



ANDREA RISEBOROUGH

# LUXOR

A FILM BY  
ZEINA DURRA

IN ASSOCIATION WITH FRONT ROW FILMED ENTERTAINMENT FILM FACTORY AND SHOEBOX FILMS. "LUXOR" ANDREA RISEBOROUGH, KARIM SALEH, MICHAEL LANDES, SHEREEN REDA  
DIRECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY ZELMIRA GANZA PRODUCTION DESIGNER MOHAMED FAKHRY EDITED BY ANDREA CHIGNOLI MUSIC NASOUIY LINARES COSTUME DESIGNER REEM SALAMA  
CASTING BY KATE RINGSELL ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS DANIEL ZISKIND IHAB AVOUB EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS PAUL WEBSTER HISHAM AL GHANIM  
PRODUCED BY MOHAMED HEFZY GIANLUCA CHAKRA MAMDOUH SABA ZEINA DURRA WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY ZEINA DURRA  
INTERNATIONAL SALES TOTEM FILMS





# SYNOPSIS

When British aid worker Hana returns to the ancient city of Luxor, she comes across Sultan, a talented archeologist and former lover. As she wanders, haunted by the familiar place, she struggles to reconcile the choices of the past with the uncertainty of the present.



# DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

ZEINA DURRA received her BA in Oriental Studies from Oxford University and MFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Film Programme.

Her directorial debut, **THE IMPERIALISTS ARE STILL ALIVE!** premiered in US Dramatic Competition at **Sundance 2010**.

British born of Middle Eastern and Bosnian descent, Zeina spent over a decade living in New York, and after making her first film, she took some time off to have a family.

She is now back having just shot her next feature, **LUXOR**, starring Andrea Riseborough which will premiere in World Dramatic Competition at Sundance 2020. Zeina is now based out of London, and is currently developing various film projects.



# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

## The unsettling darkness of our times

made me want to write this story set in a place which is a monument to past civilisations whose central beliefs, temples and obsession with the afterlife, were all rooted deeply in the idea of light overcoming darkness.

I then started to think about a time when things seemed simpler and I questioned whether that was because of one's youth/naïveté or because the world was in a place that seemed more hopeful, moving in a direction that was more just. For me, that period when things seemed simpler was in my early twenties. Then I began to think about the idea of meeting someone twenty years later who you were once close to, in love with, and hopeful with, and it seemed like it would be a good way to explore this theme. That way you would be able to directly see this passing of time and where it has brought you or what choices you made and how they shaped your life.

I sense (and I'm sure most people do) a great confusion and a lot of fear with the rise of the far right, the questions that are raised by our inability to control or understand where technology is taking us like the internet, questions about controlling it and censorship, and the instability of division and war. Hana is a character who has put herself at the forefront of the insta-

bility by working as a surgeon at a clinic on the Syrian border. She is exhausted after her post, the struggle between life and death that she saw on a daily basis has taken its toll. The pain that she carries after witnessing these atrocities, first hand, weighs her down and of course makes her ask a lot of existential questions. She is also a woman in her early forties and her own window to be a mother is closing.

Luxor is a city of archeology. The excavation of the ancient sites is so similar to psychoanalysis and works in a very visual way, the digging up, the excavation. Freud was particularly obsessed with archeology. If you go to his study in Hampstead, London, you can see his collection of ancient Egyptian artefacts. He believed that excavation of the mind is essentially what psychoanalysis is and that he could learn from archeology. I loved this idea and felt that the imagery of the digs and sites, was a strong non-verbal way of addressing Hana's existential crisis, something that will stay in the audience's subconscious.

I wanted to make a film that transports people to this amazing place, but I didn't want them to escape into some kind of orientalist fantasy, I wanted the themes of our times to be present.



