



2009 / DRAMA / 90'

Language:

ENGLISH & FRENCH

Format: 1:85

Ratio: 16MM COLOUR / 1.66

Sound: DOLBY SRD

Lab: GTC (FRANCE)

Locations: LONDON

BRITANNY (SAINT MALO)

PACA (CAVAILLON)

Producer
JEAN BRÉHAT

Co-producers
BERTRAND FAIVRE
MATTHIEU DE BRACONIER

Associate Producer
MURIEL MERLIN

Line Producers
CLAIRE BODECHON
VICTORIA GOODALL

Post-Production Supervisor
CEDRIC ETTOUATI

1st Assistant Director
MATHIEU SCHIFFMAN

Script Girl
VIRGINIE BARBAY

Sound
PHILIPPE LECOEUR
FRANCK RUBIO
OLIVIER WALCZAK

Music
ARMAND AMAR
Production Designer
JEAN MARC TRAN TAN BÂ

Editor
YANNICK KERGOAT
Director of Photography
JEROME ALMERAS

Scriptwriters
RACHID BOUCHAREB
ZOE GALERON
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Still Photographer
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Production Manager (UK)
FARAH ABUSHWESHA
Production Coordinator (UK)
VALENTINA BRAZZINI
Location Manager (UK)
CAROLINE BARNES

Production
3B PRODUCTIONS
Co-production
ARTE
THE BUREAU
TASSILI
With the assistance of
FRANCE 3
REGION PACA
ACSE
CNC

A film by RACHID BOUCHAREB

Starring BRENDA BLETHYN & SOTIGUI KOUYATÉ



LONDON RIVER



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'London River'
is about
love, hope,
vulnerability,
& above all:
humanity.

London 2005

It's the story of Ousmane and Mrs Sommers, both humble people living ordinary lives, he in France, she in the Channel Islands. He has a son – she has a daughter – they both are students in London.

On July 7th 2005, without any news of their dear children, they decide to start a journey together in search of the two teenagers. And although they come from different religious backgrounds – Ousmane is Muslim and Mrs Sommers' Christian – they will share the same hope in finding their children alive. Putting aside their cultural differences, they will give each other the strength to continue the search and maintain the faith.



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Interview with Rachid Bouchareb

Issues of race, nationhood, community and kinship lie at the heart of your films. What were your specific motivations for making 'LONDON RIVER'?

I would say that all my films are concerned with the subject of meetings between different people, from different countries and different worlds. This theme of meetings is always at the heart of my films, because the characters are always on a journey. And this phenomenon goes beyond the characters on screen to the actors themselves. I find the concept of the meeting between Sotigui Kouyaté, an African actor, and Brenda Blethyn, a British actor fascinating – beyond the fact of their friendship, it's a human connection between two people of different nationalities, religions, universes. It allows one to go beyond the cinematic encounter and affords the film a level of truth about the meeting and the different cultures of these two individuals.

Did you always have Sotigui & Brenda in mind for the parts?

Sotigui, yes. After we made 'LITTLE SENEGAL' together, I knew I wanted to work with him again, and I wrote 'LONDON RIVER' with him in mind. As for Brenda, I've had her in mind for something ever since I saw Mike Leigh's film 'SECRETS AND LIES'. When I finally met her she was very busy working on other projects, so I waited a year for her to be free, because I knew it had to be those two for the film. They were the film.

You've said in an interview that the subjects you choose to film allow you to find yourself. Did you find yourself within 'LONDON RIVER'?

In as much as this is a film about the problem of being a Muslim in Europe, then yes, this film concerns me personally. I was living in France at the time of the World Trade Centre attacks, and I felt the after-effects. Suddenly it was more difficult than ever to be an Algerian in France.

How were the bombings perceived in France at the time?

I'd compare it to the impact of the Madrid bombings in France. Really, there wasn't much coverage in the press, and I'd say that the attitude of the French population at that time was... well, I didn't hear people talking about the attacks like I did after 9/11, not with the same sense of urgency. It was as if after the initial crisis, that is, the World Trade Center attacks, nothing could be as shocking. Nothing that came afterwards could have the same effect.

