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Film tackles gay sex taboo

By Hugh Miles in Cairo

A BIG-budget film in production in Cairo is about to roll back the limits of artistic acceptability in the Arab world by tackling a host of sensitive subjects including homosexuality. The Yacoubian Building is based on a novel of the same name and depicts life in Cairo as unfair and thuggish. The residents of a central Cairo apartment block, including a hashish-smoking doorman, a student-turned-prostitute, a corrupt imam and an ambitious politician, inhabit a world in which power means violence, terrorists are not born but made and sex is always exploitative. Despite its controversial depiction of sex and religion, the screenplay got past the censor. "Nothing that we tackle in the movie has never been covered before," said Marwan Hamid, the director. "It's just we are doing all the taboos at the same time.

The only really sensitive thing we are doing which has never been done before is talking about homosexuality in Egypt." Hatim, one of the residents, has a boyfriend who is a married policeman. In Egypt homosexuality is a serious offence. "This is what could get us into trouble," said Mr Hamid. "We present Hatim as a normal human being and this will lead to a lot of attacks when the movie comes out." The film, due out in January, had a budget of pounds 3.8 million, a tiny sum for Hollywood but more than double the cost of any other film in Arab cinema history. The cast, a who's who of the current Egyptian movie business, includes Nour El-Sherif, Adel Imam and Hind Sabri That the film is being made at all is a testament to the impact of the new media, the internet and satellite television. "The best we can hope for is that movies will make people more aware. It is people who make political change," said Mr Hamid.