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**| Tell us the origin of the story.**

I was sitting at home with the flu watching movies. My children were asleep. I had thought I was pregnant with our third but then wasn't and I had just heard that a movie that I had been working on and was maybe going to get green lit, had been put on hold and I was a little down, plus the

flu and hormones from the chemical pregnancy. I had this really reflective moment and looked at my life and my choices and thought about what it would have been like if I hadn't done those things or had ended up doing something else. That night I went to bed and had a dream about Luxor and a woman walking around the temples and ruins. I had been there once as a child. Somehow the confluence of feelings and ideas merged into this idea. I called my friend Zelmira (the DP) and told her about the other project being on hold and my Luxor dream and riffing on the phone with

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her I said that I wanted to make this film in Egypt. All I said is that It was nostalgic but not in an Orientalist way, it was a combination of the past and present, nostalgia in the face of our troubled times and also growing up and looking back. She asked if she could shoot it. I said yes. I then wrote a page of notes and called Moh Hefzy my Egyptian producer who randomly happened to be in London . We met up. He read the page and said he would do it on the spot and it really starts from there.

As it developed I realised that I was making something that was coming from a place of collective consciousness. It's almost like the film wrote itself and I was this conduit. I wanted to deal with these feelings of loss, loss of a world gone bad with the current mood of right wing Governments, Brexit (which devastated me.. The post world war project has kept us out of wars for the last 70 years) the environmental emergency, seeing a lot of women around me thinking they had time to have children and then it was harder than they thought.

I had already done a research trip for another project to Ramtha, Jordan which is on the Syrian border and where MSF had a special unit where they would treat victims from the war in Syria. MSF kindly took me around and let me interview some of the doctors and nurses. I got a really good sense of what it was like for them there from their stories and also because I speak Arabic the Arab nurses also really opened up about the horrific things they had seen. MSF did not want to be mentioned in the film, which I understand, so although I did my research in the unit could not state that Hana worked for them for the purposes of the film. I think my experience on

the border and seeing where they operate, what sort of things they deal with and the savageness of war and seeing amputees sitting in one large room waiting to go back to Syria as they didn't want to stay in Jordan, they wanted to go back to their families, really stuck with me. There was one story about a mother who was injured. She could only bring one of her two injured children with her. So she left the other to die and brought one over. She begged the doctors to save the child she brought as he was all she had left. At the time I had just had our second baby and I was totally traumatised by this story. I still can't forget it. I really wanted to have this dimension to the film. I didn't want it about someone who was just "lost" but someone who really had put themselves on the frontline and the repercussions of that as a person and as a woman who has the ability to bring life into this world.

Then I had two other conversations with really interesting friends. One was with the writer Negar Azimi. She told me to check out an interview she had done in her magazine Bidoun with the archeologist Salima Ikram about a feminist tomb in the Valley of the Kings. The article was about KV10 the tomb that these two ladies took over, defacing the King's face and painting themselves all over the place. I then called Salima and told her about my film about the themes of feminism in a patriarchal world, of a character looking for rebirth or ways to understand the cycles of life etc It seemed that Ancient Egyptian philosophy was very in tune with all the things I was thinking about.

Salima really helped me. She showed me places in Setty 1st's tomb which had imagery that would translate Hana's experience like the barge where



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Ra comes back having brought back light into the world in the morning. The Ancient Egyptians believe that every night there is a battle for the Sun to come out and when it does light is victorious. There was also this beautiful moment on set when Salima who had chosen the shabtis for the KV10 tomb talked about baby Horus and Isis and how it was the archetype for the suckling

baby Jesus and Mary image. She talked about how people would wear baby horus suckling on Isis for luck, a symbol of birth and rebirth. These moments in my film seem so powerful, so contemporary, and so unbroken by this strong lineage that has been going on for millenia. I was also pregnant when I wrote the script so that might be where some of the mysticism comes from.

I then spoke to Lydia Yee who is the Chief Curator of the Whitechapel Gallery in London, and told her about the film. She asked me if I went had gone to see Freud's house as he was obsessed with the relationship between archeology and digging and psychoanalysis. That was the next piece in the puzzle that made it all make sense to me. This idea that I could show without words or description, a place that had been dug up, where things from the past had been found. It was a lovely silent way to show what was going on in Hana's mind.

