



Michael Gentile presents

Félix **Moati** Camélia **Jordana** William **Lebghil**

SOME LIKE IT VEILED

(CHERCHEZ LA FEMME)

a film by **Sou Abadi**

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SYNOPSIS

Armand and Leila, students at Paris' prestigious college of political science, Sciences Po, are a young couple. They plan to go to New York where they both have senior-year internships at the United Nations. However, when Mahmoud, Leila's big brother, returns from an extended stay in Yemen where he's become a radical Muslim, he opposes their relationship and decides to keep his sister away from Armand at all costs. In order to see Leila again who is confined to the family apartment, Armand has no other choice but to disguise himself as a woman in a full-length burka with niqab! The next day, the doorbell rings at Leila's place – a Scheherazade, whose face is veiled, is at the door and Mahmoud is not impervious to her charms...



DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

How did you switch from documentary filmmaking – as the director of the critically acclaimed *S.O.S. TEHRAN* (2002) – to a film editor, then to a comedy such as *SOME LIKE IT VEILED*?

I thought that this first documentary, which was complicated to make because it was shot in cinema-vérité in Tehran, would have allowed me to make others afterwards. That wasn't the case. I then hoped for a long while to get the green light for a project that meant a lot to me: the life of a former Israeli spy who worked for the Soviets. But my producer at the time couldn't raise the funds. I was

told that my origins – I was born in Iran – didn't give me the necessary legitimacy to tackle an Israeli subject. I gave up after five years and to avoid sinking into a depression, I wrote this work of fiction that I had in mind. I was filled with doubt as I had never written fiction before and I knew perfectly well that it's more difficult to write comedy than drama. But writing the screenplay was a true pleasure. The story flowed so effortlessly it surprised me. This probably had to do with a feeling of legitimacy: the story had links with my personal experience.

In what way?

I spent part of my life in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Mandatory religious education, sartorial restrictions and morality police squads are indelibly marked in my teenage memories.

When I returned to Iran to film *S.O.S. Tehran*, I had to put on a chador to go ask for permits from different ministries: I tripped and hurt myself more than once when my feet got caught in the fabric, and I spilled steaming hot tea on myself trying to drink while wearing it. Some of Armand's accidents draw their inspiration from personal experience.

“I ALSO THOUGHT ABOUT CYRANO DE BERGERAC WHEN WRITING THIS STORY: UNDER THE VEIL, TAKEN FOR A WOMAN, ARMAND GUIDES MAHMOUD TO DISCOVER CERTAIN TRUTHS.”

Did the idea of the veil as a disguise, like camouflage, come from that experience?

A few years ago, I heard an interview with Hojatolislam Rafsanjani, one of the rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who explained that before the revolution, in order to escape the shah's police, he'd wear a chador, pretending to be a pious woman. Moreover, a former Iranian president, exiled today in France, escaped Iran in 1982 disguised as a veiled woman. Cross-dressing in order to escape danger, to save your life: I really liked that idea. Billy Wilder's *SOME LIKE IT HOT* is one of my favorite comedies. But in order to write this story I also thought about *CYRANO DE BERGERAC*: under the veil, taken for a woman, Armand guides Mahmoud to discover certain truths. Just like Cyrano who, in the shadows, pretends to be Christian and is able to touch Roxane's heart. While I was writing I constantly thought about these two aspects of the

subject, one comical, the other more serious.

Did the characters' identities easily take shape during the writing process?

I always wanted Armand to be of Iranian extraction. It was essential to show that religious obscurantism had entirely upended people's lives in Muslim countries long before it began upsetting western societies. Indeed, Armand was raised by politically engaged parents; they participated in the revolution, and it's this commitment and their example that leads him to take the risk of cross-dressing. His parents have a crazy side to them that comes from their youth, their lost hopes and they transmitted this to their son, even if he seems embarrassed by their endless squabbling about things that happened thirty years before! Yet the family history, and this Iranian background, is going to help Armand in his cross-dressing.

You must have enjoyed thinking up these parents who could have been yours...

Mitra, Armand's mother, is a mix of my mother, my father and myself. My father was a communist, but born into the upper middle class. My mother was always politically on the right. I heard them bickering about politics my entire childhood. One of the only times they were in agreement was about my leaving Iran.

And what about Leila, Mahmoud and Sinna?

