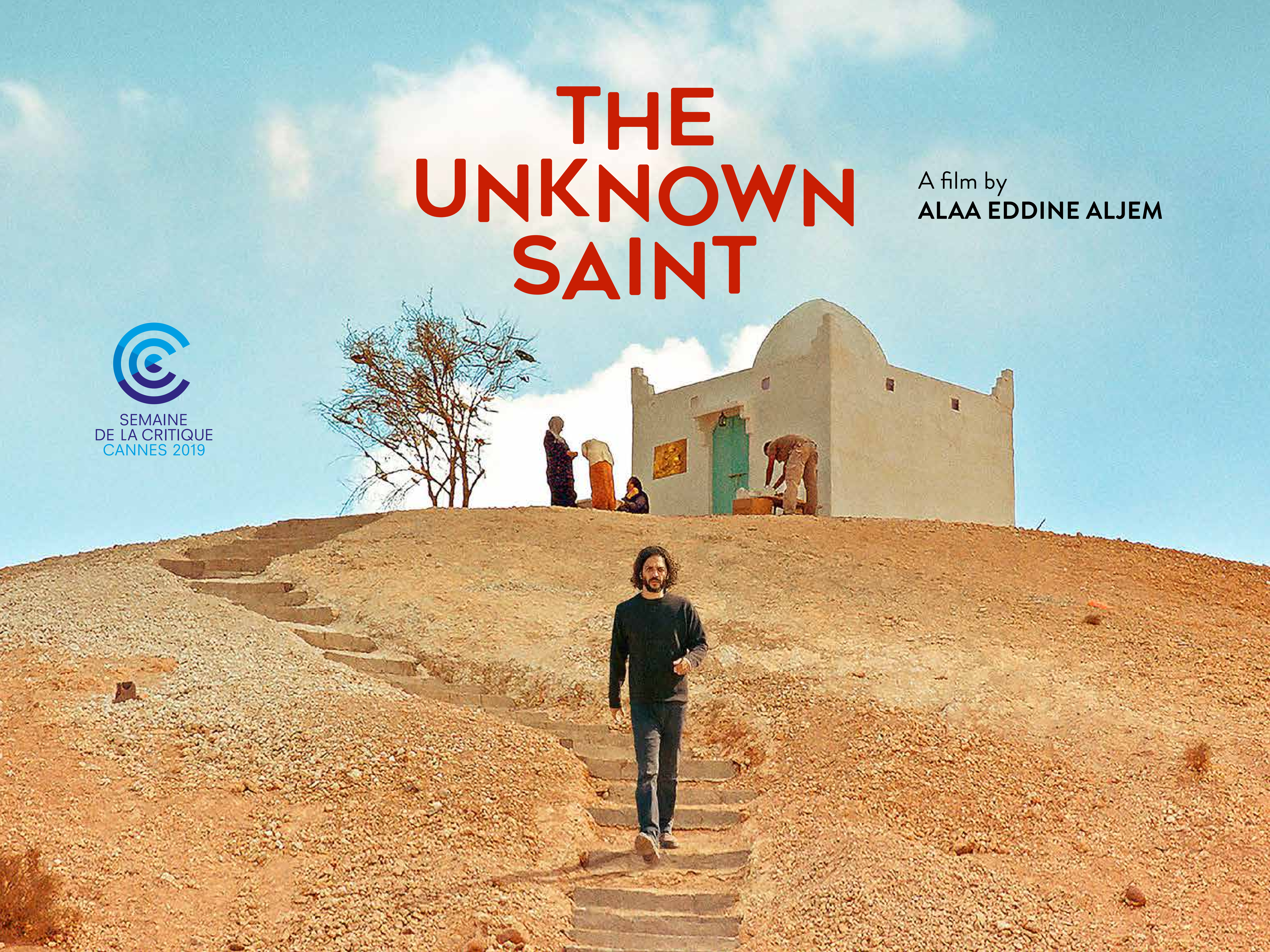


THE UNKNOWN SAINT

A film by
ALAA EDDINE ALJEM



SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2019



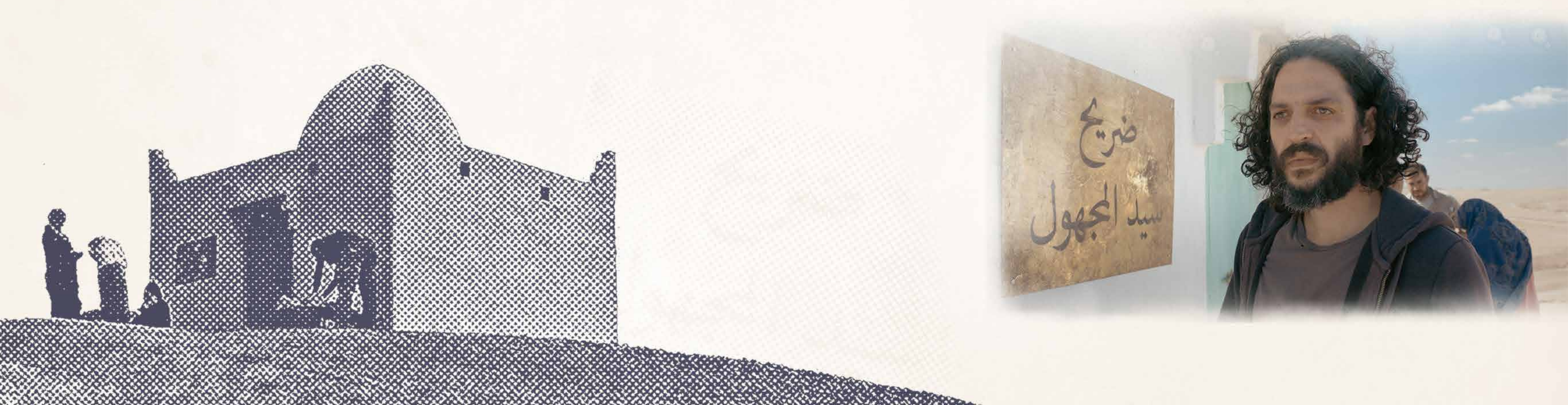


SYNOPSIS

Amine steals a big bag of money and escapes into the hills with the police hot on his trail. Before he is arrested, he digs a grave to bury the cash and disguises it as a modest tomb.

Years later, Amine is released from prison and sets off to find his money. In the meantime, a religious shrine has been built directly over the place he buried his cash. The mausoleum honors an unknown saint from the region whose tomb was recently discovered.

Down the hill from the resting place of the “The Unknown Saint”, a new village subsists on the pilgrims who travel from far and wide to visit the mausoleum. Amine settles into the village and begins plotting a way in. But with the loot now hidden in a holy place, retrieving it suddenly becomes much more complicated.