I wanted the film to have this spiritual dimension via a tourist group that go to understand the

mysteries of Egypt. This was the hardest part to research as so much of it is just eccentrics and also who am I to judge? I looked up "female cults Luxor" google and found the name of this one lady, Nicky Scully. I emailed her and we then had a phone conversation with her and Indigo a lady that she works with. Nicky explained to me that she had gone to Egypt for the first time in 1978

as her husband managed the Grateful Dead. They had a rock concert at the pyramids. She explained that she then went to Luxor and knew she had to come back. She has spent her life taking people around these sites and explaining to them the mysteries of Ancient Egypt. At first I must say I was skeptical, but Nicky and Indigo have a way of translating this ancient information into something contemporary and I found that fascinating. Indigo then said she would act in the film which was perfect.

The project came together in 3 days and was financed. It was a very strange/lucky series of

events.

“ I wanted the film to have this spiritual dimension via a tourist group that go to understand the mysteries of Egypt. ”

**LUXOR is a departure tonely from your first feature, can you tell us how you have evolved as a filmmaker?**

My first film is an explosion of life, of youth, of navigating seemingly contradictory situations. This film is more subdued, there are moments

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of memory and laughter but it is a smaller cast, and really just focuses on Hana and her internal life. However, the same ideas of telling a story through texture, mood, juxtaposition are there it's just that the nature of this story is different so they seem like a departure from one another.

I almost see this film as 10 years on. A quieter film that takes you on an internal journey so the tone is naturally different.. It's a reflective film about the past, about processing it and not finding an immediate solution but giving life, or just feeling things again, a chance. There is a sense of mourning something be it youth, purity or call it inexperience which leads to absolute optimism, and maybe realizing for the first time that decisions have been made that might be harder to change. I think the older you are the more numb you can get as it's not the first time you are hurt or disappointed or have experienced trauma and you can just shut down. Hana makes a choice to overcome this.

**Hana is in a vulnerable state and trying to heal from the war, why go to Luxor (as opposed to home)? How much research did you do about the setting before deciding to shoot in Egypt?**

As I mentioned before I didn't really have a choice about Egypt. I dreamt about Luxor and the film came from that dream. Then as I researched it further and further, pieces started to come together under the guidance of the archeologist Salima Ikram and others.

**The quiet, meditative scenes in the film are soothing - what was your intention with them? (There's a lot of quiet scenes, where she's walking alone, there's no dialogue)**

So the film had a whole load more of those silent walking scenes but we had to take them out for the sake of the audience's sanity!! I wanted to create a rhythm of a traveler alone. I have travelled alone and it is just the best because you go for days not speaking to people and then you meet a random group of person and have funny experiences with them. You spend a lot of time taking in things subconsciously when you travel alone, because you have the silence. Those scenes were there to show her being alone, travelling alone, and to show that these places were also speaking to her in the silence, she was downloading information, being given a second chance through the idea of rebirth.

**Can you talk about your casting process and working with Andrea and Karim?**

A lot of the Egyptian actors I had wanted to work with were not able to work in Egypt anymore so I looked around for other Arab actors. I knew Karim, who is Lebanese, from *Imperialists* as he had a small role in that. That's how I chose him, he is also someone who loves to joke around and live in the moment so I thought he would be good for a single archeology professor in his early forties. Kate Ringsell helped us cast the lead. We talked a lot about intelligent actresses that also have



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a vulnerability, also someone who you could see is an aid worker, Andrea became an obvious choice. I needed someone who could express so much from just the way she walks, moves, looks at things as a lot of her existential crisis is really about how she conveys it. We had a really amazing working relationship which was a blessing as it was the toughest shooting situation. We trusted each other and I think that's how that amazing performance came about. It was like a sacred space in this totally chaotic production which wasn't necessarily always production's fault, we were just shooting in ancient ruins with no ability to block anything off, ie working with tourists asking them to just hold off for one minute while we shoot! Shooting in Egypt is wonderful but totally chaotic.

Salima Ikram the archeologist is one of the most senior archeologists and Egyptologists. She is a Professor at Cairo University and is often found on the Discovery Channel being interviewed. She was a total natural. As a professor she has to stand up and give lectures and she was just such a natural actress. She also sorted the Production Design department out by opening up KV10 just for us, and totally recreating the dig for us with her work-

ers. It was the most amazing experience, very dusty, but amazing.

