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The Specials

a film by Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache
For twenty years, Bruno and Malik have been living in a world apart, the world of autistic children and teenagers. Their respective associations train youngsters from difficult neighborhoods to care for these cases categorized as “extremely complex”. A special partnership for special personalities.
How did this film come into being?

Éric Toledano: THE SPECIALS is the fruit of a twenty-year-old commitment. In 1994, we were monitors at a summer camp and I had to get a diploma to become a director (BAFD). That is where I met Stéphane Benhamou, the creator of the association “Le Silence des Justes”, specialized in caring for autistic children and adolescents and integrating them into society. We lost sight of each other. But he later took an autistic member of my family under his wing. One day Olivier and I decided to take a look at the summer camp he ran in the mountains. We were deeply impressed by the energy and humanity that Stéphane and his team exuded. The chemistry between the young caregivers and the handicapped kids completely overwhelmed us.

Olivier Nakache: A little later, Stéphane needed a 6-minute film to present his association. He hoped to collect funds, because he was having trouble obtaining the necessary aids. So we took our little camera and both went to Saint-Denis, to the same place where twenty years later we were to film THE SPECIALS. We met a young educator, Daoud Tatou, who also worked with autistic youngsters. And once again, this new experience remained profoundly etched in our minds…

Éric Toledano: We already said to ourselves, what a magnificent context for telling a story and making a film. But we were just starting out and we humbly thought we didn’t yet have the wherewithal to handle a subject like this. We were simply not ready yet. That did not keep us from remaining close to these guys for whom we felt strong friendship and a real affinity. Four years ago, Canal+ offered us carte blanche for 26 minutes. We naturally chose to showcase their work and careers with a documentary entitled WE SHOULD MAKE A FILM ABOUT IT…

Olivier Nakache: …a documentary about Stéphane and Daoud who in the meantime had become director of the association “Le Relais IDF”. This organisation also cares for autistic youngsters, but that also advocates the social and professional integration of youngsters from underprivileged neighborhoods. It’s true that between each of our feature films,
the idea of making this film kept coming up between us. It gained ground and the contact we kept with the idea of making this film kept coming up between us. It became a necessity. It started out, making this film was a strong desire, with time after two years our motivation had multiplied. If when we couldn't let ourselves stray too far from the truth or be approximate. Our period of observation was too clumsily approximate. Our period of observation was too clumsy. We couldn't let ourselves stray too far from the truth or be too clumsy. We observed. The scenes in the film, including Valentin's electrocardiogram. That's the whole subject of the film. What does it show? It shows that sometimes you redefine them. The film shows is that sometimes you redefine them. You spend two hours with us in one of the associations. Out of necessity, Bruno breaks some rules, opens a film, we don't have a screenplay, but we suggest that you spend two hours with us in one of the associations. And he got an inspection because of his sidestepping the law. We found our angle for the investigation interviewed all of his inspectors in charge of the investigation interviewed all of his inspectors and concluded that Bruno was Jewish. As we later discover that his alter ego, Malik (Reda Kateb who plays the role of Daoud Tatou) is a Moslem. You never dwell on this subject... Éric Toledano: Of course, the triggers are: religion and identity politics fade away to the benefit of humanity. That much is visible to the naked eye. Humanity transcends all those differences, which is what also captured our attention. There is an open-mindedness, an awareness that we can't help but be aware of when we are in the light-handed humor we observed in the teams, like in the battle of the logos the young caregivers indulge in. Olivier Nakache: We have been fans of those two actors for a long time. Before we even write a single line, we need an initial impetus, a stimulus. And for us, it often comes from the actors. We admire Vincent’s, “transformist” talents, his propensity to “nick” the gestures and physicality of the people he is supposed to embody. And then we liked having him play the role of a man who is not quite at ease with women. As for Reda, we have been watching him perform. We find him utterly subtle and realistic, very charismatic. He too can truly impose. Their encounter promised to be a fine alchemy between their spins and their energy.