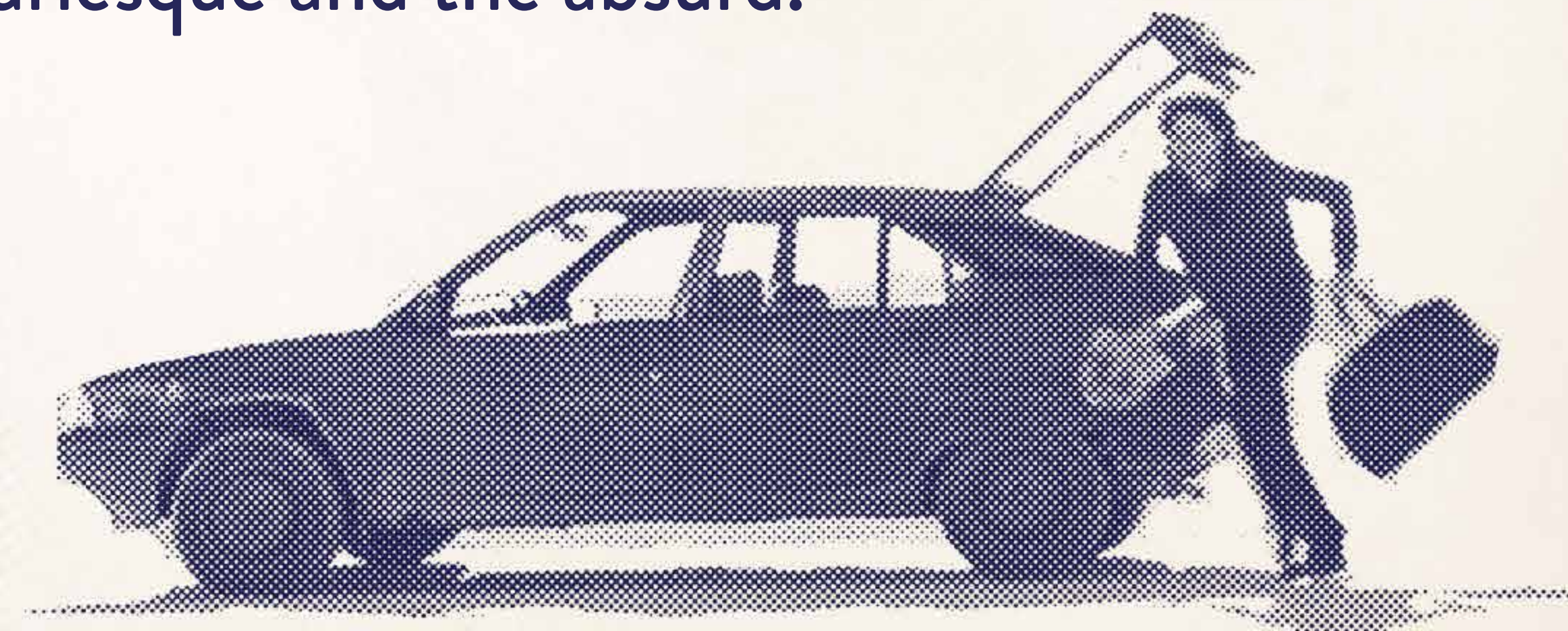




COMMENTS OF THE DIRECTOR ALAA EDDINE ALJEM

In my work, my starting point is often an absurd situation. 'The Unknown Saint' starts with a mausoleum, a spiritual place, under which a bag of money is buried. This mausoleum is considered holy to the inhabitants of the surrounding village. The village is sustained solely on the income generated by tourism around the shrine, even though

the saint it honors neither existed nor was buried there. This mausoleum is the place around which multiple, entangled stories involving spirituality and greed converge. Nowadays, there is nothing so holy as money. In this film, I also wanted to show how mere rumors quickly spread and can turn into legends. 'The Unknown Saint' is shot in the vein of my previous films, in a simple and uncluttered way that underlines the gravity of certain situations yet also offers a space for the burlesque and the absurd.





INTERVIEW WITH ALAA EDDINE ALJEM

Might one call *The Unknown Saint* a burlesque fable?

I like the word burlesque. What best defines this film is its tone, a mixture of situations, some of them comic, others more dramatic. It's a modern fable tinged with the absurd, which adds flavor to the tale. It's an ensemble film built around several characters, a burlesque story about the relationship with faith, and a study of a micro-society's transformation. The starting point of the short films I'd previously made was similar: I like to posit an absurd situation and try to exploit both its dramatic and comic potential.

The advantage of the burlesque is that you can be serious while remaining apparently light-hearted. This makes it possible to write on two levels: one that's accessible to the general public and another that requires interpretation and a certain love of cinema. Creating a good balance between the first and second levels, between drama and comedy,

was one of the challenges in making this film. Particularly because I have the impression that with a touch of humor and levity one can address any subject, even very sensitive or taboo ones, without being guilty of provocation.

The Unknown Saint is also a film about change. Something modern emerges and shakes up a society in its popular beliefs. There are two coexisting lifestyles and ways of thinking. The more contemporary and urban one is embodied by the thief and the doctor, the other one is that of this village micro-society that gets by as best it can and circles the wagons around that which unites them: the saint. He's all that unites them.



Should the village then be considered a microcosm of Morocco?

To some extent. The country has entered a rather critical era. Life under Hassan II was pretty hard. Mohamed VI brought a wind of change: He wanted to modernize the country and diversify its economic activities. He was a young king who brought great hope with him. Today, that wind of change has died out. In Morocco, young people feel the need for a new project. Friends of mine who don't like soccer were praying that Morocco would organize a World Cup: If only we could have that, they said, it would become a national goal. We would've wanted to have faith and gone with it. Morocco is in need of such a wind of change.

We can't be satisfied as individuals in geographical space, we need shared beliefs. This is very apparent in societies like mine with their very important, very entrenched sets of popular, codified beliefs that date back a long way. This relationship to faith, to rumor, virtually defines the average Moroccan. We have the ability to create legends ex nihilo. We need to believe in something, be it spiritual, ideological or material. And in the case of our small village, this translates into an absurd belief. The inhabitants believe so strongly in it that it becomes true.



How did you come up with the idea of a village that reveres an unknown saint?