I wanted to avoid stereotypes about poor working-class areas: language idiosyncrasies, juvenile delinquents, etc. I wanted to show a type of middle-class family whose parents made sure their children went to university and who were themselves educated. That's why they named their eldest son after the poet Mahmoud Darwich. And then their death caused an emotional



rupture for Mahmoud making him vulnerable to the point of his seeking refuge in religion, and from there letting himself get caught up in the slippery slope towards fundamentalism. Let me be clear, I'm not blind to the realities of life for French people whose families immigrated here. Some of Mahmoud's

uniform and homogenous block of people.

Where did you get the idea to have Armand and his friends belong to an organization helping refugees?

I volunteered for refugee and

What is the origin of the scene where Scheherazade takes the bus and elicits such strong reactions from the other passengers on the bus?

I have an Iranian girlfriend who does that. So the idea for this scene was directly inspired by her. But it was also important



observations are accurate; it's his conclusions that aren't. Another point that was important to me: to show the diversity of people who live in the poor suburbs: you can be Muslim like Sinna without being a Salafist; you can be from North Africa and be an atheist, like Leila. The suburbs are not a

illegal immigrant organizations, helping people who are generally found near the Gare de l'Est train station in Paris. I'll take this opportunity to mention that I witnessed improbable situations, sometimes with none of the humor that is seen in the film.

for me to have a parabasis in the film. A parabasis is the moment in a Greek tragedy when the chorus directly addresses the public to explain what is happening in Athens. I took advantage of this moment in the bus to express out loud what everyone is thinking, but doesn't dare say: "Just because we're



dressed normally doesn't mean we're whores." And "When your parents worked themselves to the bone so you could live in France, they were hoping for a different future for you." These words come from conversations I've had with French people about the veil. It's good common sense: these passengers are kindly people. They don't vote for the extreme right. They're not Islamophobic. I imagine they believe, as I do, that there are a hundred ways to be religious in the 21st century, and that another spirituality is possible, one that is open and accepting, that does not oppress believers and non-believers. In fact, this is what Armand teaches Mahmoud, thanks to literature.

Is the *Conference of the Birds* a sacred text?

It's first and foremost a poem that 90% of Iranians know more or less well. I wanted to come back to spirituality through literature: the idea that god is in all

of us, or is a part of ourselves. If the poet Farid al-Din Attar discovered this in the 12th century, why can't it inspire us nine centuries later? Why wouldn't Mahmoud be saved by this text? *SOME LIKE IT VEILED* is a tale of reconciliation. Who am I making fun of? Myself. And communists, feminists, Iranians, the intellectual elite, and fundamentalists. With the hope that in the end we can all laugh together.

He still hasn't become a full radical, but that is where he's headed: I'm a profoundly optimistic person and in general I like my characters, even the three guys from the low-income housing who wear their religion much like the latest pair of fashionable sneakers!

How did you approach the direction?

Rhythm played an essential role: I wanted my characters to speak quickly, run, not walk, to not have a moment's rest. And

“SOME LIKE IT VEILED IS A TALE OF RECONCILIATION. WHO AM I MAKING FUN OF? MYSELF. AND COMMUNISTS, FEMINISTS, IRANIANS, THE INTELLECTUAL ELITE, AND FUNDAMENTALISTS. WITH THE HOPE THAT IN THE END WE CAN ALL LAUGH TOGETHER.”

the audience to be as breathless as they are. After each take, I would turn to my script person: “how many seconds did it take?” A comedy shouldn’t be a two and a half hour film. In post-production the music, by Jérôme Rebotier, was written in that same frame of mind to bring rhythm and humor. I don’t know if there is such a thing as “comic music,” but without tipping into caricature, there have to be elements that make you smile. **SOME LIKE IT VEILED** is a tale of reconciliation. Who am I making fun of? Myself. And communists, feminists, Iranians, the intellectual elite, and fundamentalists. With the hope that in the end we can all laugh together.

What is it like to shoot a comedy?

Complicated when it rains from the first to the last day – and that day it actually rained so hard there was a flood! We shot the movie in the spring of

2016, and we even had snow one day! The moment we were outside we had to wait for the sun to come out. We would wait one, two hours and then, well we didn’t have a choice, we had to go with it! The other problem was to film a chase between the bearded men and the niqab-clad ladies right in the middle of Orly airport without creating mass panic. We were very worried that we wouldn’t be given the permits. Yet this decor was very important to me, I wrote the entire final scene thinking about Orly airport where I have waited for an endless number of visitors from Tehran! Once the airport said “yes,” since it was impossible to close it just for us, we had to be very careful not to scare the passengers who didn’t all notice the signage we put up, saying “A movie is being filmed here.”

