



# You will die at twenty

**Director:** Amjad Abu Alala

**Country:** Sudan

**Date:** 2019

A review by Jay Weissberg for *Variety*:

The visual assurance of “You Will Die at Twenty” is the most immediately notable element of Sudanese director Amjad Abu Alala’s accomplished feature debut. Beautifully composed and boasting the kind of sensitivity to light sources and color tonalities usually ascribed to top photographers, the film lovingly depicts the remote east-central region of Sudan as a quasi-magical place of sand, sky and the colors of the Nile. The story, about a young man raised to believe an unfortunate event at his birth has condemned him to die at 20, generally has an equally clear-cut quality, simple in the telling yet matched to the pictorial tenor. Some may find a clash between its fable-like guilelessness and other moments when the outside world’s cynicism breaks in, yet the film remains a touching, nonjudgmental depiction of people circumscribed by superstition. Festival play is assured.

This pocket of Sudan is both life-giving, situated between the Blue and the White Nile, and pitiless in its desert harshness. After giving birth to a baby boy, Sakina (Islam Mubarak) goes to have him blessed; during a religious ceremony, a dancer counting off in a trance stops on the number 20 just when the sheikh gives his benediction. “God’s command is inevitable,” the old man says, and everyone takes it as a sign that the child will die at 20. The pressure on the family is terrible, and Sakina’s husband, Alnoor (Talal Afifi), leaves to find work abroad, unable to cope with the sadness of knowing his only child won’t live to reach full manhood.



The boy, Muzamil (Moatasem Rashid), is raised knowing his fate, taunted by other kids as the “son of death.” Sakina, overprotective, keeps him out of school as if she can somehow stave off fate, yet she never questions its inevitability. Muzamil, however, wants to learn, and as a teen (Mustafa Shehata) he’s allowed to go to a new sheikh for instruction in the Quran. Abu Alala includes an unfortunate scene here, in which the religious man has Muzamil remove his top, then praises his beauty while stroking his torso and telling him to come regularly for instruction. The problem isn’t the homoeroticism or the implication of sexual abuse, but that the director doesn’t do anything with it — the scene has no repercussions and the clear inference is subsequently ignored as if it never happened.



Muzamil turns out to be excellent at memorizing and learns the Quran by heart. He’s also working for the village shopkeeper, delivering bootleg alcohol to Sulaiman (Mahmoud Elsaraj), a cynical man returned after years abroad who’s shacking up with wise prostitute Set Alnesea (Amal Mustafa). Sulaiman is the catalyst for Muzamil to question his fate and his surroundings, introducing him to cinema and the notion of a world outside. The character is a little too

familiar, the use of cinema as a way of opening Muzamil's eyes a bit too much like a first film device on the part of the director, and yet Abu Alala just makes it work, as images of Hind Rustum from "Cairo Station" (the influence of Youssef Chahine is obvious) introduce the young man to freewheeling female sexuality, and Jadallah Jubara's shots of Khartoum in the 1970s reveal a different Sudan from the one crushed by dictatorship and fundamentalism.

These scenes sit oddly with the continued fatalism of Sakina and her son, the former consciously evoking the Virgin Mary in her position as a mother aware that her child is destined to die young (there's even a *pietà* tableau). The parallel feels forced, and Sakina has no trajectory in which she questions the superstitions that have kept her doleful and static. Even more uncertain is the way Abu Alala uses the character of Naima (Bunna Khalid), a radiant young woman inexplicably in love with Muzamil. If she's not merely sorry for him, the script needs to give a sense of why these two disparate personalities would be a good romantic match outside of Naima's pure likability.

Despite these provisos, "You Will Die at Twenty" remains an affecting work and an impressive first feature thanks in great part to its splendid visual design. Together with cinematographer Sébastien Goepfert, the director presents a world of sharp contrasts, where dream-like shots of religious votaries floating down the river, or conical shrines piercing the solid blue sky, are contrasted with a dark interior pierced by shafts of light, such as the room where Sakina marks off the days of Muzamil's life. A dream scene of the young man resting his head on his father's stomach, light coming in from a window in the background, is a model of composition.

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