Why did you choose Vincent Cassel and Reda Kateb to play Bruno and Malik? Olivier Nakache: It was impossible for us to tackle this subject without understanding it completely, without being in possession of all the complex issues. We needed to assimilate the subject technically in order to fuel the fiction we wanted to create. Éric Toledano: Of course, there are legions of functions: religion and identity politics fade away to the benefit of humanity. That much is visible to the naked eye. Humanity transcends all those differences, which is what also captured our attention. There is an open-mindedness, an awareness that we can't help but be aware of when we are in the light-handed humor we observed in the teams, like in the battle of the logos the young caregivers indulge in. Olivier Nakache: The idea was also to include real monitors and real autistic youngsters in the film, to have them “break into” the film. It should immediately be known by the viewer that we have partners, actual autistic youngsters in the film, to have them “break into” the film. It should immediately be known by the viewer that we have partners, actual autistic youngsters in our films: a group at work, stories that can serve as examples. Olivier Nakache: We may have “idealized” our impressions, but it also took us a lot of time to familiarize ourselves with the term and thus be able to intrude on the intimacy of the characters, their daily lives and personal issues.

Once you decided to shoot, how did you work? Éric Toledano: For 2 years, we immersed ourselves in the world of these associations, having dinner, walking around, while Valentin’s running away, are all real life experiences. In THE SPECIALS, we depict autistic youngsters, parents, and caregivers, but also the doctors, health officials, and the IGAS (General Inspection of Social Affairs). We couldn't let ourselves stray too far from the truth or be too clumsy. Our period of observation was too clumsy. We couldn't let ourselves stray too far from the truth or be too clumsy. Our period of observation was too clumsy. We couldn't let ourselves stray too far from the truth or be too clumsy. Our period of observation was too clumsy. We couldn't let ourselves stray too far from the truth or be too clumsy. Olivier Nakache: These associations work with a constant stream of things that is what more, after two years our motivation had multiplied. If when we started out, making this film was a strong desire, with time it became a necessity.

We discover almost by chance that Bruno (Vincent Cassel), the character inspired by Stéphane Benhamou, is Jewish. As we later discover that his alter ego, Malik (Reda Kateb who plays the role of Daoud Tatou) is a Moslem. You never dwell on this subject...

Olivier Nakache: If only to outsmart the subject. Within that universe, for example, you hear language that is hard to understand if you’ve come from the outside. A world for which we could all also contribute to the IGAS, ADSP, MIP, IME, USIDATU... that everyone else seems to know by heart. We also wanted to reproduce the light-hearted humor we observed in the teams, like in the battle of the logos the young caregivers indulge in. Olivier Nakache: The idea was also to include real monitors and real autistic youngsters in the film, to have them “break into” the film. It should immediately be known by the viewer that we have partners, actual autistic youngsters in our films: a group at work, stories that can serve as examples. Olivier Nakache: We may have “idealized” our impressions, but it also took us a lot of time to familiarize ourselves with the term and thus be able to intrude on the intimacy of the characters, their daily lives and personal issues.

Éric Toledano: If you don’t have the time, or the desire, we’ll stop right now. We have been fans of those two actors for a long time. Before we even write a single line, we need an initial impetus, a stimulus. And for us, it often comes from the actors. We admire Vincent’s, “transformist” talents, his propensity to “nick” the gestures and physicality of the people he is supposed to embody. And then we liked having him play the role of a man who is not quite at ease with women. As for Reda, we have been watching him perform. We find him utterly subtle and realistic, very charismatic. He too can truly impose. Their encounter promised to be a fine alchemy between their spins and their energy.

How did you proceed? Olivier Nakache: We tried a daring bet. We had separate meetings with them and told them: “We have an idea for a film, we don’t have a screenplay, but we suggest that you spend two hours with us in one of the associations. If you don’t have the time, or the desire, we’ll stop right then and there. No problem. Otherwise, we’ll go together.

We feel that the audience should almost grab the viewer by the arm. Besides the music that accompanies the opening scene recalls the sound of a heartbeat. We discover almost by chance that Bruno (Vincent Cassel), the character inspired by Stéphane Benhamou, is Jewish. As we later discover that his alter ego, Malik (Reda Kateb who plays the role of Daoud Tatou) is a Moslem. You never dwell on this subject...
and if you’ve had enough after an hour, we won’t hold it against you.” But essentially we weren’t running any risks. All you have to do is spend a few minutes at “Silence des Justes” or “Relais IDF”, for something very powerful to happen. We were convinced that we held the right formula. They came, and that very evening both texted us pretty much the same message: “We don’t need a screenplay to continue on with this adventure with you”.

Éric Toledano: That was a shot in the arm.

We introduced them to each other. They didn’t know each other, but wanted to work together.