Shereen Reda is a well known Egyptian actress, she is half Serbian half Egyptian ( like my mix of half Herzegovinian half Arab) and I had seen her in a couple of Egyptian things. She was always really good and doesn't have that melodrama that some actresses in the region carry with them at all times. I had cast her in another movie that I hope to make soon and so I knew her from that.

“ We trusted each other and I think that's how that amazing performance came about. ”

**Obviously shooting on location at a place like Luxor can have its own challenges. Do you have any anecdotes to share from production?**

There were so many. We shot in 18 days so you can imagine how nuts it was. I had my third child, our 4 month old baby on set. When the location was too far or hot, or rural so more a chance of him catching something, I left him with our nanny at the Winter Palace. However, I still had to nurse so I would pump the milk, put it in an icebox, it would get driven to a boat on the Nile, then taken across the Nile and then someone would collect the milk and walk it to the hotel. At the time we just did it but now looking back that was quite an epic thing to pull off in the middle of shooting. I used this tiny pump that goes in your shirt that nobody can see, called

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the Elvie, except for the fact that it has this little light that shines. Andrea would call me 'Robo Boob' as I would be directing but with flashing lights in my shirt. That always made us laugh our heads off.

Then half way through my other two children and the DPs two children joined us out on set and it was a lot of fun. They were really good and on one occasion when they were too noisy we just put them in a production van and the driver would drive them around for a while! It was doable. I think that children on set should be encouraged. The scene in the phone booth was actually not even in our shooting schedule. I had stumbled across the phone booth area as it was in a part of the hotel no guests go to anymore and our production office was just opposite. I felt so nostalgic when I saw these phone booths. I remembered all the times, when travelling in far flung locations, when I could only call from a telephone booth and sometimes I would call from hotels like this one, that I would go to just to make a call.

It really tied in with Hana and Sultan's relationship, as this is how they would have communicated when they met, mobiles weren't widely used then. I then brought Andrea and Karim to the place and explained to them how it was like a relic and we played with the idea of being nostalgic with these phones. Plus the carpet backed booths were just so amazing, such texture.

The supporting actor situation was always amusing. I had seen this Egyptian woman tourist guide in head to toe leopard print with a hijab and a cowboy hat, speaking in Chinese. I took a video of her and the local casting guys found out she lived in Cairo and it was too expensive to fly her in. I was devastated.... But I still wanted to keep

the idea of the Chinese tourists who have Egyptian Chinese speaking guides. These guides are everywhere speaking Japanese, Greek, French, you name it. Anyway, I had asked for a bus load of Chinese tourists and was assured they would show up. The day of the scene I am wondering where the bus load of Chinese tourists is. Instead the local casting guy got me a Chinese family a mother, father, 4 month old baby and 3 year old girl. It was sort of perfect, working out way better than the Chinese tour group, a lovely Chinese family on holiday not in a hoard of tourists.. Although how he found a Chinese family that live permanently in Luxor I will never know!

As I had mentioned previously I had had a chemical pregnancy that didn't work out and when I was location scouting I went to this holy temple Abydos, which although unseen in the film, psychologically it plays a big part in the narrative. I was walking around and then this guide said to me, all the villagers walk around this ancient door to get pregnant. I laughed and did it and asked for a third child and a few weeks later I was pregnant! It felt sort of perfect that then he spent the first few months of his life in Egypt among the temples and tombs that I had asked for him in.

For the trance sequence I had not thought of using our children but on the morning of the shoot on set, something was missing. We called Zelmira's husband and our nanny back at the hotel and asked them to get the girls in white dresses and bring them as fast as possible to set. Strangely, although we live on other sides of the Atlantic, one of Zelmira's daughters had the same white dress as one of mine and so it looked like they were in costume. I then put my son on the stones ( we decided he had to have a blanket underneath



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him, although I was torn!) and very much in the moment I directed this scene with no plan, this is very unlike me as I am always super planned, or I have a plan that then I move away from. Here there was no plan just directing with pure gut. It was one of those other worldly moments. I later found out that the chamber we had shot in in the trance scene, where Hana sees the baby, and the chamber where she has the intimate conversation with Sultan at night in Luxor Temple, are both the Birthing Chambers in those temples where birth and rebirth are celebrated. The film is full of coincidences like this. Salima was particularly excited about me nursing my baby boy in Setti I's tomb because she said he would have loved it, having a baby in there who is feeding from his mother. That made me happy.

