The police cynically assume that perfectly genuine tension between the various factions is part of a ruse to blame them for mistreating their captives, and threaten to shoot them for any perceived misdemeanours – and in turn, the Islamists assume that the fact that a sniper is picking off police and military is part of an elaborate frame-up to make it look like a Muslim Brotherhood operation.

Even in an extreme situation, ideology can override rational thought: Badr (Mohamed Radwan), the bleeding victim of an assault inside the van initially refuses to allow Nagwa, a professional nurse, to treat him on the grounds that she's a woman, although Hossam's later need for more urgent medical treatment persuades even the devout A'isha to remove the pins whose usual function is to ensure that her hijab tightly covers her hair (she's just lost her father, and clearly doesn't want Fares to suffer the same fate). A neighbouring van has things even worse, as it appears more tightly packed (all we see are glimpses through the barred windows), and the film alludes to an earlier incident in which three dozen people

died under similar confinement. Small wonder that Mans, a DJ in more normal times, tries to blot everything out with his music, or that policeman Awad (Ahmed Abdel Hamid) decides to disobey orders for admirably humanitarian reasons, only to end up locked inside the van himself. At a time of extreme national volatility, nobody knows what's really going on at any given moment, not even if they still enjoy freedom of movement and communication.

Diab's direction is admirably controlled: given that he had to restage protests outside on an impressive scale, involving hundreds of extras, it must have frequently been tempting to take the camera outside the van to show off his resource-marshalling skills. But he remains strictly true to his concept: aside from brief excursions a few inches outside the rear door, the camera never leaves the confines of the central location, the film relying as much on Ahmed Adnan's terrifyingly vivid sound design as on the often very fleeting glimpses of what's happening – in particular the shockingly sudden attacks by a sniper and a mob wielding what appears to be an infinite supply of rocks. Cinematographer Ahmed Gabr constantly finds imaginative ways of varying what might initially appear to be hopelessly limited source materials, in particular the massed use of fireworks and green laser pointers (the latter foreshadowed by Fares being chided by Nagwa for using one in the van) in a way that makes the protests seem more like an all-night rave than the alarming demonstration of unchecked mob rule that they actually are. Khaled Dagher's score is all the more effective for being utilised so sparely, usually during the film's rare moments of quiet contemplation.

The absence of a coherently conclusive ending might seem frustrating at first, but it perfectly mirrors the film's subject. Four years on from the summer of 2013, Egyptian society remains as riven as ever, and few people watching *Clash* will be unaware of the subsequent rise of Daesh/Islamic State in neighbouring countries on either side, and their ideological sympathies with many of the van's occupants. But Diab, just as he did in *Cairo 678* (a film about sexual harassment that also had much to say about sexual frustration in an ultra-conservative society), makes a point of demonstrating the mechanisms via which people become radicalised, usually as a direct result of being oppressed by the authorities along the lines depicted here. And not just by the authorities – Badr, one of the most militant of the Islamists in the van, is also one of the more obvious victims, since he was attacked and wounded by one of the existing occupants almost as soon as he entered it. Throughout both his films to date, Diab repeatedly demonstrates that it's impossible to straightforwardly take sides, at least not without having to take uncomfortable truths on board.

The film itself enjoyed a happier ending – at least up to a point. Convinced that *Clash* would have been censored or even banned had it gone straight to Egyptian cinemas (much

of the filming had to be clandestine for this reason), Diab took advantage of French co-production contacts to secure a prestigious Cannes slot, effectively daring the government to interfere with its domestic release. After it opened to considerable success, it was picked as the official Egyptian Oscar submission – which might seem surprising for a film that shows government officials in a less than flattering light, but Diab's theory was that by appearing to endorse the film, the authorities intended to undermine the filmmaker's various accusations against them. The events in *Clash* may be four years old, but the struggle clearly continues.

Michael Brooke is a freelance writer and multimedia producer. A regular contributor to* Sight & Sound *and the* Journal of Film Preservation*, he has also written numerous booklet essays for Arrow, the BFI, Criterion, Indicator and Second Run, as well as chapters for the books* Polish Cinema Now! *(2010),* Shadows of Progress *(2010),* 39 Steps to the Genius of Hitchcock *(2012),* Gothic: The Dark Heart of Film *(2013) and* Trzynasty miesiąc. Kino Braci Quay *(2010).

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR MOHAMED DIAB

HOW DID THE IDEA OF CLASH COME TO BE?

