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2013 – France – 1h27
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HOMELAND
A FILM BY MOHAMED HAMIDI

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WRITTEN BY MOHAMED HAMIDI AND AALAIN-MICHEL BLANC

2013 – FRANCE – 1H27
26-YEAR-OLD LAW STUDENT FARID HAS TO GO TO ALGERIA TO TRY AND SAVE HIS FATHER’S HOUSE FROM DEMOLITION. HE DISCOVERS A COUNTRY WHERE HE HAS NEVER SET FOOT AND IS GRADUALLY WON OVER BY A GALLERY OF EXTRAORDINARY CHARACTERS WHOSE HUMOR AND STRAIGHTFORWARDNESS GO STRAIGHT TO HIS HEART. AMONG THEM HIS COUSIN, A QUICK-WITTED WHEELER-DEALER WHO DREAMS OF MAKING IT TO FRANCE.
A CONVERSATION WITH MOHAMED HAMIDI
DIRECTOR AND CO-WRITER

HOW WOULD YOU SUM UP THE FILM?
Farid, a young law student, has to go to Algeria where he has never been, to save his father’s house. While there his cousin - who shares the same name - steals his passport and goes to France under his name. Stuck in a country he doesn’t know, Farid will discover the story of his father and his family, triggering issues about his own identity. This is the story of a character born out of the new generation of French people who question their identity.

WAS HOMELAND INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY?
The starting point is linked to personal events. When I began to think of this story my own memories of Algeria were remote. I hadn’t set foot there since 1984, my father had just lost his job with Peugeot and was starting to build his house: 45° in the shade, no electricity, no television, water had to be drawn from the well… I had spent two months running after lizards and throwing stones. After that I preferred to stay in France, in the suburbs of Paris, with my brothers and sisters, while my father returned to his village to build a house we only knew from photos.

In 2005 my father fell ill and I realized we might never enjoy this house with him. So I went to Algeria with my parents, my two brothers and one of my sisters. For me it was a return to my homeland, after 21 years of absence. When I saw my cousins again I wondered: “What if my father had stayed here? What if I had been born here? What would my life have been without school, cinema, anything?” The story was built around this. In real life I have, like in the film, a first cousin who has the same name and looks like me. He’s quick-witted like the character and has always wanted to make it to France. But that’s where the comparison stops. He never stole my passport!

YOU’VE TAUGHT BUSINESS MANAGEMENT, YOU WERE ONE OF THE PEOPLE IN CHARGE OF BONDY BLOGS, THEN YOU BECAME JAMEL DEBBOZUE’S ARTISTIC DIRECTOR. HOW DID YOU END UP IN FILM?
First of all I wrote a story I felt very close to - “Nedroma City” - which is the name of my father’s village. But I didn’t know if it would become a short story or a film. Jamel read it, found it moving and asked me to work with him. Later on I met Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, who were in the process of beginning their work on THE INTOUCHABLES, also encouraged me to write a screenplay. But needed a co-writer. I’d noticed Alain-Michel Blanc’s name in the credits of several films that I had really liked. He didn’t know Algeria and we went together film talked a lot with my family and met people who have become characters in the film. To begin with I thought I’d only write a screenplay, but Alain-Michel, Jamel and the producers at Quad encouraged me to direct it.
“ONE IS NEVER CURIOUS ENOUGH WHEN IT COMES TO YOUR OWN STORY,” SAYS FARID’S VOICE-OVER, AND YET AT THE BEGINNING OF THE FILM HE ISN’T CURIOUS AT ALL ABOUT THE LAND OF HIS FATHER, HE DOESN’T SPEAK ARABIC AND BEGINNING OF THE FILM HE ISN’T CURIOUS AT ALL ABOUT THE PLACE WHERE YOU ARE BORN.

You can say that. The family house is threatened with demolition and Farid’s very anxious, sick father tells him: “You are a law student, you have to go and fight.” Nothing else: his people decided to build houses in Algeria, like my father, they thought that if they lost their jobs they would go back to their country. For all immigrants - Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, Algerian, whatever - the house in the homeland was what you’d fall back on in the event that Jean-Marie Le Pen got there and what is left of that place is often a house or a bit of land. It is the witness of a past that links the generations to one another.