My mother is from the south of Morocco, which we crossed a lot when I was a child, and I still have images of it in my mind's eye: the small, white buildings, sometimes on top of a hill, sometimes scattered in the middle of vacant terrain... I found this very beautiful, but I didn't really know why. Then, much later, while scouting for another film, I spotted one of these mausoleums. I went up to it. No name was marked. I asked the guard: "What is it?" "The mausoleum of a very powerful saint," he replied. "But who?" "To be honest, I don't know."



Lots of mausoleums like that exist in Morocco. The saints who are to be found there haven't been canonized via the Catholic Church's lengthy process! They're also known as marabouts, the word designating both the mausoleums and their dwellers. There's a very famous one in Morocco with a funny story attached: A villager owned a donkey whom he loved. When it died, he wanted to build a tomb for it. He naturally couldn't bury it in the village cemetery, so he did so a bit further off, at the edge of the village. Later, people built a mausoleum over the tomb and it became a famous saint, even though we know it was actually a donkey...

The film is a satire on credulity, but this is not a charge being made against religion.

It's not about religion at all. It's about belief. Be it the belief in rain that will never come, in a panacea that will cure all ills, in the possibility of recovering a bag of money that has been buried for years... Or the faith in the miracles of a saint whose story is unknown. A number of characters are confronted with issues of belief, with the absurdity of life, and their paths cross at a place that symbolizes all this.

I could've made the same film in Mexico or Italy and no one would've thought it was questioning Christianity. When I started letting people read *The Unknown Saint*, I was frequently told that the comic aspect was very risqué and that the story didn't have a sufficiently social aspect.



But the directors of my generation are tired of hearing that a film from this part of the world must necessarily thematize the status of women or terrorism or religion or immigration. Our societies have plenty of other things to discuss. My role isn't that of showing an audience on the other side of the Mediterranean what it expects to see, but that of exposing it to other aspects of the culture I come from.

What was the scriptwriting process like?

I wrote alone. I was awarded several writing residencies, which facilitated a lot of exchange and afforded me perspective on what I was doing. I always work in two stages: a purely intuitive one, where I write down what comes to me, and a second one that's more reflective and where I consider what works and what doesn't. The thief appeared in the first stage. As did the doctor, who was in part inspired by my sister's story. When you finish Morocco's very lengthy medical studies, you find yourself working for the state.

One is automatically posted to a rural area, to a dispensary like the one in the film. My sister was sent to an Amazigh district even though she doesn't speak a word of Berber. Her patients were all old ladies and she only had cotton wool, disinfectant, and the generic paracetamol now produced in Morocco.

The stories of the people around me, what I observe in day-to-day street life, what people tell me... This feeds my imagination and provides a reserve of characters and ideas from which to draw when I write.

And the other characters, like the guardian who prefers his dog to his son?