In the film, Malik (Reda Kateb) teaches his caregivers etiquette, French and punctuality…

Olivier Nakache: He gives them a global formation, “you come, you accept the rules, you are formed, and you’ll see, you’ll come out a winner”. He’s gifted with intelligence, instinct and the gift of the gab. He gives them the keys to work with, but also to make themselves respected by society and find their place in it.

These caregivers are mostly from the universe of diversity present in all your films…

Olivier Nakache: Diversity is one of the main components of their associations. Most of the caregivers are from underprivileged neighborhoods. They are familiar with violence and take it from their autistic charges, without turning it against them. And for someone who does not count for much in our society, becoming a caregiver is a very interesting parable. Besides, we discovered among them some true acting talent! It was obvious to us: they had to play in the film.

And Bryan Mialoundama who plays Dylan?

Olivier Nakache: We immediately sensed his sincerity during the auditions. He wasn’t acting. He reminded us of the caregivers who show up at Stéphane or Daoud’s. He had unbelievable eyes, and you could sense the violence and truth within him. He was a like a block of marble waiting to be carved.

Éric Toledano: We needed an outside look in order to enter into the story. Dylan is the one who doesn’t know, who asks questions like why is this autistic kid hitting me just after giving me a hug? He is the audience’s eye.

How did you find the autistic kids who play in the film?

Éric Toledano: “Scrolling” through all the associations of Paris and the Paris region, we had a hit on Turbulences (an arts group that employs people who have
communication issues, suffer from autism or related issues). The ESAT (Establishment of Service Aid Through Work) is located in a circus tent at the Porte d’Asnières, and we offered to create a theater workshop. It was in that workshop that we met Benjamin Lesieur, who plays Joseph. He has a very winning personality. He didn’t speak, or he communicated in a random fashion, citing names of French singers or asking the same question over and over again: “what did the weather man have to say tonight?” We quickly realized that he enjoyed the workshop. We started treating him like any other actor: we offered him the role. His parents warned us it would be complicated. He never wore a tie, a belt or socks, and he couldn’t stand anyone touching his skin and hair. But they agreed. During the 25 days of shooting, we got him into a tie, belt and socks, we made him up and did his hair. We figured out that Benjamin really liked the costume crew, Isabelle and especially the dresser, Marine. They are the ones who used niceness and psychology to get him to wear the clothes they wanted him to. Marine wound up playing the role of Brigitte, the young employee at the company where Joseph works. No one else could do it. She objected “but I’m not an actress!”. We told her “Trust us…”. And she was perfect.

Olivier Nakache: During the shoot, we asked Benjamin, “Do that again, get back into place, go back to the beginning, come on, we’re going to do another take…” and he was perfect, just like all the other professional actors. Talking with the doctors, we realized that the cinema uses a very autistic-like process of repetition: supervised and repetitive. We organized the entire preparation around Benjamin. We showed him the sets before filming. We rehearsed scenes with him. At the same time, he could say anything he wanted. He sometimes put his head on a technician’s shoulder. We were ourselves experiencing exactly what we were talking about in the film.

Eric Toledano: He was soon our buddy, and we even stole some ideas from him. The line “I am innocent!” for example, comes from him. He loved repeating certain dialogues in a loop, and we kept some of them, like “We’re not far!” Benjamin soon became the film’s mascot, and the dance scene profoundly moved the entire technical crew.

And Valentin (Marco Locatelli)?

Eric Toledano: His brother is autistic. A very serious case as a matter of fact. Astoundingly mature, Marco came to the casting session without telling anyone, explaining, “I have a little brother who’s autistic. Making this movie will help me
come closer to him, help me to love him”. He did some convincing screen tests, and we explained to him that there were going to be quite a few working sessions with us and some behavioral coaches. We spoke to his mother about it, who said: “It’s up to him. I have total trust in you”. Marco’s presence made sense to us.

You try several times to make us understand Valentin’s autistic sensations in a very sensorial way…

Olivier Nakache: You can’t depict what someone autistic feels or sees. But what we are sure about, is that such children focus on certain sounds. Some calm them, others aggress them. We wanted to try to reproduce that without using too many effects in order to adopt his own point of view, his own subjectivity.

Éric Toledano: We had to confront reality: a hospital discharge after six months of confinement. All the doctors told us: you don’t get out like that, you have to set up gradual releases. You start with once a week for three months before risking a definitive release. That is why Malik (Reda Kateb) chooses to assign Dylan as Valentin’s caregiver. Their technique is 1 for 1. Despite Dylan’s clumsiness, something worked. It’s chemistry. It doesn’t always work, that’s for sure, but when it does work, it’s mighty impressive.