**LET’S TALK ABOUT THE HOUSE – IT’S ALMOST THE LEAD CHARACTER…**

Farid is a bit of a hoodlum, a wheeler-dealer, a smooth-talker nicknamed chaouchi, which means the crafty one, the swindler. He always held against his father the fact that he didn’t have a little - theirs as well. When I went back to Algeria in 2005, I don’t know how many Algerians I know and they’ve all regretted discovering only too late just how much they needed the crafty one, the swindler.

**“WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU…”**

In the 80s people started to build houses in Algeria; like my father, they built it brick by brick, Farid understands what it implies: “Your father built this house and became curious about their story, he

**HAVE YOU DONE JAMAL DURING THIS ROLE RIGHT FROM THE START?**

When I started to work on the screenplay I didn’t dare to imagine that, even though I’ve been working with him for years. It was Jamal himself who after having read the screenplay saw himself in the role. It was a great surprise for me and allowed me to write bespoke dialogues and situations. He lends the character the humour, the craftiness and the flaws I wanted him to have. So much so that one never holds the fact he ran away to France with his cousin’s passport against him. I think this is the first time Jamal has played a likable rogue in a film.

**AND THE SUPPORTING CHARACTERS FROM THE VILLAGE?**

From the moment his passport is stolen Jamal gradually takes his cousin’s place and starts hanging around the café, the nerve center of the village. There he sees Mustapha, an ex-armed computer specialist who, like so many Algerians, is outraged, politically aware, enlightened. Opened to the outside world, he reads newspapers and watches French news on television. He decides to stay behind when all the others leave for France, when he in fact is the instigator. He stays because he is more aware than any of them, probably because of his father, a Majjud who had fought for independence. When it’s time to leave the boat, I imagine Nidrine, like his father before him, that if everyone leaves, Algeria will never get anywhere.

**WHAT ABOUT MUSTAPHA, THE MECHANIC?**

He’s the romantic of the group. He met a female cousin who lives in Northern France and wants to join her. He regularly applies for visas that are invariably refused. I met a lot of Najems, people I know and they’ve all regretted discovering only too late just how much he needs the crafty one, the swindler. This was inspired by one of my cousins. To start with, Alain-Michel and I had met him to ask him if he knew of any village youth who had tried to get away by boat. He said: "Yes...Yes...Yes..." Even Farid forgives him because he thinks that had he been in his place he would have probably done the same thing.

**“FRANCE SPENDS HER TIME SENDING US REGRETS, THE WORD ‘REGRETS’ COMES FROM A VISA REFUSAL LETTERS WHICH ALL START WITH ‘WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU...’**

In my film, “Né quelque part”, this word “regrets” comes from the visa refusal letters, all of which start with: “We regret to inform you...” Then at some point Mustapha can’t take it anymore and decides to leave illegally. This was inspired by one of my cousins. To start with, Alain-Michel and I had met him to ask him if he knew of any village youth who had tried to get away by boat. He said: “Yes...Yes...Yes...” Even Farid forgives him because he thinks that had he been in his place he would have probably done the same thing.

**My cousin, who has a few teeth missing, is five years younger than me yet looks ten years older. How can you not feel guilty in front of such discrepancy, knowing that you haven’t even been able to buy cigarettes… My own Guilty. The cousin lives in a run-down house, he owns one or two tracksuits, no phone, no job, he struggles to buy cigarettes…”

**WHAT IS THE TITLE “NÉ QUELQUE PART” MEANT TO MEAN?**

Because of a crucial scene in the film: when Farid and his cousin share a bedroom for each of his children. And when his uncle explains to him that he

**FRARID FINDS HIS PARENTS’ WEDDING PICTURE IN HADJ’S HOUSE AND BECOMES CURIOUS ABOUT THEIR STORY, HE STARTS ASKING QUESTIONS HE HAS NEVER DARED TO ASK THEM...**

It is a sense of propriety, particular to the relationship we have with our parents. I started to talk with my father when I began to write this story. After his death in 2007, I kept on with my mother. Alain-Michel Blanc, my co-writer, asked her questions I would have never dared to, such as: “What did you think of your husband when you saw him for the first time?" He was handsome?" It was very moving because my mother replied happily and sincerely.

**PLEASE TELL US ABOUT THE ALGERIAN COUSIN PLAYED BY JAMEL DEBBOUZE.**

He is a bit of a hoodlum, a wheeler-dealer, a smooth-talker nicknamed chaouchi, which means the crafty one, the swindler. He always held against his father the fact that he didn’t have a...
He’s the memory of the village and has seen war, immigrants leaving the country, then returning. He tells Farid about his father’s youth, his parents’ wedding, things he didn’t know at all. As for Uncle Brahim, he is a man resigned to his fate, who carries the burden of having renounced to leave for France when he was young.