The subject matter is quite sensitive...

I hope that people who see the film will understand that the event itself is just starting a point. My film is less about the bombings themselves, and more about the meeting between these two people that takes place in their wake. That's what was important to me, that these two people who meet are united by the same problem, which is their desire to find their children. And the story is about these two people, a man and a woman from very different backgrounds but faced with the same fears, the same anxieties. It needed a crisis to bring them together, but that crisis could have been something else, the September 11 attacks for example.

'LONDON RIVER' is first and foremost a human drama, about how people react to events such as these, how they come together in the same place and forge a connection. Events such as the attacks of 7/7 naturally divide people, but at the same time they also bring them together. They need one another. People have to come together in the face of such crises. It's an obligation.

What research did you do for the film?

The coverage we see of these events on our televisions is already very strong, we don't need to add to it, but to give these dramas a human face. Although the film contains archive footage of the events and their real life victims, I didn't do a lot of research into the impact of the attacks on the people that lived through them – interviews with families affected and so forth. Rather I was interested in taking these two actors, living with them, seeing how they would approach their characters and what relationship would develop between them: their encounter. This is what lends the film its universality. Whether I had made the film with Chinese actors, Indians, Arabs, or actors from other parts of Europe, it would have been the same, concerned with these same fears, worries, dramas.

I didn't want to have to stick to the historical facts and eyewitness accounts – these things are there in the film, on the televisions we see on screen. But for the story I wanted to go beyond that, to find something deeper.

How did you go about writing the screenplay?

I wrote the story for the film before we started shooting, but once we started there was some improvisation: the scenes were all there, but there were gaps that needed filling. So when Brenda's character first arrives outside the Butchers shop that her daughter lives above, for example, or when she first encounters Mr Ousmane her response in these scenes wasn't scripted, the gestures were completely spontaneous.

There was more improvisation still at the level of the two leads, scenes that weren't written in advance. For example when we see them sharing an apple, or their characters' final parting. I couldn't have scripted the physicality of that embrace they share, when he holds himself strong and straight like a tree, while she clings onto him, just as I couldn't have scripted the song Sotigui's character consoles Brenda's with – that came entirely from him. He felt the need to sing then, so he did. For me, this working method produced some of the most moving moments of the film.

There's a beautiful physical contrast between the two actors...

Exactly. That's why I needed those two actors and no-one else. It's a very important element of the film. In fact, you might say it is the film.

The film has a rough, documentary aesthetic, which is quite a contrast from the polish of 'INDIGÈNES'...

After the precision that 'INDIGÈNES' demanded, I wanted complete – absolutely complete – freedom on this film. I wanted to forget cinematic aesthetics entirely, to put aside all technical discussions. All that concerned me was the characters. We had a district of London, two actors, 15 days, and we were working day to day. There was little light, a very small team. Working like this I was free from the obligation to spend a long time preparing scenes, rehearsing, setting up shots. It was very refreshing to work like this, with very little preparation or preamble. In fact, the week before we started shooting I was in Cannes, judging the festival competition, and from there I flew straight to London to begin the film. I didn't spend weeks in advance thinking about the film; I arrived with a clear head. And as a result both the shoot and, I think, the film, were much more spontaneous and much more intimate.

Were there any particular cinematic influences on the film?

What was great about this film is that I could take myself away from other films, there were no influences, no imprisonments, no obligations. That was important, because as I've said, I wanted to be free, I wanted the actors to be free, and I wanted the film to be free. So I didn't want to have any 'concepts' in in my head before we started shooting. That's why it was so important that I arrived on the set in this very calm state. And I think the film is better for that. That said, I feel very strongly that cinema should move you, make you feel something. Always. 'INDIGÈNES' did that – at screenings across the country I saw audiences weeping while they watched the film. And that's important, to produce strong feelings. I like melodrama.