Did you have to deal with any crises on the set?

Olivier Nakache: Yes, but we had to manage them, and we absolutely wanted to show that part of the truth in the film. In any event, we had to endlessly adapt, improvise. Especially during group scenes like the skating rink, for example. There were always three cameras on location, permanently ready to film.

Hélène Vincent plays Benjamin’s confused mother…

Éric Toledano: We share a long history with Hélène that began with SAMBA. This actor, whom we are particularly fond of, has a kind of double nationality: she can be very moving in one film and very funny in the next. She is a very SPECIAL actor! We could not make this film without giving the floor to the parents. We often heard the words that Hélène’s character pronounces: “What will happen to him when I’m no longer here? They are cute when they’re little, but when they grow, people no longer look at them the same”. When the diagnosis of autism comes in, parents do not have time to think of the future, they are all fired up for immediate combat. There is no possible remission. You’re in for 30, 40, 50 years. The world is then split in two: those who help you and those who won’t even look at you.

You often say “Behind the laughter, there are tears”, you could almost turn that around: “Behind the tears, there is laughter”?  

Éric Toledano: Comedy is sometimes sadness in disguise, but more than that, it is our way to express ourselves and communicate with each other. In these associations, you run through an entire gamut of emotions, laughter obviously being one of them. It just has to fit into the situation intelligently. As with Bruno, who accumulates romantic trysts with women of the Jewish community, organized by his entourage that would like to see him marry. Being humorous is also being Special, or in other words breaking the rules, and of course it takes the sting out of certain situations. Taking a step back, keeping some distance. 

Like in C’EST LA VIE, the film ends on a very poetic scene…

Olivier Nakache: That scene is a perfect illustration of the overall gist of the film. The context may be harsh, but poetry, movement and music prevail. At the end of his choreography, Joseph returns to the center of the circle around which he was dancing. Alone under the lights, he incarnates all our characters’ combats: keeping these kids, adolescents and adults in the center of things, never losing sight of them, and never banishing them to the margins of our world. Benjamin is truly poetic. For 2 years, we were constantly surprised. By a kid with autism who at dinner eats off your own plate. This group of autistic kids dances, each with his and her own pathology, each in their own world, but all of them together. When Bruno didn’t even look at you, all those who won’t even look at his association, he watches those kids dance and feels moved. He feels that emotion essentially also our own. That’s what we felt throughout our preparation for the shoot, and what we tried to reconstitute throughout the film.
What was your first contact like with Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache?

When they first offered me the film, they explained to me how important it was to them... They had had this project for a long time, but did not yet feel totally ready to direct it. I remember, they had not yet written a single line when we first met. I just asked them not to make me read 12,000 drafts of the screenplay. I explained that I was in no hurry, and that I would wait for them.

Had you wanted to work with them?

Yes, and I told them so. I was very curious. I knew their work, I saw what they were able to do, but I did not really know how they managed to do it. I quickly understood. They have faith in their screenplay, but they keep on searching for stuff all the time. For me, true actor’s direction is the way a director, or in this case, two directors look at an actor. They discerned something in me that I did not suspect was there, things I didn’t know I was capable of “bringing out”.

Do you remember your first visit to the association The “Silence des Justes”?

I was rather discombobulated. But also completely overcome. I was surprised to find myself in tears. I asked myself: “How am I going to work with these kids, these teens and these adults? How will I detach myself from these sometimes very serious cases of autism?” Observing Stéphane and our contacts there, I understood that they dedicated their lives to bettering those of their “residents”, at the price of their own. Unsentimentally. They are “doers”. The autistic suffer from an inability to communicate. But when you stimulate them, you can enrich their sensory baggage. In other words, a guy who has spent twenty years in this officially recognized not-for-profit organization does not look the same as someone who is just starting out.

How did you shake off those fears you mentioned?

I had to face up to my own issues. I spent time with them, and especially I stopped being such a crybaby. I told myself time and again that I should not be afraid to step up to the front lines and get slapped in the face two or three times. Some of them
are actually pretty burly. One day, Eric and Olivier took me to be interviewed by the Papotin, a paper put out by a man without a wife or children, and who finds fulfilment in giving love to the autistic with whom he works. But we extrapolated with Stéphane. Like the “Shidduch” he makes use of.