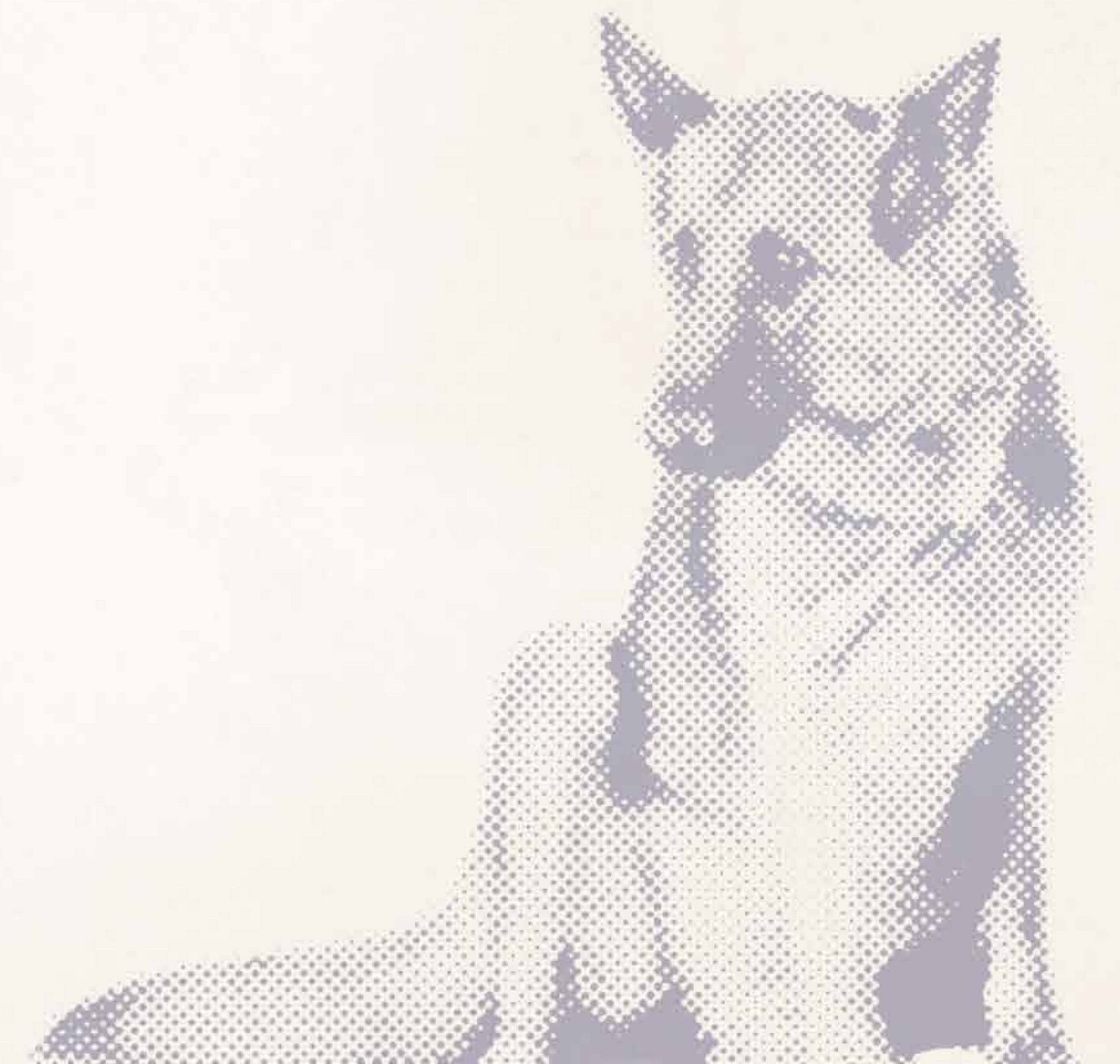
A lot of the characters were born from observing character types common in Moroccan society. It's said in our country that Moroccan fathers don't show affection for their children; They love them but unload all their problems on them. I can never hate a character I create in writing. I'm very fond of this father who doesn't love his son, for no reason, but whose love for his dog renders him endearing. He's willing to sacrifice everything for him. There's this "watched watchman" aspect: The guard ends up guarding the watchdog. Yet another absurdity. The world is absurd, and Morocco all the more so!



Where does this idea of an old and a new village come from?

Modernity is on the rise in today's Morocco. The future of an ancestral way of life is being called into question. This sort of isolated village does exist. And there's a national campaign to reconnect these villages to the power grid, to the roads – hence the presence of the workers dynamiting the rock. This village has grown in significance because of *The Unknown Saint* and is to be reconnected to the world. And then there's the old village, which is deserted and no longer inhabitable because there are no more resources due to the drought.

Morocco is a traditional agricultural country. Many of my ancestors on my mother's side were farmers in the south. There was a major drought in the early 1990s, and it was a real national disaster. I remember my grandfather, who lived in Marrakech and was waiting for news from his land in the south. His eyes fixed on the weather forecasts, he waited for a rain that never came. A little like the character of Brahim in the film.





**There are real comic notes, like the doctor watching snails mate on television.
Or the barber playing with different shaving foams...**

I've never had a TV, and every time I watch it I understand why not. The doctor is bored, he turns on the TV hoping it'll entertain him, transport him from this village, but instead finds himself witnessing something absurd. What could be more boring than watching snails copulate to operatic music?

The detail with the two types of foams, yellow and white, allowed me to detail the guardian's relationship to the villagers without dialogue. When he's hailed as a hero, he's entitled to the better product; As soon as he fails to defend the mausoleum, he's downgraded to the yellow foam!

The film has comic potential because the characters are quite eccentric, yet I didn't want to include gags, but rather little scenes, tiny details, that play into the comic tone. And then there are the more dramatic sides relating to Brahim and his son.



In the case of the thief, his repeated failure and concomitant frustration almost turn him into a cartoon character...