I like 'GONE WITH THE WIND'; 'PARIS, TEXAS'; 'BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI'. Films like this have a human warmth, they have the power to bring their audiences to tears. And that's something I aspire to.

What is the role of faith within the film? Although the first two scenes show the protagonists at prayer, in most other ways, religion seems strangely absent from the film.

Quite simply, the two protagonists each live with their own faith serenely. Because one can have faith, and live with it, and be a good person. Just like that. There are plenty of people who have their beliefs. It is part of who they are, but it doesn't necessarily define them. Politics, faith, nationality – these things aren't the same. That's why you have the character of the policeman, who tells Ousmane that he, too, is a muslim. That is, not all muslims are Arabs: there are muslims in

China, in Russia, in Eastern Europe. There are Europeans who are Muslims. In France. In London. I wanted to show this. **One thing that stands out is the constant failure of connection between people, even between loved ones. Both the protagonists know so little about their children's lives.**

I think the great problem of our times is a lack of communication. You see this in global politic relations. Is there any discussion? Is there any understanding? People don't talk to one another any more, the world has difficulty doing this. You see it every day on the news. Rarely do we see people sitting round a table for days on ends conversing, talking things through. No. Instead we see people armed, at war. This problem begins at the level of personal relations, and the solution can only start here too.

In many ways the film seems to be summed up by the line that she speaks, "our lives aren't so different".

It's true. Our lives aren't so different because we're not so different, whichever of the four corners of the globe we might live in. In our thoughts, our feelings, our fears, our joys, our hopes and worries – our lives, they're not so different at all. They're the same.

There's a strong juxtaposition between the rural and the urban.

I wanted to show the manner in which both of these characters live somehow outside of the world, and to show the futility of this. She lives on her island, he lives in the forest, but one can't continue like this. One can't remain completely isolated.

And yet both characters return to their rural retreats. What are we to make of the film's ambiguous ending?

It's completely up to the spectator to decide what might happen next. Life goes on. The farm, the forest: these are their homes, their work and their lives. What else would they do but return to them? I think the spectator can draw his conclusion from this ending, by putting himself in the place of these characters.

Interview with Sotigui Kouyaté

What was it about Rachid's screenplay that convinced you to do the film?

The theme of the film doesn't just concern Africa, but the whole of society. That is, it is about the crisis of communication and the problem of identity. This is particularly relevant to Africa. I believe that every African has a duty towards Africa, since every African carries Africa within him. But Africa is terribly misunderstood – by others and by itself: the word 'Africa', itself is such a superficial term, given the diversity of nations and peoples. African is 3 million metres squared – that's the size of Europe, the States, China and Argentina all together! We can't talk of it as if it were a single entity, there's more to it than that. One of the interesting things about Rachid's film is that he shows an older African travelling abroad to find out what Africans abroad are like, what motivates them. Many films show African-Americans going back to the old continent to discover their roots, but this film shows the reverse of that. This, for me, is the first time I've seen that on film.

But while I am African, and always will be, what matters most to me is humanity. In any story, if the human being is not at its heart then it doesn't interest me. London River is about the problems that life poses for mankind. It has to do with the attacks of 7/7, and it also talks of Islam, but these subjects are not at its heart. Rather, it wants to show the difficulties people have in accepting one another, the fear they feel.

It is a film about how we react to things, and this is what interests me. It teaches us that when you meet the other, don't be scared to look them in the eye; for if you are brave enough to do so, you will finish by seeing yourself more clearly.

You first worked with Rachid on 'LITTLE SENEGAL'. Were you pleased to be reuniting with him for 'LONDON RIVER'?

There's an African proverb: "Take me back to yesterday" – which supposes, of course, that yesterday was something good. My first experience of working with Rachid was exactly that. We have so much in common, in terms of history and of humanity. And such openness, such respect for others, as Rachid has is rarely seen. When we were working on 'LITTLE SENEGAL' he would ask me to read the script and offer my thoughts and criticisms: this is very rare in a director. But more extraordinary still is that subsequently he'd adapt the script taking my thoughts into account. Such consideration creates a very positive tone from the outset.