He is a practicing Jew, and works with Malik, a Muslim played by Reda Kateb…

You're talking about of his body, but what precisely reasons for which he does what he does are in fact very urgent. Altruism? Humanism? The work is so urgent. And Bruno, my character, is Stéphane without being Stéphane. You had a “model”: Stéphane Benhamou…

You just have to let yourself go.

Did you know- Reda Kateb?

I felt like we were members of the same family. I like his somwhat smashed in face, his Benicio Del Toro or Javier Bardem look. He’s large caliber. A street dandy. The epitome of class. Our encounter was equal to what I was expecting. I loved the comic power and generosity of Alban Ivanov. What an obvious choice! When he arrives, it’s in there with the kippas, veils and mezuzot… Besides, we shot some scenes that evoked it even more, but Eric and Olivier cut them out during the edit. And that’s just as good. In the film, religion is shown as is practiced in these associations. An issue that is not, and I think it’s exactly like that at all for their members. Besides, Malik only reveals in an offhand line that he is a Muslim and has three children…

Bruno is angry, but he knows what he wants. Is there a little bit of cunning in his attitude? In Brazil, they have an expression for that: you need to know how to cry to obtain something. I felt like we were members of the same family. I like his somwhat smashed in face, his Benicio Del Toro or Javier Bardem look. He’s large caliber. A street dandy. The epitome of class. Our encounter was equal to what I was expecting. I loved the comic power and generosity of Alban Ivanov. What an obvious choice! When he arrives, it’s in there with the kippas, veils and mezuzot… Besides, we shot some scenes that evoked it even more, but Eric and Olivier cut them out during the edit. And that’s just as good. In the film, religion is shown as is practiced in these associations. An issue that is not, and I think it’s exactly like that at all for their members. Besides, Malik only reveals in an offhand line that he is a Muslim and has three children…

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Through the “Shidduch” are the pretext for some rather comical scenes…

From “Hate” to “Irreversible”, I have always tried to inject some comedy into my darkest roles. Here I play a guy who is so involved in his work, that I was sometimes afraid to stop talking to him. “I’m the one who does that. Like Bruno in the film.” Okay, of course it didn’t always work. Historically, Benjamin has the art of the autistic adults whom he took care of. If he doesn’t want to give you the time of day, he is capable of some very powerful emotional demonstrations.

The dance scene is crazily poetic…

Some of them dance. Some play the piano. Others slam, and you don’t always understand everything, but wow, it is ever beautiful! And then there are some who don’t do anything. One day, during a workshop, I saw one of them lying in a booth with the little lights they light up to stimulate the autistic. 15 years ago, he didn’t express himself because he couldn’t speak, but what intelligence in his eyes – the eyes of the Little Prince – they transfix you. What lurks behind those eyes? What can his thoughts processes be like?

The film asks a basic question: should you upset norms? Can you allow yourself to think differently? Anyone who has ever had difficulty with autism should see this film. Stéphane Benhamou goes all out to find solutions in a system that has gone haywire. He disregards the legislators. And inspires legislators who will perhaps help the situation evolve. THE SPECIALS is not a film about autism; it is about commitment and people who care for others.

In what state of mind did you approach the scene that portrays Bruno’s encounter with the IGAS inspectors? We had to find a rhythm and an imperative to respect: not to turn the sequence into the “emotional sequence”. Bruno is not a man without a wife or children. He has a little bit of cunning in his attitude? In Brazil, they have an expression for that: you need to know how to cry to obtain something. I felt like we were members of the same family. I like his somwhat smashed in face, his Benicio Del Toro or Javier Bardem look. He’s large caliber. A street dandy. The epitome of class. Our encounter was equal to what I was expecting. I loved the comic power and generosity of Alban Ivanov. What an obvious choice! When he arrives, it’s in there with the kippas, veils and mezuzot… Besides, we shot some scenes that evoked it even more, but Eric and Olivier cut them out during the edit. And that’s just as good. In the film, religion is shown as is practiced in these associations. An issue that is not, and I think it’s exactly like that at all for their members. Besides, Malik only reveals in an offhand line that he is a Muslim and has three children…

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You often say that each of your films is a voyage. How did this one start?