**APART FROM SAMIRA, THE HADJ’S GRANDDAUGHTER, WE SEE VERY FEW WOMEN IN ALGERIA IN THE FILM. WHY?**

You see them in cafes, in the streets, and bars when the two cousins are in Oran. But things are different in the countryside. It’s a conservative world where men and women are still segregated. I wanted to keep the country’s reality, even if it is archaic. Men and women rub shoulders in the family context or when you have been accepted into the circle like Farid. If he visits the Hadj often it is because he likes to listen to the old man but also because of Samira’s beauty: this is the only place where he can hope to see her.

**FARID HAS A GIRLFRIEND IN FRANCE - AUDREY, A LAW STUDENT LIKE HIM…**

She has no problem with having a boyfriend of Algerian descent. But he does because he knows it’s going to cause problems with his family. At the beginning of the film she asks him: “So what do we do about your parents?” to which he replies: “Now isn’t a good time, we’ll deal with that when I come back.” This is still true today even though, for the past 10 years or so, there’s at least one mixed couple in each North African family, and the same with French families. It’s Audrey who goes to get him out of the detention centre at the end of the film. She is very attached to him and what he goes through in Algeria will reveal how much, in fact, he is attached to her too. He wants to live with her without having to renounce his family history.

**BUT TOWARDS THE MIDDLE OF THE FILM WE THINK FARID IS FALLING IN LOVE WITH SAMIRA.**

Is his interest in Samira genuine or a fantasy? These moments add to his general questioning: “I could have led this life which, after all, has some very pleasant aspects: the weather is great, I feel very good with these people… Why not Samira?” Yet he will decide to leave. Firstly because he wants to see his father again very soon, since he is getting worse, but also because unconsciously, he needs to get closer to what his father went through: he needs to prove to himself that he too is capable of facing danger.

**HOW DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR ACTORS?**

That was the most interesting aspect of the film’s preparation. Since my background is live shows I needed the actors to pull me into the story. Tewfik Jallab has the sensitivity, the fragility and a certain sort of self-confidence that characterize Farid, the lead character. And on top of that, he’s good-looking. But most importantly, we had to be able to tell from the word go that he was not an Algerian from Algeria. Mohamed Madj who plays the Hadj is a great actor in Morocco and in the Arab world. I had seen him in INCENDIES and THE SOURCE and really wanted to work with him. To my great sadness he died last winter without have seen the film.

Fatsah Bouyahmed, the telephone operator, and Secteur, the café owner, are both actors I’ve worked with on-stage. To me, they typify Algerian humor. Algerians are great at self-deprecation and at defusing tragic situations. Fatsah, like Secteur, can talk about horrible things and make you cry with laughter.

**IS HIS INTEREST IN SAMIRA GENUINE OR A FANTASY? THESE MOMENTS ADD TO HIS GENERAL QUESTIONING: “I COULD HAVE LED THIS LIFE WHICH, AFTER ALL, HAS SOME VERY PLEASANT ASPECTS.”**
I wanted this tone in the film and moments when everyone laughs heartily, including Farid, making him forget what’s happening to him. It was a real problem since they had to speak Algerian Arabic from my region. This was a general way but we forget that behind each family there are myriad personal stories and life paths. It is a film about identity and roots. When I speak like that it sounds like I’ve made a drama! But that would be to forget my Algerian roots. I really would have loved to shoot in Algeria but it was very complicated as far as production structures and authorizations over there. I hope I can do it one day.

The film was shot in the Moroccan countryside that looks very much like Algeria, particularly after we recreated a few things. Houses for example were re-painted yellow and green because they’re red in Morocco. The set designers and prop people went to Algeria to buy things like drinks, cigarettes etc… but it doesn’t matter since this is not an Algerian story. It’s more universal.

I wanted the difference in light and atmosphere between France and Algeria to be very strong, so we worked to obtain an image that would be neither ‘cheap’ nor mannered. Alex’s suggestions were really interesting. We opted for steady traveling shots. This is a simple story and we wanted to film it in a simple way. We had many discussions beforehand; then we edited the film together. I had a pretty precise idea of what I wanted to see on screen and they helped me to give it shape.