So when, after 'LITTLE SENEGAL', Rachid told me he wanted to work with me again, in my deepest soul I wanted nothing more. It took time – 8 years – but of course when he proposed 'LONDON RIVER' to me I said yes straight away. And the instant we started shooting in London, I realised that I had never before felt such harmony on a shoot; there were no clashes or disagreements at all. We had our little difficulties – the weather was bad, some of the local residents were unhappy about the filming – but the whole team, from the runners to the producers, worked together so well... it was a real love story. And shooting in France, too, I had the same feeling. This is the Rachid's great gift, that he is able to create a great complicity on set. I've rarely seen such complicity! You might say that it was like being part of a family. And because of this, the film came almost of its own accord. It delivered itself – but thanks to him.



Like your characters, you and Brenda come from very different backgrounds. How did you find working together?

After I'd said yes to doing the film, Rachid showed me this film that Brenda had been in, 'SECRETS AND LIES', and we both agreed immediately that she should play the part of the English woman. However, we couldn't find a time when both Brenda and I were free to film. I had no English, and she had very little French, but we had met, and we knew that we would work well together. So Rachid kept waiting. He knows what he wants – how to choose his stories, who he needs for the part – and he knows how to wait for it. It's always a labour of love for Rachid. He's very gentle, but also very determined.

Finally we found the right moment, and once we started shooting, thanks to Rachid the differences in background – not just between me and Brenda, but between all the crew – mattered little. Irrespective of race, nationality, and so forth we were all together in the adventure for the time of making the film. And in this atmosphere, it felt like Brenda and I had known each other for years. We were like partners. In Africa, we say that "what makes a beautiful bouquet is the variety of colours". It's in difference that one finds harmony.

You bring your background as a musician and a griot, to the part for the parting song you console Jane's mother with...

Throughout the filming, Rachid had allowed us to improvise – he was constantly asking for our suggestions – so the work opened itself up to us. This scene, where the two characters say goodbye to one another – had to be a very powerful one. In the screenplay it was written that my character tells Brenda's to be brave, and wishes her well before we part. Then we had the idea of a song, but the problem was that in such an atmosphere, singing might be somehow diminutive, banal; that it wouldn't bring anything to the scene. In the end, we just decided to let the moment arrive, and the song that you see and hear in the film was what came to me. It is a very, very, very, old song, which my mother, (who was one of

the great Malian chanteuses) used to sing to me as an infant, and which she continued to sing to me until the day she died. The words translate as something like:

In life, no-one knows their destiny.

Life is like that.

You can say I've never had that, but that doesn't mean you won't ever have it.

No-one knows what the future holds.

So every moment, every instant, you must live.

It means, no one knows where we'll end up. I might die in the forest; I might die in the City. Take Pascal Terry, the French motorcyclist killed during this year's Paris-Dakar series. The organisers moved the race to Argentina because it was deemed too dangerous to retain the original route, but he died all the same. It's the same with the character of my son in the film, and so this is the song that came to me, the song that I sang. I didn't want to play at singing – I needed to feel it. It couldn't be an intellectual thing. If I make a film, it's not to be rich – evidently! – but because I love it. Rachid understands that.

Interview with Brenda Blethyn

Could you tell me how you came to be involved in the project? What was it about the screenplay that first attracted you to it?

Actually, when Rachid asked to meet in London and I didn't know who he was! But I met him anyway and he was really quite inspiring: everything about him – his attitude, his demeanour, these things. And of course it helped that he liked my work! Then I saw 'DAYS OF GLORY', and I thought it was wonderful. But I wasn't sure that the dates were going to fit – and if I remember rightly at this point he didn't even have the script ready, just the story. The other thing was at the time the incident was still really very fresh in the memory. It still is, but then it was even more so. But then the film isn't about that incident, it just takes place then, that's when their paths cross. And I found my character's ignorance of the Muslim faith interesting – I think many people are ignorant of others' faiths. Although it's not about that either though really. I just thought, two people, completely different cultures, completely different faiths, coming together and finding a meeting ground, it's an interesting story. And I knew it would be a good film with Rachid directing. So Rachid said he'd wait for me, which took nearly a year in end. Then of course there was the fact of working in French, which was a new challenge for me....

