

CULTURE & ENTERTAINMENT

Celebrating religious diversity through art

By Mariya Petkova
Special to Daily News Egypt

On Tuesday evening, Cairenes had the rare chance to enjoy a talk by Egyptian screen legend Omar Sharif on interfaith relations.

Sharif's talk was part of the Caravan Festival of Arts organized by the St John's Church in Maadi that celebrates religious diversity through art, a much-needed initiative following the recent sectarian clashes that put a large question mark over religious harmony in Egypt.

At the festival, Sharif presented his film "Hassan and Morqos," which tackles the thorny subject of sectarian tension. The film tells the story of a sheikh and a Christian Orthodox priest who resist inter-religious violence and, while in hiding each disguised as belonging to the other faith, develop mutual respect and friendship.

Throughout his long career, Sharif has played characters of different ethnicities and religions, at home and in Hollywood. "I played St Peter in a four-hour film produced by the Vatican," he recounted. "I got a fatwa from Bin Laden to kill me because... St Peter says several times during the film:



Egyptian actor Omar Sharif.

"Jesus is the son of God."

As a response, Sharif wrote back on Bin Laden's blog. "I said to him, 'Look I'm an actor - I learn my lines and I speak them and they give me money so that I can survive with my children and grandchildren.'"

Sharif converted to Islam to marry the love of his life, Egyptian actress Faten Hamama. Tolerance and friendship of

all religions has marked his life and his personal philosophy. "I remember saying to [my son], 'Never ask a girl her religion or her nationality before you kiss her,'" he said.

The film screening with Sharif was preceded by a literary night on Saturday with famous journalist and writer Tahir Shah, the son of late Indian-born Sufi writer Idries Shah.

"The East and the West have always been joined in ways that we have forgotten," said Shah. "I think it is mumbo-jumbo that we don't understand each other. We are built on the same bedrock, on cultural bedrock," he added.

This year's Caravan Festival, which opened last Thursday with speeches by the Bishop of London Richard Chartres

and Egypt's Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, has also hosted an art exhibition.

More than 40 local and foreign visual artists presented their vision in a collection of paintings titled "Harmony: East and West." The works, displayed on the walls of the St John's Church, featured paintings by prominent artists Omar El-Fayoumi, Mohamed Abla and Mohamed Mandour.

According to Reverend Paul Gordon, one of the organizers, the Caravan Festival is a venue for an alternative inter-religious conversation. "[Some people] are disillusioned with the traditional interfaith dialogue which is always so high-level. Some people all the time, some conferences—very little going to the grass-roots level," he said.

"It is wonderful to see priests and imams on television working together and it allows the populous to do creative things together. But it takes vision on the ground and people with a real heart for that," he explained.

Since Thursday, thousands have attended the lectures and visited the exhibition. The organizers plan to donate 10 percent of the art sales to the Spirit of Giving which supports Muslim and Christian charities in Egypt.