I drew inspiration from directors who touch me, to make something that resembles me. I was inspired by Ken Loach, in particular CARLA’S SONG for the homecoming. I wanted this tone in the film and moments when everyone laughs heartily, including Farid, making him forget what’s happening to him. It was a real problem since they had to speak Algerian Arabic from my region. This was a general way but we forget that behind each family there are myriad personal stories and life paths. It is a film about identity and roots. When I speak like that it sounds like I’ve made a drama! But that would be to forget my Algerian roots. I really would have loved to shoot in Algeria but it was very complicated as far as production structures and authorizations over there. I hope I can do it one day.

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The universality of the subject. No one in the world can free himself or herself from looking into their origins, their roots, particularly if they have been deprived of them. In addition, the director is pretty much the subject of the film, which is rare. His implication is written in his genes, in his nature. It’s the first time I’ve never met a single Algerian! I started to read all I could find about the subject and haven’t stopped since. So I didn’t need any research on a historical level, but I didn’t know the country so I told Mohamed that I wouldn’t start writing before going there with him.

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE DID YOU MEET?

This was summer holiday time so we lived in the family house with his mother, his sisters, his two brothers-in-law, his nephews… the uncles, the neighbors would drop by… Every day, twenty-five of us sat around the table! So I lived with the film’s characters, on the film sets. I have traveled a lot in the Maghreb and in Africa but I’ve never been in a country where France was so present. It was important to show that in the film. I needed this trip to understand to what degree emigration is a tragedy. To be forced to abandon what is most central to your being to try and live and feed your children is a total injustice.
A CONVERSATION WITH TEFIK JALLAB

ACTOR

THIS IS YOUR FIRST MAIN ROLE IN A MOVIE AND YOU’RE STARRING BESIDE JAMEL IN A SUPPORTING ROLE: WAS THIS A DOUBLY-STRESSFUL SITUATION?

On the contrary, I felt protected. Perhaps because we shot the film in a foreign country and we all slept in the same hotel, cut off from the world. I have to say Mohamed Hamidi helped me so much by giving me the story he wrote before it became a screenplay. There was a huge amount of information about the character, details on the way he functions, his relationship with his girlfriend and his friends who were all from well-off backgrounds, etc… As for Jamel, I grew up watching him on television and in films and even though I hadn’t met him before making this film, I always felt a close relationship with him, as if we belonged to the same family, like he was a young, successful uncle whom I wanted to be like. Of course before shooting I was slightly intimidated but Jamel has this wonderful quality - shared by all the greats - which is to make you feel at ease right away. He likes people; he wants everyone to feel relaxed and is very good at making that happen.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM HIM?

Precision. To the millimeter… He also taught me how to work free of stress, to be in a kind of active relaxation.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE FARID, YOUR CHARACTER?

He’s in his twenties, studies law, wants to become a barrister and feels 100% French. He thinks he knows everything but hides a kind of weakness connected to the fact that he is not completely comfortable with his origins. Like everyone who has never set foot in a country, he’s full of preconceived ideas that are going to start unraveling as he starts meeting the characters of the film.

HOW DID YOU WORK ON YOUR CHARACTER?

I made the same journey Farid embarks on with my Algerian-Tunisian father when I was 23. We took the ferry from Marseille, arrived in the port of Algiers and went all the way down south into the Algerian desert. It was an extraordinary time, and also very strange. Everything seemed familiar to me. For Farid’s return to the country of his parents, I had only to draw on my own feelings. Since Farid still lives with his parents in France, I also went back to mine in Argenteuil (a suburb of Paris) to immerse myself in a family atmosphere. As Farid is a student, I went to lectures for a month. To understand Farid’s reluctance to introduce his girlfriend to his parents I drew on the experience of some of my friends, those whose parents are older and stricter than mine.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM HIM?

Precision. To the millimeter… He also taught me how to work free of stress, to be in a kind of active relaxation.
HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THAT HIS COUSIN AND ALL HIS FRIENDS TAKE SO MANY RISKS TO GO TO FRANCE?

I remember something that happened two years ago. I was in a play in Tangiers, Morocco. One evening I went to a café at the bottom of a hill from where you could see Spain perfectly. There were groups of boys and girls sitting still, looking at that country. I was struck by their silence. In their eyes you could see it all: sadness, longing, dreams. When Farid boards a boat in the middle of the night to go to France I thought of these youths.

WHAT IS YOUR STRONGEST MEMORY OF THE SHOOT?

Coming out of Marseille detention centre: it was the last day of shooting with the Moroccan unit and even though we had a few more days to go in France I think we had the same feeling, that these were the final moments. It was very powerful.