How did you find performing in another language?

I didn't speak very much French before I agreed to do the film – a little bit, but not enough. Prior to shooting I was working up in Manchester, so I went to a French school to get some tuition. Sadly like anything else, it fades if you don't keep it up, but I did

learn enough to improvise during the shoot. What I'd have to do was anticipate what might come up, so that if a scene went into that area I would be able to improvise. And of course, I was surrounded by French people all speaking French. All the crew were speaking French, all the instructions were in French...

That must have been difficult...

We got by. Sometimes it was hard, but people helped me. Occasionally we had to scrabble around to find translators. In any case, it didn't have to be perfect French – after all, she's an English speaker, talking French. The character lives in Guernsey, where many people are bilingual. I don't think she was born there, but has lived there for many years.

In many ways, your character finds herself in a foreign country – one that is as alien to her, if not more so, than it is to Ali's father.

It's foreign to both of them really. They've both come from working with land, nature. It's a sleepy place, Guernsey: trying to find someone in the middle of the bustle of London, when you come from order, must be a nightmare. Also she's very reserved. In the alley, for example, when she meets the butcher, she's thrown – that's not the sort of person she'd interact with. And it's only when he explains that he's the landlord that she lets down her guard. He's got a role then. She says to her brother on the phone, "*Its crawling with muslims*". I was a little wary about that phrase, which was an adlib, but that's the way she thought. Suddenly she's been embroiled into this strange world. Being an outsider in that community must be as close as white people come to the experience of exclusion that many black people have – just look how helpful the police were as soon as she mentioned that there was a black muslim with a picture of her daughter!

She's certainly very insular; is she a racist?

Not racist, but certainly ignorant. She's conservative. Then again, in Sotigui's culture, too, there are prejudices. There, I think, the women are still to some extent second class citizens – for example it's frowned upon for a woman to smoke in front of a man in that culture. When my character lights that cigarette in front

of him – and she doesn't even smoke! – you can see that's something he's uncomfortable with. But I suppose you could say that it takes something of these proportions to make people think about these things. If it hadn't been for those terrible events she'd still be at home, feeding her donkeys – she wouldn't even have thought about other ways of life, hers was ok thank you. She was perfectly happy with the prejudice she didn't know she had! Then this happens, and she starts to question everything. Where is she – where is her daughter? I think really until the perpetrators are caught, she still must think that she's been kidnapped or something, maybe held for ransom. And at the same time she'd even think that that's absurd to think that, that her daughter's probably just too scared to call her, because she knows the sort of reaction that she'd get if she were to call up and say "Mum, I've met this guy, he's black, we're getting married at the mosque..." The silly thing is, when it comes to it, she's actually pretty ok with it. She reaches the point where she can leave a message for her daughter about buying a new hat for the wedding. In the end it's ok, because nothing's as bad as her child being lost. Nothing's so bad that she can't call her mum, they'll deal with it.

Like your characters, you and Sotigui come from very different backgrounds. How did you find working together?

It was a hugely pleasant experience! Being with Sotigui was like being in the presence of royalty. The majesty of the man is... well, how lucky was I to be working with him? He's just wonderful, and I just hope a little of what he had rubbed off on me. He has true inner strength. We'd have long long conversations, both of us struggling to be understood, and by hook or by crook we got there. With a bit of pigeon English, a bit of pigeon Malian, and a bit of pigeon French on my part – we'd sit for ages chatting. The whole family was great really. Everyone. Working in the East End of London, the weather was terrible, it rained everyday, but everyone that contributed was wonderful. And then we went off to France to shoot all the interiors and the Guernsey scenes and it was even better! Sometimes you get a project that ticks all the boxes: above all the people you meet, who you admire and you want to go on that journey with. And it was a journey I'm glad I took, because I learnt something along the way.



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