What was really interesting was that the whole crew felt the energy and felt that we had to be respectful. I was worried that we might not all see eye to eye on this. We even had to do an offering for Sekhmet. I went into the temple before we shot and felt really unwelcome and it wasn't just me. So we researched what the Ancient Egyptians did before worshipped there. We recreated it, much to the horror of the guard looking on, left some things for her and returned. She seemed to be really happy when we went back. That temple is very alive. My husband, who was visiting when I shot that scene, started chatting to some older French ladies who come and visit this temple and Sekhmet regularly because

they felt a special energy in this temple. He was fascinated by this notion. That was also part of the great thing of not being able to lock everything down. The set was open so the tourists would kindly wait for us, but we were in there shooting with visitors the whole time.

We shot the film in 18 days. Sometimes I would have 20 minutes for a scene. My brain would literally melt as I had to think so fast. But we did it!!

“ We even had to do an offering for Sekhmet. ”

**How did you get the Winter Palace to agree to let you shoot there? It is an incredible place.**

Our Associate Producer, Daniel Ziskind, knew the Sofitel group and spoke to them. It was so hard to leave that hotel as we also all lived there for about 8 weeks! It was heaven to be in a place with so much history from Tutankahmoun being announced there, to Agatha Christie writing *Death on the Nile* there.... It's a special special place. It's also perfect because it doesn't have a flashy hotel vibe, all the old fixtures are there, so you really feel the space and what has gone past.

**Tells us about the romance between Hana and Sultan. Was it meant to be healing for Hana?**

So the romance with Sultan was tricky. I did not want it to seem like a guy had come and

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saved the day, as that is never a healthy solution. It was more that meeting him, and visiting a place where she had been so happy once, reminded Hana of how she has the ability to feel that way again about life. Reminiscing with him, with someone who knew her so well, was comforting. So he brought her comfort and although she runs away from him as she just can't take even the idea of his messing about and his coldness, then she realizes what the hell, I might as well give this a go. I have nothing to lose, I want to live and I want to feel. I did not want him to feel like that sort of quiet strong male who gives her this sense of security. He's a kid, he has to grow up too, probably more than her, men often have the luxury of not growing up as fast as women as they are coddled by society, society is less judgmental of them and their choices. Karim as an actor pointed out that Sultan probably wouldn't want to be an older father, but it's still different, he gets to be a father however old he is, the reality for Hana is that she might not ever be a mother and is this something she is OK with or does she want to try? These are all undercurrents, I didn't want any one thread to stick out, which was difficult. These ideas are difficult and triggers for people and I didn't want to simplify and give people answers or judge anyone. It's just about showing this messy soup that we are all in. ■





# CAST

**ANDREA RISEBOROUGH** \_\_\_\_\_ **Hana**

**KARIM SALEH** \_\_\_\_\_ **Sultan**

**SHEREEN REDA** \_\_\_\_\_ **Dunia**

**MICHAEL LANDES** \_\_\_\_\_ **Carl**



# CREW

**DIRECTION & SCREENPLAY** \_\_\_\_\_ **ZEINA DURRA**  
**PRODUCERS** \_\_\_\_\_ **MOHAMED HEFZY**  
**MAMDOUH SABA**  
**GIANLUCA CHAKRA**  
**ZEINA DURRA**  
**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER** \_\_\_\_\_ **PAUL WEBSTER**  
**ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS** \_\_\_\_\_ **DANIEL ZISKIND and IHAB AYOUB**  
**DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY** \_\_\_\_\_ **ZELMIRA GAINZA**  
**PRODUCTION DESIGNER** \_\_\_\_\_ **MOHAMED FAKHRY**  
**EDITED BY** \_\_\_\_\_ **ANDREA CHIGNOLI**  
**MUSIC** \_\_\_\_\_ **NASCUY LINARES**  
**COSTUME DESIGNER** \_\_\_\_\_ **REEM SALAMA**

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