I've been told there's a cartoon-like aspect. The characters are realistic but everything else isn't: There are explosions without victims and a dog with golden teeth! People also mentioned westerns because of the scenery and the fact that some scenes are shot like dueling scenes: When the thief arrives in front of the mausoleum, it's shot and countershot with different angles and nothing but eyes...

How did you come up with this very composed staging, the objectivity of which emphasizes the absurdity of what is on screen?

We're in cyclical time with situations that repeat with scant modification. Time is suspended, no one's in a hurry. Even the thief, who's in a hurry, can't combat the village's rhythms. I didn't foresee camera movement, but rather fairly static images like tableaux of characters and situations. I set up the film shot by shot with still photos and stand-ins. This shot of the thief at the bottom of the hill is a powerful image that took a long time to prepare. We tested fifteen shot types with different focal lengths: How were we to make the hill seem overwhelming? How to make the character the right size and place him at the right distance? In the end, the film was mainly shot with 35 and 50mm focal lengths, which are quite close to the human eye.

And how was directing the actors?

Some of the actors are newcomers, others are very well known in Morocco, such as the doctor, played by Anas El Baz, whom international audiences may have seen in *Return to Bollène*. I avoided psychology: We know nothing about the characters' pasts. Each of them is identified by his or her function, and this is enough to understand their roles in the story. Most of them have no names, they are archetypes: the father, the barber, the thief, etc. I wanted minimal characterization. I didn't want to create emotion with feelings or narrative arcs specific to each of them. Their respective situations were to be enough.

I did some rehearsals with the actors, explained the film's tone and register to them. How they were to act more with their bodies and glances than with facial expressions. I tried to explain this to them, then to accustom them to a kind of staging that's sometimes a bit choreographed in terms of movements and the exchanges of eye contact, a staging that forced restraint upon them so they'd internalize feelings and emotion and play with silence and dead time.



How did your wish to make films come about?

It did so very late. I sometimes read interviews where directors say they discovered their vocation in childhood when watching lots of films. I didn't. I wanted to be a computer programmer, I'm quite the geek. I was even supposed to go to Japan to study after I finished school, but I didn't pass the qualifying exam. I had no plan B. I sat around at home, pretty depressed, and a friend brought DVDs over. I watched more and more of them. I was surprised at the pleasure they brought me in the midst of my depression; I was really somewhere else and would forget my fears for the future while watching a film. I found the power of cinema



very impressive. Later, I happened to read an announcement: the opening of the first film school in Morocco, in Marrakech. It was a competition for which I was entirely unprepared – and I was accepted.

I went back in 2006 at the age of seventeen. In 2009, I continued my film studies at the INSAS film school in Brussels. I thought I was too young to start working and wanted to live abroad. I stayed there until 2012 and shot a short film that I was happy with. There were opportunities for me in Belgium, but I was writing stories set in Morocco. Something was going on back home and I wanted to go back and be part of the movement.



Trained at ESAV Marrakech and INSAS in Brussels, Alaa Eddine Aljem directed several short films, among them 'The Desert Fish' (2015), which gained great acclaim in the film festival circuit and took the Critics, Screenwriting and Grand Prize at the Moroccan National Film Festival. 'The Unknown Saint' is Aljem's debut feature. With this project, Aljem participated in the Open Doors Lab at the Locarno Festival, where it won the ICAM award. Aljem also took part in La Fabrique des Cinémas du Monde in Cannes in 2016, and in the Sundance Screenwriters' Lab. In 2016, Alaa was named by 'Screen International' as one of the Five Arab Stars of Tomorrow.

Filmography

- 2019 – The Unknown Saint (debut feature)
- 2015 – The Desert Fish (short)
- 2011 – Tribute (short)
- 2009 – National Education (short)
- 2008 – The Ritual (short)