I immediately felt “chemically” confident with Éric and Olivier, who came to see me in the small café where I hang out in Montreuil. I felt that in spite of the considerable success of their films, they too shared this idea of a voyage. The desire to always put the counters at zero, to consider each feature film your first. I understood the force, the restlessness, the “electric charge” that animated them: paying tribute to the work of Stéphane Benhamou and Daoud Tatou. I got carried away when I screened their documentary: ON DEVRAIT EN FAIRE UN FILM. I didn’t know anything about autism other than what I saw in films like RAIN MAN or SHINE. Here it was a question of playing with “non-verbal autistic youngsters”. Olivier took me to visit the premises of “Le Silence des justes”. I was immediately captivated, but also very touched. I discovered a very rich world that promised an intense adventure in which I would move freely. Éric et Olivier make a big deal out of the actor’s freedom. They are very committed to it.

Interview
Reda Kateb

Your character, Malik, is inspired by Daoud Tatou, how did you work with him?

Before even reading the script, I got into one of those vans that pick up autistic kids each morning at their family homes to drive them to their activities. I went to play soccer with them in a gym and to lunch at “Le Relais IDF”. His association, then Daoud took me to Morocco, to Rabat and especially Oujda, where he is building the first center for the autistic in North Africa. Like “Le Silence des Justes”, it has a magnificent name: “Les Oiseaux du Paradis” (Birds of Paradise). The situation of the autistic is even worse there than here in France. So we went to visit a family with several autistic children. One of them was tied to the wall. I spent the following night staring at pictures of my 4-year-old son on my phone. When you see the distress of some situations and the humane response that Stéphane and Daoud bring, a kind of responsibility begins to weigh on you at the idea of playing them. Some kind of validation on their part was important to me. I received their blessing, but I also had to free myself from them, because THE SPECIALS is not a biopic about Stéphane and Daoud.
Empathy, dynamism, endurance. And uncomplicated relations with kids from neighborhoods I never got very far away from. I was part-monitor, part-educator in the Paris suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine. I sponsor a movie festival, “Cinéis- banlieusés”. Talking to them or listening to them was not a role of composition role for me. All I had to do was to draw on my life experience and interact across autism, as he himself says, Daoud was a rapper. He’s almost like a one of his meetings with his monitors, they certainly get their work done, but they also laugh a lot, and you get the feeling that there is a “show” going on. It’s the same thing in Morocco, where during interminable discussions with the local authorities, he moves mountains in in no time at all. We are up against walls. He finds the breech and charges through it. With him, in the end closed doors always open. Malik shakes up the monitors pretty much when he expresses his demands punctuality, commitment and respect for the architectures and bearings. The film is a parable about the formation of real life. Back then, they told me that they could not call the monitors “teachers”, since they had seen the film, I felt reassured. Religion is in there of course, but in its rightful place, a little as it should be everywhere else. Were you afraid beforehand to confront the autistic actors in the film? A little bit, yes, and I had to move beyond that. We actors sometimes do. Will people like what I’m doing? Will this role bring me others? All that stuff that interferes with our work. With them, you have to find another type of communication. During Benjamin’s dance, we slipped into the auditorium without being filmed. Actors sometimes produce imitations using the truth or vice versa, whereas autistic kids are always true.

The film is also a comedy, but you didn’t have that much comedy to do, or did you? It is a comedy, but we went about it in another way, not in a cinematic adventure, but like me in a human adventure. On set, it was a joy to see him send back the balls I sent him, with the warm heart and spontaneity that are his trademark. He accepted traveling with me on the film in another adventure. The project came into my life, I was part-monitor, part-educator in the Paris suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine. I sponsor a movie festival, “Cinéis-banlieusés”. Talking to them or listening to them was not a role of composition role for me. All I had to do was to draw on my life experience and interact across autism, as he himself says, Daoud was a rapper. He’s almost like a one of his meetings with his monitors, they certainly get their work done, but they also laugh a lot, and you get the feeling that there is a “show” going on. It’s the same thing in Morocco, where during interminable discussions with the local authorities, he moves mountains in in no time at all. We are up against walls. He finds the breech and charges through it. With him, in the end closed doors always open. Malik shakes up the monitors pretty much when he expresses his demands punctuality, commitment and respect for the architectures and bearings. The film is a parable about the formation of real life. Back then, they told me that they could not call the monitors “teachers”, since they had seen the film, I felt reassured. Religion is in there of course, but in its rightful place, a little as it should be everywhere else. Were you afraid beforehand to confront the autistic actors in the film? A little bit, yes, and I had to move beyond that. We actors sometimes do. Will people like what I’m doing? Will this role bring me others? All that stuff that interferes with our work. With them, you have to find another type of communication. During Benjamin’s dance, we slipped into the auditorium without being filmed. Actors sometimes produce imitations using the truth or vice versa, whereas autistic kids are always true.