TEWFIK JALLAB FILMOGRAPHY

CINEMA

2012  HOMELAND  
by Mohamed Hamdi

2011  UN NUAGE DANS UN VERRE D’EAU  
by Stallah Sumacquaye

2008  L’ANNÉE DE L’ALGÉRIE  
by M’Bo Elbouda

2007  DEMAIN J’ARRÊTE  
by Lili Fahmi

2006  LES BONNES MANIÈRES  
by Emile Odeh

2005  LA COLLECTION  
by Patrick Guédi

2005  COLINE : LES AMIS DE MES AMIS  
by Ebrine Constantinou

2004  QUI DE NOUS DEUX  
by Charles Bonnot

2004  STEREOTYPES  
by Alvaro Declercq

2004  LA NUIT TOMBE  
by Vincent Mariotte Femis

1994  KILLER KID  
by Gilles de Mestre
A CONVERSATION WITH JAMEL DEBBOUZE

ACTOR

HOW DID YOU LAND THE FILM?

It’s more a case of the film landing in my life! Often, beautiful things happen when you least expect them! Mohamed Hadimi gave me his screenplay but I didn’t read it right away. I wanted to get to know him first. I discovered a very human artist, deep, funny and equipped with true political awareness. His screenplay was a wonderful surprise. This is exactly the kind of cinema I love.

WHAT ATTRACTION YOU IN THE STORY?

I’ll say it again - first of all, it was Mohamed. I trust him completely. The proof is that I put him in charge of directing my one-man shows, which is what I hold most dear in my professional life. I also like the truthfulness of his intentions. HOMELAND is a true story and I love true stories. They’re hard to beat! I’m in complete empathy with a subject that talks about us, children of immigrants, a subject not often enough dealt with or emphasized in French cinema. We don’t have a director like Martin Scorsese who talks about Italian immigration in the US like no one has. We need our cinema to get a hold of stories like those of Farid and his French cousin, to help change attitudes and try to make people understand who these people (us!) are, and learn not to fear us.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND FARID, THE CHARACTER YOU PLAY, WHO STEALS HIS COUSIN’S PASSPORT AND ESCAPES TO FRANCE?

Absolutely, and I think I would have done the same. Terrible things are born out of frustration. If a guy isn’t happy in his country, how can we hold against him to try to be happy somewhere else? Governments have to understand this. It’s thanks to cinema and stories like this one that we can show what happens in real life. It’s our responsibility and Mohamed brought it all to light very well.

IN THE FILM, YOU SPEAK FRENCH WITH AN ALGERIAN VILLAGE ACCENT. HOW DID YOU WORK ON THAT?

To tell you the truth I didn’t need to work on that because it isn’t a character role. Inside, I’m an Algerian villager! I grew up with Algerian villagers; I have many friends from Algerian villages who are in France illegally. I know this tune - it’s mine! It wasn’t difficult to play and I loved doing it. I had great fun working with Rachid Bouchareb on DAYS OF GLORY and on HOMELAND with Mohamed Hamidi. Their characters are deep, touching and endearing.
WHY DID YOU WANT TO CO-PRODUCE THE FILM?

Because I think the intention behind it is useful. It's a kind of cinema I love, there's depth to it, the characters are poignant, they tell us something truthful and topical. It's a cinema that allows us to know France better. I've been lucky to portray some very popular characters in films such as HOUBA! ON THE TRAIL OF THE MARSUPIAL and ASTÉRIX, so when there are subjects such as HOMELAND to stand up for, I do it, without giving it a second thought, because I think it's the best way to try and change attitudes.

DAYS OF GLORY, OUTSIDE THE LAW, HOMELAND, ... DO YOU FEEL A NEED TO TELL THESE STORIES?

A need no, a duty yes. I know what I represent today and I feel I should use my fame to change people’s mentalities.
CAST
TEWFIK JALLAB
JAMEL DEBBOUZE
FATSAH BOUYAHMED
ABDELKADER SECTEUR
MALIK BENTALHA
FEHD BENCHEMSI
MOURAD ZAOUI
MILOU KHETIB
MOHAMED MAJD
JULIE DE BONA
ZINED OBEID
FARID
THE COUSIN
FATAH
SECTEUR
KIKIM
NORDINE
MOUSTAPHA
HAME BRAHIM
THE HADJ
AUDREY
SAMIRA