WRITER-DIRECTOR ALAA EDDINE ALJEM



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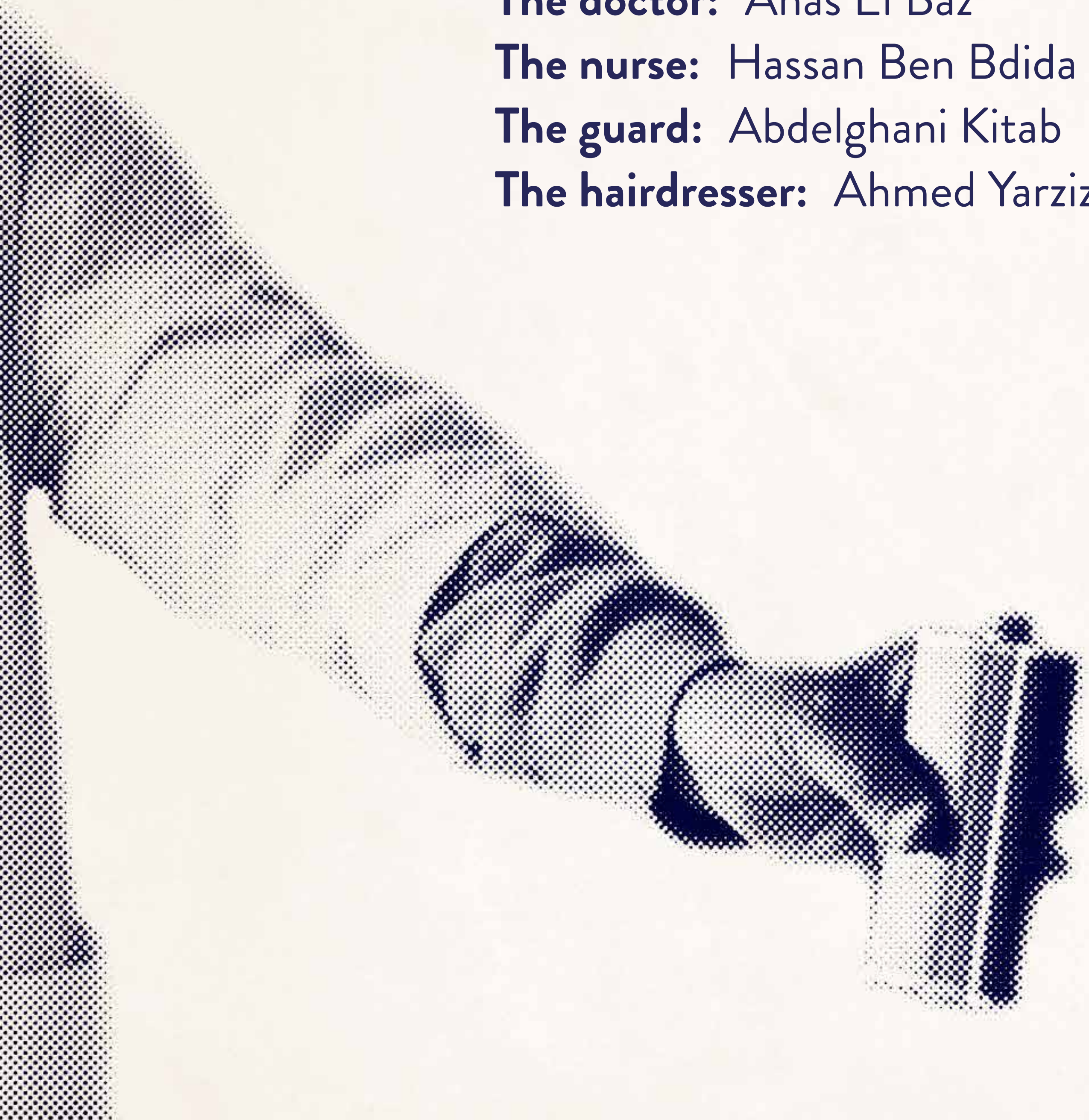
a film written and directed by Alaa Eddine Aljem
produced by Francesca Duca Alexa Rivero
in association with Michael Weber, Georges Schoucair, Rabah Mezioud

MAIN CAST

The thief: Younes Bouab
The brain: Salah Bensalah
Hassan: Bouchaib Essamak
Brahim: Mohamed Naimane
The doctor: Anas El Baz
The nurse: Hassan Ben Bdida
The guard: Abdelghani Kitab
The hairdresser: Ahmed Yarziz

MAIN CREW

Screenplay & direction: Alaa Eddine Aljem
Cinematography: Amine Berrada
Editing: Lilian Corbeille
Sound: Yassine Bellouquid, Paul Jouselin, Matthieu Deniau
Music: Amine Bouhafa
Production designer: Kaoutar Haddioui
Producers: Francesca Duca, Alexa Rivero
Produced by: Le Moindre Geste Productions (Ma), Altamar Films (Fr)
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