Cairo 678 was released in Egypt a few weeks before the 2011 revolution. I took part in the movement and soon enough I wanted to make a film about it. But for the last five years, things have changed so fast that each idea became obsolete even before we started writing. Only after the 2013 events did my brother Khaled and I discuss the idea of *Clash*, which he came up with. We got down to work by bouncing ideas back and forth, thinking that this was the best way to talk about what's happening in Egypt. Since 2013, the conflicting forces involved have been the same: the revolutionaries, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the army. Ironically, the only relevant subject we could find about the revolution was its failure.

WHAT PART DID YOU TAKE IN THE 2011 REVOLUTION?

I drew upon my newfound fame: *Cairo 678* had just been released, I had been on television, people recognised me. Today in Egypt, people know me more as an activist than as a filmmaker! I wasn't one of the ideologists of the movement, but rather one of its promoters. I put my job as a director aside to fight, alongside the Egyptian people, for democracy. I felt it was my duty. I always thought I would go back to making films once things got settled, and I thought, as many people did, that it was the case during the 2012 presidential election. But, unfortunately, everything has changed since then.

WHERE WERE YOU AT THE TIME WHEN THE FILM IS SET, A FEW WEEKS AFTER PRESIDENT MOHAMMED MORSI STEPPED DOWN?

I was in Cairo, and just like any other Egyptian, I got carried away by what was happening. All these events took place on the streets; you couldn't help being confronted with or even mixed up in it just by going across the city to get to work. At that time I demonstrated against Morsi. Of course, he had been elected democratically, but we would have been

better off with a Mandela of sorts, somebody who would have stood out from the crowd and reconciled the Egyptian people.

But we knew that wouldn't be the case right from the first round of the elections: the winners, both candidates on the second round, were the pro-islamist Morsi, and somebody from Mubarak's former regime. We were caught between a rock and a hard place. That night I cried, literally. After a year under Morsi's presidency, during which he divided the country, there was the biggest demonstration Egypt had ever known, to call for his resignation and new elections. I took part in the demonstration. But neither Morsi nor the Muslim Brotherhood did anything. Maybe it was too late, anyway... The film shows what happened after Morsi's deposition, the demonstrations that set Cairo on fire and the casualties that followed. But one should choose one's words carefully, because Egypt is really black-and-white right now. For instance, if you use the word "coup" to describe Morsi's removal from office, your choice of word deems you are on the Muslim Brotherhood side; likewise if you refer to it as a "revolution", that word would deem you to be on the military's side. I would like people to watch my film without wondering all the time which side I am on. It isn't a film about politics, it is a film about the human rather than the political aspect of things.

HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE CHARACTERS FOR YOUR STORY?

My brother and I spent a lot of time thinking about that. We thought about some people we know, we wanted to show several aspects of Egypt. Yet it isn't a "panel" in the sociological sense: the proportion between the revolutionaries and the Muslim Brothers isn't as balanced in real life... We tried to think about ordinary Egyptians. We wrote thirteen versions of the script...

Obviously, the first characters were the journalist and the photographer. The journalist was inspired by Mohamed Fahmy, an Egyptian-Canadian who used to work for Al-Jazeera. He spent a year and a half in prison, and afterwards he sued the network, which had let him down. In the film he is an Egyptian-American, it was a way to address the increasing xenophobia in Egypt, and the constant conspiracy theory going on there.

Zein, the photographer, was inspired by Mahmoud Abu Zeid, also known as Shawkan, who used to cover the demonstrations for an Egyptian newspaper, and who has been in jail for almost three years now. Shawkan was on the side of the revolution, but then anyone could get arrested, especially journalists, who were branded as traitors by both camps. In a way, both characters are reflections of myself: I also take pictures and I am claustrophobic too.

TELL US ABOUT THE GROUP OF OPPONENTS TO THE MUSLIM BROTHERS...

Those people are on the street for various reasons, but essentially they get arrested by mistake. There is a family: parents and their adolescent son. The mother is a nurse. She cannot stand the pervading chaos any more. Her husband is probably a civil servant, although it isn't said in the film. They belong to the middle class. There are also two young men: one of them isn't politically active, he was just following his pal. The homeless man is angry because his dog died. This character is a good example of what I was trying to show: if you saw him on the street, you would think that he is a thug. But his genuine sadness about the death of his dog makes him human. You see, this is what the film is about, you don't know anyone until you really know him.

AMONG THE MUSLIM BROTHERS, THERE ARE MEMBERS AND SYMPATHISERS...

