

REVIEW



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Photo courtesy of BAFF

Documentary chronicles fight for Egypt's temples

Gathering archival footage, hour-long film takes place in 1950s

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The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Screening Thursday as part of the Beirut Art Film Festival, Olivier Lemaitre's 2019 documentary "Saving Egypt's Temples" looks back on how the world almost lost a treasure trove of Pharaonic heritage.

Gathering archival footage, expert knowledge and testimonies from people involved in the historic rescue mission, the hourlong film begins in the '50s, when Gamal Abdel-Nasser announced his plans to build the High Aswan Dam.

Home to hundreds of ancient temples and monuments, the region of what used to be Nubia would be entirely submerged by a 5,000-square-kilometer reservoir lake,

wiping away centuries of history and knowledge.

By 1954, the issue was garnering international attention. Archaeologists and journalists began raising awareness about the temples soon to be lost. Egyptologists were given only a few years to salvage what they could before the water levels made digging impossible.

French Egyptologist Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt rallied the international rescue mission, seeking to beat the clock and save priceless heritage, such as the Ramses II temple Abu Simbel, one dedicated to his wife Queen Nefetari and other temples on the Nile's banks.

Interviews with Desroches-Noblecourt, now in her later years, recall the race to gather enough money, expertise and manpower to protect Egypt's history in the face of its modernization.

The doc focuses mostly on the efforts to save Abu Simbel. Many visitors to the temple today would never think it once sat 65 meters downhill, where Lake Nasser now lies.

Carved into the rock face, rather

than built from stone blocks, the temple posed a challenge. It could not be moved and so some suggested letting it sink and having visitors view it as an underwater attraction.

Made of fragile sandstone, this would be impossible, as would a glass dome over the underwater temple. In the end, the only possible solution was to cut the whole temple into moveable pieces and reassemble it on higher ground.

Their progress makes for tense storytelling as the workers tried to save the temple, while work on the dam continued and water began flooding in. By 1996 they had managed to dismantle it and it would take another two years to reopen, following a complicated reconstruction.

The fate of other temples is also shown, such as how Amada temple was moved 3 kilometers away on rails and jacks, saving the temple's near-perfect colored reliefs. Debd temple was moved all the way to Madrid and reconstructed there, as payment for Spain's aid. Dendur temple now sits inside New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Gerf Hussein, however, and so many others, now lie at the bottom of Lake Nasser, either too fragile to survive relocation or lost to the race against the rising waters.

The documentary offers an interesting watch, with knowledge about sites that many take for granted being able to visit today. The scale of such a project – moving entire temples – seems unfathomable and may leave audiences mind-boggled long after the credits roll.

The tale also highlights striking similarities with Lebanon's currently threatened heritage and archaeological sites in the Bisri Valley, which recently had a partial collapse due to the heavy rain.

While it's unlikely the world will rally to save Bisri, which also faces issues caused by plans for a dam, it's definitely food for thought. Lemaitre storytelling is compelling and of interest to lovers of archeology and heritage.

"Saving Egypt's Temples" will be screened free of charge at ALBA, Auditorium 2 on Jan. 16 at 7 p.m.