How did you choose Félix Moati to play Armand?

I didn’t have a precise idea

in mind at the writing stage. I hesitated for the Armand role: a real Iranian? No, because the character grew up here. In real life, Félix is not at all a “mama’s boy,” which is what Armand is, but he was able to slip into this character. He understood that Armand feels indebted towards his parents, and he wants to meet their expectations and the hope they have placed in him. Félix found a demeanor, a body language that isn’t naturally his. It was his idea to straighten his hair, which gives him a nice boy from a good family look. To play Scheherazade, he was the one who insisted on wearing low-heeled women’s shoes – I had imagined him in Converse sneakers, but Félix felt the shoes with the heels gave the character a specific gait, and he was right. He found Scheherazade’s voice on his own, letting me hear it fairly late in the process. I didn’t want her to be too realistic. Félix found this voice that is sometimes hoarse and breaks: Armand does the best he can!





And the niqab?

We tried different full-length niqabs over several weeks with a dressmaker who specializes in them. She made custom niqabs for everybody. Finally we came up with this special full-length niqab for Armand that has Iranian specificities, such as the openings to slip your hands through.

What did wearing the niqab change for Armand?

When it comes to Mahmoud, Armand discovers an unexpected

power – the full niqab makes him mysterious. But in the outside world, he feels the weight of what other people think. This also comes from personal experience. When I pass by a woman in a full-length niqab, my first reaction is instinctive and nonsensical – I'm overcome with a feeling of fear and rejection, which brings me back to my childhood under an Islamic regime. Women in niqabs make up the feminine branch of the militia in Iran. They are armed and often much more ruthless than the men militia. This irrational fear that takes my breath away for a few seconds upsets

me because we live in a democracy, and I support the liberty of expression and human rights. I also deeply respect the liberty of each person to dress as they like.

Did you already know Camélia Jordana and William Lebghil?

Absolutely not! I have an excuse though, which is that I don't own a television. My casting director organized the screen tests: Camélia convinced me with her energy; she stood out, though she has never taken acting classes. For Mahmoud,



I saw a number of people who were too threatening or too strapping. There was always something that was just a little too much. William is practically the opposite! And yet although he isn't thickset, he was able to convey the character's strength and determination. And the trio of Félix, William, and Camélia worked well together.

Anne Alvaro is wonderful in the role of Mitra.

She worked relentlessly and very seriously on her accent, as the great stage actress she is. I introduced her to my Iranian girlfriends and she observed them, taking on their way of moving and speaking. She even learned how to dance in the Iranian style. But her sense of observation isn't the only thing unique about her performance: she plays a loving and committed woman who has extraordinary strength. And she has tremendous comic timing. As for her husband played by Miki

Manojlovic, he is less submissive than he seems. He's just a man who is terribly in love with his wife.

Is the story Mitra tells the cops true?

It happened right outside my junior high. A year after the revolution, when we went back to school in September, we had to sign a paper binding us to follow the Islamic dress code in school. As a teacher, my mother had to sign the same document. We spoke about it with my parents for several hours: the only way to not sign this document was to stay home and be home-schooled. But I didn't want to suddenly become an outcast, and my mother didn't want to make them happy by resigning from her teaching position. So we both wore scarves around our necks, and we put them up over our hair just before walking into the school. In the street, there were many women dressed normally, without a scarf: the

government sent the militia to scare them. A few meters from my school, a girl was disfigured with sulfuric acid – it could have been me. This intimidation, orchestrated by the powers that be, won in the end over Iranian women's freedom. In short, I took the tragedies of my life and turned them into a comedy.







Félix Moati	Armand
Camelia Jordana	Leila
William Lebghil	Mahmoud
Anne Alvaro	Mitra
Carl Malapa	Sinna
Laurent Delbecque	Nicolas
Oscar Copp	Fabrice / Farid
Oussama Kheddam	Mustafa
Walid Ben Mabrouk	Ahmed
and with Miki Manojlovic	Darius



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Production Designer
Sound

Costume Designer
1st Assistant Director
Editor
Music Supervision
Original Music
Production Manager
Screenwriter
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