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When and how did you create your two associations, “Le Silence des Justes,” and “Le Relais IDF”?

Stéphane Benhamou: I discovered autism in 1992, when I took in a teenager who suffered from it at the summer camp I directed. I created “Le Silence des Justes” four years later. Autism was recognized as a public health problem in April of 1995, but there were no structures for dealing with it. So the delay was considerable, and it still is. At first we opened an ordinary facility, and then we specialized. We obtained our first authorization in 2007. But the association was truly given a “boost” in 2010 when a magistrate entrusted us with a first autistic case. That is how the first round-the-clock medicalized emergency structure was born. Today, 59 “residents” live in our apartments.

Daoud Tatou: “Le Relais IDF” was created in 2000. As of that date, the association has taken care of the complex cases we give precedence to on the weekends. Stéphane and I then extended our presence to weekdays too. I have been working with Stéphane since 1996, when I ran into him at the Théâtre Le Lucernaire in Paris where I was putting on plays with autistic youngsters. A friend asked me to organize some workshops. My career has been different from Stéphane’s. I was a monitor-educator, and then I worked with Howard Buten – an American psychologist who specializes in autism, a writer and a clown. We soon began to run the experiment together on complex cases at Stéphane’s summer camp. Because I came from an underprivileged neighborhood, I had the idea of putting young people from the same neighborhoods to work taking care of people affected by the disease.

What has kept you going all these years?

Stéphane Benhamou: The first autistic case I met was a teenager unable to communicate. I wanted to understand why. I opened my summer camp to him.
When he left, he asked if he could come again. Ali Daoud and I did answer the requests that came rolling in.

Daoud Tatou: I was 17 when I “stumbled across” autism. I am now 45. I didn’t understand the violence of autistic people. How could they suddenly rear up and smash everything without any warning? I searched, and I’m still searching for an answer.

Listening to you, it sounds like everything was built up as you met people and received requests? Daoud Tatou: Nothing was planned. At the start, we grew without a blueprint. Then I set up “Le Relais IDF”. It was a feverish period. Then we began to consider how to make up for the deficiencies of the political powers that provide us with too few means.

Stéphane Benhamou: We actually got two favorable reports from the IGAS. From 2000 to 2010, Daoud and I were there 200th time, you’ll keep your pants on and we will have achieved something. It then depends on education: we have to say to ourselves that we want people to have the strength needed to organize off the cuff: classes, field trips, etc… for those complex cases.

Daoud Tatou: Those autism spectrum disorders cover a very broad field: co-morbidities, epilepsy, violence… People have to haggle in an Ubuesque situation…

Stéphane Benhamou: The autistic community made us aware of what we are today. We filled in the gaps, we slipped through the interstices into the system to make up for what we are today. We filled in the gaps, we slipped through the interstices into the system to make up for what we are today. We filled in the gaps, we slipped through the interstices into the system to make up for what we are today. We filled in the gaps, we slipped through the interstices into the system to make up for what we are today.

Daoud Tatou: When someone knocks at our door, we open it. But the politicians imply us: “Leave your children here, you can’t help them at home.” Selection is a very real phenomenon. Directors of the structures receive a global budgetary envelope for the year with a ratio of one educator for 3 cases, one educator for 6, but when we are dealing with complex cases, we need one caregiver per patient and once every 37 000 places. That means 37 000 children out in the cold. An institution will take the case that sleeps all day, that is turned out by Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache late years to the world that the child is suffering, but also because during that time its condition will deteriorate and therefore triple its cost for health care. Once the child is placed in an institution, it is a very real phenomenon. Directors of the structures receive a global budgetary envelope for the year with a ratio of one educator for 3 cases, one educator for 6, but when we are dealing with complex cases, we need one caregiver per patient and one educator per patient and once every 37 000 places. That means 37 000 children out in the cold. An institution will take the case that sleeps all day, that is turned out by Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache late years to the world that the child is suffering, but also because during that time its condition will deteriorate and therefore triple its cost for health care. Once the child is placed in an institution, it is a very real phenomenon.

Stéphane Benhamou: We have observed that 80% of our cases improve with socialization.

Daoud Tatou: It depends primarily on empathy: there is no substitute for that. Professionals are trained to deal with all your issues. So you want to go out into the street naked? No problem. You’ll do it 199 times, but the 200th time, you’ll keep your pants on and we will have achieved something. It then depends on education: we have to say to ourselves that we want people to have the strength needed to organize off the cuff: classes, field trips, etc… for those complex cases.