Indeed, we don't know exactly how many members they have in Egypt, especially as their organization is now being tracked and declared illegal. As for them, they see themselves as a kind of clandestine resistance... I tried to clearly separate the two subgroups. For instance, the old man and the girl with a veil are religious sympathisers, but not members. Although I am against the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology, I can still portray them as human beings. You can't understand someone if you can't humanize them. In the film you see their collapse, the fight between their elders and their youth, who are now leaning towards violence as a form of retaliation. Understanding the Muslim Brotherhood and what they've been through, is very essential to understanding the roots of extremism.

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND DAECH?

The answer is in the film: indeed, the exposure to brutality and violence leads some characters to consider joining the extremists in Syria. In Egypt, this is what is happening: the Muslim Brotherhood is collapsing, so that many youths quit it and go to Daech. If Had Badr, the Salafi, would have mentioned Syria in the truck at the beginning of the film, nobody would have listened to him. But after the cycle of violence, resulting in one guy losing his father and another losing his child, it becomes easy for the extremist to recruit.

WHY DID YOU NOT SHOW THE MUSLIM BROTHERS IN THE ACT OF PRAYER?

There was a rather funny sequence that I edited out. Everybody was clueless about where Mecca was, and all prayed in different directions. But if I had shown the Muslim Brothers

praying, I would have been told: “So these are the real believers, then...”. I know that each scene will be analysed, looked into, construed. I therefore tried to get rid of the most trivial controversies...

COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT THE PROCESS OF MAKING THE FILM?

Technically this was a complex film to make. One year before shooting, we created a wooden replica of the truck that we put in an apartment. We rehearsed with the actors for several months, and they helped us fine-tune the characters. We started by improvising and the writing became gradually more specific. And then we shot those rehearsals: it was a chance to shoot the film before the actual shoot which gave us some kind of live story-board. Simultaneously, we built the truck that you see in the film, which is identical to those used by the police. It’s a real truck you can drive. The film was shot within 8 square meters, over 26 days, with all the actors present all the time.

THE ACTION SCENES ARE QUITE IMPRESSIVE.

The first one was shot in 2 days, with 500 extras in a studio. It was hell, mostly because there is no stunt culture in Egypt. The stunt coordinator would tell me: “This looks real, because it is real.” The extras really fought each other, some of them even got injured. The bridge scene was shot in the city, on a huge interchange, which is one of the busiest highways in Cairo. The shooting caused unbelievable mayhem, for people thought this was yet another demonstration and walked away. Today, when people see a gathering in the street, they think it is a demonstration and they get scared! We shot for 12 hours straight, with a passionate team. I guess we got infiltrated by both sides, the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the police, with each believing that the other supported us. Making this film under extreme time constraints lead me to some weird talent, which consists of giving orders into the microphone exactly between the characters’ lines!

THE SHOT WHERE THE SNIPER EVENTUALLY GETS KILLED IS PARTICULARLY EMOTIONAL: THE FEELING WE GET IS OF A TERRIBLE WASTE OF HUMAN LIVES...

The film strives to avoid easy answers. I’m 100% against violence. That scene starts with the emotional soldiers losing their colleague then goes to the killer on the ground bleeding to death. You decide how you feel about it. Throughout the story we see how someone can turn into that killer, and we understand how a police officer could become so brutal. It’s the vicious circle of violence.

WHAT DOES THE END OF THE FILM MEAN?

The truck gets caught up in a chaotic demonstration, in which it isn’t clear to us nor the characters whose side these demonstrators are on. The irony is that they’ve been struggling since the beginning to get out of the truck, but and now, faced with insane fury, they find themselves helping each other to remain inside the truck, away from the madness outside. Are they going to die? I don’t know. Admittedly, it is a pretty grim prospect, but this is no different from what we have in Egypt right now.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY TO THE PEOPLE OF EGYPT?

Several things, with the most obvious being that if we carry on like that, we’ll never get through this... But I’m still dreaming of the day when someone from the Revolution, who represents neither Islamic law nor martial law, will eventually run the country.

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Clash appears in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 5.1 surround sound. The High Definition master was supplied by Pyramide Distribution.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet produced by Kevin Lambert
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Technical Producer James White
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Subtitling DCU
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SPECIAL THANKS

James Agnew, Alex Agran, Michael Brooke, Mohamed Diab, Ian Froggatt, Mohamed Hefzy, Jon Sadler, Agathe Valentin, Andrew Ward


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