Stéphane Benhamou: We and our teams then examine the feasibility of treatment and we go to work. We never turn anyone away.

Daoud Tatou: When one refuses to go out into the street naked? No problem. You’ll do it 199 times, but the 200th time, you’ll keep your pants on and we will have achieved something. It then depends on education: we have to say to ourselves that we want people to have the strength needed to organize off the cuff: classes, field trips, etc… for those complex cases.

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What needs to be changed? Stéphane Benhamou: We need lots of finance. When you’re talking accommodation and formation, you’re talking business. Daoud Tatou: And those who make the laws need to listen to the people who relate their experiences in the field. You might then create the necessary framework for the physical structures we have set up.
for “Le Silence des justes”. They became very emotional. And they’ve never abandoned the association since. Even after they became famous with THE INTOUCHABLES, they came back to see us. They followed us and helped us in all the many situations we went through.

Daoud Tatou: We were involved in it. We were overwhelmed by the film. We said to ourselves: we were able to do all that – a half drop of water in the ocean we have to fill – but we still have just as many problems.

Stéphane Benhamou: I also thought of the families, Eric and Olivier finally lift the veil on the treatment of autistic people. 37 000 families still live a nightmare in the dark, second after second, 24 hours a day. When the diagnosis comes in, there is no more family or life. The families are left in angst-ridden isolation.

Daoud Tatou: Worse yet. Certain aging parents have told us: “I am going to kill myself, and take him with me. I don’t want him to end up in a psychiatric hospital after my death. I fought all my life to keep him out of there.” First, it’s the couple that breaks down. Then the siblings. The parents – and it’s understandable – will often concentrate all their efforts on the autistic child, often to the detriment of the others, who feel neglected. But it also impacts family finances: unless he child is cared for, many parents have to stop working and find themselves in a fine mess.

The film also focuses very closely on the monitors...

Daoud Tatou: That is also very realistic. We were able to set up a structure with the monitors being made up of neighborhood teenagers. At first, they didn’t want to clean up human excrement or get punched in the face. We insisted on creating a formula and imagined something that could last. If we were able to make our municipal politicians sensitive to the handicapped, it might also encourage inserting young people into the sector of care giving, in old people’s homes, for example. That is to say doing thankless jobs no one wants to do. The neighborhood recruiting grounds are waiting for something like that. We even had youngsters hired at the AP-HP, the psychiatric hospitals of the Île-de-France. We did not come with the help of the law. It was all done empirically, with humor and humanity. We have to conserve that vitality and empathy.

Did you immediately accept the idea of the film?

Stéphane Benhamou: We agreed once our psychiatrists validated the scenario. Unlike what you may sometimes hear here...
and there, we are responsible people. Everything was very transparent. And we did not change anything about the way we operate. We did not adapt ourselves to the film, the film adapted to us. **Daoud Tatou:** But it is the first feature film with real autistic people and real caregivers.

You had to accept the presence of two actors: Vincent Cassel and Reda Kateb?

**Stéphane Benhamou:** At our first meeting, I could tell that Vincent was interested: he asked a lot of questions. And he approached the children. I didn’t feel like I was dealing with an actor. He was “caught up”. But I did not adapt my work to his schedule. He adapted his to mine. **Daoud Tatou:** It was the same with Reda. A real human being, and, especially, very sensitive. I suggested that he accompany me to Morocco – I am in charge of an NGO that works with autism – telling him: “If you want to understand, come eat stones with me.” Neither Vincent nor Reda ever acted like stars. We spoke to them like Stéphane and I speak to the CEOs we occasionally meet: “You have money, we have autistic people. What can we come up with together?” What we look at are the technicalities. Who can bring what to our combat?

**Stéphane Benhamou:** That’s true, but when I see Reda Kateb, I see Daoud. **Daoud Tatou:** And when I see Vincent Cassel, I see him mimicking Stéphane.

What are you expecting from this film?

**Stéphane Benhamou:** That it casts light on our complex cases, even if things are beginning to move and the administration is waking up. Today we see the prospect of more appropriate treatment. I told Eric and Olivier: “I hope that there will be a before and after THE SPECIALS.”

**Daoud Tatou:** And that it may touch the politicians. We would like the film to raise the awareness of all deciders, and even of the President of the French Republic.